



“The Gift of Therapy”: A Book Review

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“The therapist’s job is to do everything in her power not just to promote self-understanding but to encourage experimentation.”

(Jeffrey A. Kottler, Author of Book ‘On being a therapist’, 1986)

“The Gift of Therapy: An open letter to a new generation of therapists and their patients” (2001), a book written by Psychiatrist Dr. Irvin D. Yalom brings various aspects of psychotherapy onto the surface, which can be used as a guide for psychology students as well as professionals. Throughout the 85 chapters or ‘tips’ for beginner therapists, Yalom has beautifully illustrated real life case studies from his own sessions and that of other psychotherapists. Apart from a general approach of having empathy towards patients, letting patients matter to you, being supportive, using the here-and-now approach, providing feedback, facilitating awareness and decisions through advice giving, providing a comparison of analytic institutes bolstering particular approach of psychotherapy, taking notes in session, self monitoring, Dr. Yalom also has placed his unorthodox suggestions about being a fellow traveler, acknowledging one’s errors in therapy, making use of dreams, talking about life and death, making home visits to patients, creating idiosyncratic therapy for each patient, history taking as an ongoing part of therapy, expressing one’s dilemmas to patients etc. All of this manifests from his own insights gained in 35 years of experience in the field. It is an insightful, informative and entertaining read for both beginners and experienced therapists because of the revelations in the book being grounded in reality, morality and love.

EXPLORING THREE RELEVANT THEMES

I. Engage in personal Therapy

Yalom writes in chapter 12 of the book that personal therapy is an important part of psychotherapist's training. By not only being at the recipient side of the therapy, one gets to explore the darker sides of self, achieve and understand full potential, and also gets to know what it feels like in a transference process, yearning for a therapist's love and acceptance, dilemmas about self-disclosure etc. Experiencing the dynamics of group pressures, conformity, compliance, team-building, the feeling of competition, relief of catharsis and getting others' feedback also comes from being in group psychotherapies. The journey towards self-transformation comes by working on one's neurotic issues, working with Johari Window to get into terms with blind spots and learning to accept feedback. Yalom suggests being in therapy at different stages of life for constant self-awareness.

The article titled 'Personal therapy for future therapists' by Loizos (2013) raises critical questions on whether psychotherapy should be made mandatory for future therapists, or not. It describes the theoretical positions in which it is perceived as, and the pros and cons of being in psychotherapy. Personal therapy has a dual role to play: (i) adding more knowledge of skills, helping the trainee comprehend effectively in the counseling process, (ii) promoting self awareness. Despite accepting its importance, debate is still on regarding its consideration as a mandatory requirement for trainees. Many institutions across the globe include that in their curriculum, including' Division of Counseling Psychology of the British Psychological Society (min, 40 hours), the European Federation of Psychologist's Association (min. 100 hours), the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy" required 40 hours of personal therapy in future therapist's training but then revoked it in 2005 as no longer required for accreditation. Personal therapy (often termed as training analysis by psychoanalysts) is concerned with deep internal research, exploration / working with unconscious unresolved conflicts. It is perceived with different lenses of approaches. The psychoanalytic approach posits that helping one's others gain self-knowledge is impossible without resolving one's own unconscious motives and experiencing transference, whereas a humanistic psychotherapist, being flag bearer of personal growth/self-actualization, believes in the philosophy of constant self-awareness throughout life of its constituent, Gestalt therapy firmly demands of personal therapy as a prerequisite in training programs. Behaviorists, on the other hand, are not staunch supporters of it because of their aim in behavioral change rather than uncovering at the unconscious.

Personal therapy, no doubt, helps in improvement in self-esteem, social life, work function and prepares student/ trainee for becoming an efficacious self-aware therapist (with warmth, tolerance, empathy, genuineness) as substantiated by many qualitative researches (Rake & Paley, 2009) (Kumari, 2011; Murphy, 2005), but also carries some inhibiting factors for psychotherapists and trainees to enter personal therapy. This deals with issues of financial burden, confidentiality, sense of self-sufficiency, fear of exposure. Also, it is suggested that therapists who themselves don't therapy their unraveling of their own weaknesses and struggle with their unresolved conflicts. Research shows that personal therapy leads to a trainee's depression and pre-occupation with self-exploration (Macaskill, 1998). Thus, personal therapy may not always yield a good outcome and is very risky and may result in interference in their own therapeutic work depending on the person's motives, personality traits, and the time at which it occurs. Therefore, one's motive and choice of engaging in therapy is a good way to acquire self-knowledge rather than a forced decision taken in haste.

II. Therapist's self-disclosure

One major aspect of psychotherapy which many professionals find difficult to deal with is self-disclosure. Is it just revealing yourself, your feelings, your identity, your background, is what makes me also feel discomfort as much as it makes me feel authentic and real. The 'Gift of Therapy', thus clarifies this concept, relates to 3 realms: (i) mechanism of therapy, (ii) here-and-now feelings and (iii) therapist's personal life.

