

Integrative Psychotherapy

A Three Course Meal

by Carl R Nassar



Salads & Starters

Integrative psychotherapy saved my life. Figuratively speaking. Then I gave my life to Integrative psychotherapy. Dramatically speaking.

Working with an Integrative Psychotherapist, I uncovered the hidden stories of my past, learning I'd suffered a relational history of cumulative neglect. Later, I realized I was enacting the narrative of my past in my present: I was transferentially, unconsciously, acting out my childhood relational patterns with my wife. Slowly, I redefined my future: today, I relate to others with more naturalness and spontaneity, experiencing my life in congruence with my genuine sense of self.

Enamored by the transformative power of this two-person therapy, I am in training for my very own certification as an Integrative Psychotherapist.



Entrees

So, what is this Integrative Psychotherapy that served as life-saver, career-changer, and magic-elixir? What is this therapeutic modality that has me so enamored?

Integrative psychotherapy, which for the sake of brevity, and for both our sakes, I'll refer to as IP, is a therapy emphasizing characterological change, not simply behavioral change (although behavioral change plays its part). It's a therapy supporting the transition from a life of unconscious relational patterns that limit flexibility and spontaneity, to a life lived with a sense of presence and naturalness in relationships. This process of change unfolds, often gradually, in a manner respectful of the client, a non-confrontational approach that, in the words of IP, goes "beyond empathy" (more on that later).

The theory of integrative psychotherapy can be neatly expressed in a three part narrative: a story of motivation, a story of personality, and finally a story of methods.

Briefly, the theory of motivation views hunger for relationship as the core human drive. We all long and reach out for contact within the relational matrix that surrounds us, and it is through a reciprocal process of contact that we come to know and understand our needs, our feelings, and our very sense of self.

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The theory of personality elegantly integrates together (hence the name Integrative psychotherapy) a collection of approaches that are theoretically consistent: interlacing personality theories that stem from a shared theory of motivation, that is, interweaving theories that view relational hunger as our essential drive. IP's understanding of personality is informed first and foremost by Fritz Pearls' Gestalt therapy and its contact oriented approach, as well as Transactional Analysis as originally envisioned by its founder Eric Berne in his 1950s writings on the intrapsychic structure of the ego (as opposed to his later behaviorally-oriented publications). In addition, the theory borrows from Fairburn's object relations, self-psychology, and Carl Roger's humanistic or client-centered approach.

In short, the story of personality unfolds like so: A young child naturally and unavoidably comes into contact with his own needs and feelings: an internal contact. As each need moves from ground into figure, he reaches out into the world around him looking for satisfaction: an external contact. Sadly, when life resembles the Rolling Stones classic "I can't get no satisfaction", the child must find a way to compensate for the pain of an unmet need. Ouch: the deep hurt of an unmet need!

Without a vehicle for external satisfaction, the child turns within to soothe himself. When in Piaget's concrete operations phase, the child often compensates by creating a script belief, a belief about himself such as "I am too needy". In a sensory motor phase, the compensation often takes the form of a procedural or physiological survival reaction, such as a tightening of the body muscles. These compensations represent artificial (false) closures that protect the child from the pain of the unmet need.

Okay, so we've got this sweet little child who has created internal artificial closure for the unmet need. Now, whenever the need arises, as opposed to reaching out into the world with spontaneity and naturalness and with the hope of satisfaction, the child turns instead to, for example, his script belief "I am too needy". His needs never leave his internal world, and in time he represses his own awareness of his original needs and associated feelings. Instead of spontaneity, the child forms a fixed perspective.

In time, this evolves into a life script, a collection of unconscious relational patterns consisting of unaware physiological survival reactions, implicit conclusions and explicit decisions, that together inhibit spontaneity in relationships and problem solving. Additionally, the ego can be described as fragmented, where, as opposed an integrated adult ego, the person carries unresolved fragments of ego from their childhood.

The theory of methods emphasizes a re-establishment of that lost contact. Based on the understanding that the wounding and corresponding loss of self happened in the failures of contact in relationship, this theory emphasizes creating a client-therapist relationship that recreates contact. It's the sort of contact that allows the client to reclaim the lost, repressed elements of the self.

The therapist, let's say you, gently, kindly, patiently, engages with the client in a parallel, three-part dance, a dance of emotional intimacy. With inquiry (part 1), you practice the art of gently following the client into his awareness of the existence and significance of the hidden, repressed affects and needs. Through attunement

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(part 2), you engage in empathy and a connection that reaches “beyond empathy”: first, empathy, your resonance with the client’s feeling and experience; and second, “beyond empathy”, your meeting of the client’s feeling and experience with a reciprocal response - for example, the meeting of your client’s sadness with your expression of compassion, or the meeting of anxiety with a sense of security-making. Add involvement (part 3), and you offer an ongoing sense of presence in the relationship in the form of reliability, dependability, and constancy. Slowly, the client discovers the lost aspects of the self, and integrates these (hence the name Integrative psychotherapy) back into a comprehensive sense of self. Together with the client, you and he, like the classic children’s book, are now “Free to Be You and Me”. At last.



Desserts & Drinks

In a few short months, beginning April 15, 2009 and ending on April 19, 2009, I’ll be heading to Slovenia (a part of the former Yugoslavia) where I’ll get together with my IP Colleagues from around the world for our biannual conference. It seems Integrative psychotherapy is becoming quite the rage in Europe. Like the Beatles, I hope its fan base slowly continues to grow here in the US. I’m excited to see Richard again, Richard Erskine, former professor at the University of Illinois, current director of the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy in Kent, CT (www.integrativetherapy.com), and perhaps most significantly. founder of IP.

While there, I’ll take my evaluation with the hope of getting certified as a CIP (Certified Integrative Psychotherapist). Be thinking of me this April 15. And, if you find yourself thinking about IP or would like to join us in April, take a look at the association’s website at www.integrativeassociation.com.

To learn more, visit www.integrativeherapy.com and click on the articles link. There, you’ll find a wonderful array of reading materials available at no charge. For a more personal introduction, feel free to contact Wayne Carpenter, LCSW, Certified Trainer and Supervisor in Integrative Psychotherapy at waynecarpenter@msn.com and, of course, you are always welcome to contact me directly at 970-388-7274 or drcarln@mac.com.
