7. Tolerance and Taking a Non-Judgmental Approach and Individualization – Page Version

Introduction

We have spoken about tolerance and taking a non-judgmental approach in passing several times in this course. We also have spoken about prejudices, assumptions, and generalizations, and the need to move ourselves and the client toward individualization, that is, toward dealing with specific people rather looking at and perhaps blaming whole groups. Both of these topics have to do with peacebuilding and reconciliation and the transformation of collectives, that is, societies, as well as with individual and group work with clients. Later, in the course on psychology and trauma, we will describe the levels on which traumatization can occur and how we need to work on it on several levels in parallel. Here, we want to introduce the general concepts.

As always, we strongly urge you to complete all of the recommended activities. We also remind you not to post anything that would lead to the identification of another person. As we will continue to say, that can cause harm and is highly unethical.

Tolerance and Taking a Non-Judgmental Approach

A very important principle in giving care is to distinguish people from their acts.

In this, we need to present several important principles.

The first principle is that, in virtually all cases, we are talking about actions that are the result of psychological *reactions* rather than psychological *diseases or disorders*. People carry out actions based on their backgrounds, education, the way they have been treated, the cultures in which they grew up and lived, and a wide variety of other experiences that they have had. These reactions may have become habit. A reaction that a person has now and the action that the person takes may have its roots in what worked in the past and may not necessarily be based on what is happening at the current moment. Also, the person simply may not know how to react to a given situation.

In this context, another principle is that every person does the best that he or she possibly can at any given moment given his or her background and the circumstances. Almost no one does something deliberately that they think will be harmful. Almost everyone has morals or standards. These also can get in the way of other things. The effort to do something good may backfire and do unintended harm.

We must mention that there are two groups that are exceptions in this context. One is people who are known as *psychopaths*. These are people without feelings. There are very few such people.

The other group is people who are known as *sociopaths*. These are people who, in general, have been highly traumatized, usually at an early age, and who react only in their own interest.

Both psychopaths and sociopaths may be considered to be psychologically ill people and should be worked with only by specialists. Sometimes, they are difficult to identify. However, the number of such people whom you will see probably is very small.

Many people have guilt for their reactions and they feel shame about them, whether they deserve to or not.

Guilt has to do with responsibility. It can be positive or negative. We see positive guilt as admitting that something was wrong when it really was wrong, which frequently is not the case, and trying to put it right. Negative guilt is taking responsibility for something that was not the person’s fault. Shame is the negative feeling within the person for his or her actions. Guilt and shame are different, and must be distinguished.

Our point here is that it is the responsibility of the caregiver to explore the client’s reactions with him or her. The caregiver may judge the reactions and the actions that have followed them as inappropriate, but it is not the place of the caregiver to judge the person as a person. This is tolerance. This is an extremely important principle and is central to the relationship between the caregiver and the client and to the transformational process of the client. Thus, it is the responsibility of the caregiver to accept the client as a person and to get the client to accept himself or herself.

Under some circumstances, it is not possible for the caregiver to work with clients who have carried out certain actions. Obviously, in such cases, the caregiver should refer the client to someone else.

Activity

Give a situation in which the client had difficulty accepting his or her own actions. How did you deal with that?

Give a situation in which you had difficulty accepting a client’s actions. How did you deal with that?

Give a situation in which you had difficulty in accepting your own actions. How did you deal with that?

Individualization

Individualization is the opposite of making generalizations or assumptions or having prejudices. That is, it means taking the responsibility or blame away from a larger group and putting it onto specific individuals. Thus, it was not the (fill in your least favorite group here) who carried out those acts, but it was Mr. X or Ms. X. This is very important at a collective level and also at the level of the transformational process for the individual in several respects. Again, we first must look at a principle that we will get into in more detail in the next section, namely that each individual has responsibility for his or her own actions. This is an important psychological principle as well as one that has its foundation in international law. Under such law, no one may be forced to carry out orders that he or she deems to be immoral or illegal. Individualization leads the client to see the traumatization in a different context. Thus, it was the individual who carried out the action and not the group as a whole. At one level, the system might be blamed for brainwashing them, but the individual still had the responsibility for his or her specific actions. With regard to the client, this can have deep consequences, as it can for the societies involved. This realization can lead the client to take restorative action, both psychological and legal, with regard to the trauma. The interaction between legal action and individual psychological transformational action by the client also can be therapeutic.

Activities

Describe a situation in which a client benefited from work with individualization if you have had one.

Even if you haven’t done this sort of work, describe one or more situations in your own context in which clients could benefit from individualization.

Final Remarks

Tolerance and looking at actions as the consequences of the person’s entire background, reaction patterns, and circumstances is extremely important for the client as well as giving the caregiver deeper insights into the client and into traumatization in general. As everything in this work, it takes a great deal of time and effort and thought and feeling.

Individualization is another one of those processes that requires thought and work.

With work on both of these, we think that you will become a better caregiver who is more useful to your clients and yourself.