As an Indian, we are all familiar with shamanistic healing practices in our society and how processes and techniques are concealed by the public and its flag-bearers tending to mystify it. Opposing this view is psychotherapy therapists, who believe in transparency between patient-therapists (regarded as fellow travelers) opposing the power dynamics, magic and mystification within the healer-healed pair. This realm of disclosure, which talks about authenticity and genuineness between fellow travelers, is absolutely essential. Making one's client familiar with the nature of psychotherapy, duration, assumptions, rationale and clarifying his/ her doubts not only makes the client informed in advance, thus reducing his already anxious, painful state, but also helps him to understand what he/ she must do to maximize his progress in a therapeutic setting like this. Thus, preparation for individual psychotherapies and group therapy, especially where group dynamics are more complexly knitted with each member, is essential. Clients should be encouraged to consider psychotherapy as a solution to end the emotional

miseries they are facing in their life. Mental health professionals must tell them about the benefits of psychotherapy. The first benefit of psychotherapy is that it gives a safe space to discuss their problems in life that cause sadness, frustration, anxiety, trauma etc., so that a deeper understanding of the patient's problems can be achieved and a new way of looking at difficult situations and feelings can be gained to which helps in moving towards a solution of their real life problems. The second benefit of psychotherapy is that the patient can build awareness, compassion, understanding, respect, empathy and acceptance towards themselves and other people around him.

Thus, mental health professionals should psycho-educate them and spread awareness about the benefits of psychotherapy as a proven and effective solution to deal with psychological issues. Consequently, the nature of psychotherapy along with duration of sessions and logistics are told at the initial phase by therapists. One of the critical aspects is disclosing feelings towards the patient in the here-and-now moment. One major thing which has to be considered is the use of self-disclosure, which should be in the interest of the patient. Yalom beautifully cites certain cases of his disclosure of feelings acting as a catalyst to change. An intriguing exploration of the experiences of psychoanalysts in their own analysis indicated that whereas non-immediate (factual) self disclosure was not associated with perceived therapeutic change, immediate disclosure (feelings) was perceived as associated with change (Curtis, Field, Knaan-Kostman and Mannix, 2004).

Self-disclosure as revealing one's personal life in front of clients is one of the deepest fears coming from a therapist's side because of fear of getting misconstrued by the patient, revealed to others outside of therapy, an intention to hide in personal life to continue prevailing, the self-fulfilling prophecy often imagined by patients that therapists can deal with any problem, and they are always happy in their lives. Although Yalom has illustrated how revealing his mother's death and their relationship has benefited the group members in therapy, he also teaches that if a therapist doesn't want to tell any aspect to go public, he must not reveal it. As ethical professionals, therapists have to respect clients' confidentiality but shouldn't expect it from their clients, who might reveal their therapist's revelations to his/ her next therapist. Thus, self disclosure, especially regarding personal life, should be used cautiously.

III. Dealing with professional hazards

The final theme of the chapter is concerned with the inevitability of occupational hazards that come along with professional work as a psychotherapist/ mental health professional. Psychotherapy is a very

exhausting process and thus, one needs to be capable enough to tolerate the feelings of anxiety, frustration, loneliness, existential crisis, sense of failure and much more. Yalom writes about concealing one's professional identity or avoiding contact with relatives because of fear of their reactions/ responses towards therapists. Pre-occupation with self- exploration, engaging oneself in deep thoughts, over-evaluating oneself based on the success rate of their therapies, attributing patient's reactions towards therapists all cause burnout, which is, unfortunately, an inevitable part of the profession. Two major catastrophes are suicide of patients and malpractice of lawsuits which not only put therapists under greater guilt, a sense of failure, but also shake the life of a therapist whose service was just to help people deal with their distress and losses in life.

Therefore, as Freud suggests, engaging in personal therapy at every interval of 5 years to protect oneself from these cruel exposures and being involved in support groups of like-minded professionals is a must. An article by Coaston (2017) suggests 2 key components for self-care: compassion and mindfulness to strive to become fully functioning again. What a paradox is it that interventions for mind, body and soul like gratitude journal writing, doing yoga, music therapy, expressive arts therapy, exercises all of which therapists suggest to their clients are those which are hardly practiced by therapists in their daily life. Thus, authentic self-care is the ultimate balm to deal with burnout and professional hazards.

Conclusion:

Pain is a symbol of healing. If you don't fall, how will you learn to get up again and grow? When the wound rips off the skin, it pains; but that's the point when the new cells start to take their place and cure. Getting hurt turns into getting healed at some point or another. You just have to be patient and strong enough to trust the journey of healing.

Given all harsh circumstances and dilemmas, therapists also must not forget the value they hold in their client's lives; which trusts upon them with all they've ever experienced in life. A therapist's life isn't smooth as it seems from outside because of the greater responsibility, intention to provide help and service by building genuine human connections which are dynamic/ complex in nature.

This book not only teaches different intricacies of being in this profession, but also bolsters young psychotherapists and counselors to stay connected with the intention of spreading acceptance, care and love.

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