

PSYC SPOT PSYCHOLOGY CLINIC

Understand & Develop Your Inner-Workings

The Use of Problematic “Solutions” The Snowballing of Mental Health Problems

NEWSLETTER #6

Traditionally, one of the better ways to discern whether a client is likely to benefit more from supportive-counselling or treatment-centric therapy is to assess whether the person is *employing problematic “solutions” to one’s perceived problems*. The idea is that without counterproductive efforts to strive towards one’s goals or fend off one’s fears, most issues will naturally fade over time (e.g., people can gradually accept the unachievable goals, adapt to unresolvable issues, or the issues may be temporary in nature). In such cases, counselling may facilitate the “time heals” processes. However, if the person’s efforts are counterproductive, like fuelling the existing problems or creating new ones, then therapy may be needed to shed light on and help break this vicious cycle (instead of expecting “time heals” kind of spontaneous improvements). The key question is, why do people employ problematic “solutions”?

Sometimes, we may be too fixated on achieving a goal or fending off a threat that we ended up neglecting to weigh up the costs, or are willing to accept any costs. For example, someone who has an insatiable need for attention may dramatize or outright fabricate parts of their life. Likewise, someone who has an excessive need to feel superior may resort to undermining everyone nearby. In both cases, however, the immediate gains is always followed by costly mid-long term consequences.

Other times, we may not realize the “solution” being employed is actually a costly and otherwise problematic one. For example, someone who relies on being extremely generous to win relationships may only highlight the positive aspects of generosity, and overlooked how one has drawn in and failed to filter out people who see this as a chance for exploitation. Worse, some may have been exploited for as long as they could remember, and have desensitized or never learnt to see it as an unacceptable price to pay for maintaining human connections.

Still other times, we may not even realize we have actually employed some form of “solution”. For instance, someone may be using (the proverbial) Sour Grape rationalizations, meaning the person may have developed the biased view that the potentially unattainable goal is not that desirable anyway (“those hard-to-reach grapes look sour anyway”). While unconsciously devaluing the target can lessen the potential disappointments involved, it can also prevent us from genuinely pursuing what may have been attainable and valuable outcomes. As another example, many people who are highly intolerant of uncertainties will, without realizing, make decisions that bring forth a negative or even the worst possible outcome, because subjectively that is still less painful than prolonging the uncertainty-related sensation.

A fundamental goal of therapy is to help each client figure out how and why one has come to (over) value and/or fear certain things in life. Simultaneously, focus is placed on exploring why the person (consciously or unconsciously) strives to attain what one values and/or defend against one’s perceived threats in counterproductive ways. If the person simply did not realise the “solution” use is maladaptive, insight building could be most relevant? If the person actually lacks the means to employ more adaptive solutions, skills and capacity building could be most pertinent? Alternatively, if the problem lies in the pursuit of “unhealthy” goals and/or seeing issues in areas when there is none, then another direction in treatment may be relevant. In any case, psychotherapy is really more about understanding and developing the individual, than it is about clinically treating (symptom-defined) DSM conditions.

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