

PSYC SPOT PSYCHOLOGY CLINIC

Understand and Develop Your Inner-Workings

Two Very Different “Holistic” Approaches to Mental Health and Psychotherapy

NEWSLETTER #3

A cursory look at the Psychologist and Clinical Psychologist profiles in our area would suggest many if not most of us adopt a “holistic” approach to mental health and therapy. Yet a closer read would reveal how we often use the same term to mean very different approaches and philosophies.

Some practitioners use the term “holistic” to describe the increasingly popular model that ties psychological health to biological and spiritual health. Here, “mind-body-spirit” is seen as an interconnected whole – meaning none of these components should be neglected, and improvements in any one should lead to improvements in the other two. Thus, focus is placed on facilitating healthy diets, physical fitness, meditation, being spiritual and/or in touch with nature etc. to improve mental wellness, and vice versa.

In contrast, other practitioners use the term “holistic” to describe “old school” psychotherapy. Unlike contemporary disorder-centric (and non-holistic) treatments that focus on isolating and narrowly targeting diagnosable fragments of people’s psychology, traditional person-centred (and holistic) therapy focuses on understanding how and why the person has developed and operates in ways that make them repeatedly encounter or remain entrapped in particular problems. This contextualizes the symptoms (as a function of the person’s psychology and circumstances) and points to meaningful directions in treatment.

To illustrate, suppose someone presents with Panic Disorder, defined by the cycle of panicking about having more panic attacks, which paradoxically causes more panic attacks... If we are to faithfully adopt the disorder-centric approach, we would simply address the snowballing cycle of panic-about-panic then call it a day (since the person is technically “cured” from the disorder). However, if we are to adopt a holistic approach, we would try to get to the bottom of all this and wonder what led to the cycle of panic in the first place. Was the original panic attack a normative response?

Or was it reflective of something that warrants attention (e.g., panic attack when finding out one’s favourite pop idol is no longer single)? Even if the original panic attack was unequivocally a normative response to something like bankruptcy and pending eviction, we would still wonder – was the bankruptcy due to misfortune (it often is), or was it symptomatic of deeper problems? If for instance it resulted from the emphatic refusal to work and “be complicit” in our capitalistic system, we would then explore why the person embraces such extreme beliefs and decisions. For instance, has the person yet-to-develop the (often taken for granted) capacities needed to see things beyond black-or-white? Or developed overly strong morals but overly weak sense of self-care and pragmatisms? Or subscribed to this doctrine to be part of a socio-political group to avert social isolation? Or was it something else... As illustrated, traditional therapy is holistic in that it aims to understand the interplay between the person’s psychology and circumstances to make sense of the symptoms and get to the root problems.

Is “old school” psychotherapy better than contemporary disorder-focused treatments? And is the traditional approach to being holistic better than the one which views mind-body-spirit as a system? Despite my personal biases, I have to say no. What works best really just depends on who and what it is for. Having said that, most psychotherapists evidently seek “old fashioned” therapy for ourselves (this even applies to those who specialise in non-holistic treatments). If you also suspect this approach suits you, contact us for an appointment.

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