
CHANGING LIVES

Dr Christian Jonathan Haverkamp M.D.

Changes in internal and external communication patterns are important to keep people adapted to their changing environments and to help them pursue their needs, values and aspirations in the world. Mental health problems are often a result if changes to internal or external communication patterns are impaired. From anxiety to depression and burnout, many of today's severely debilitating conditions can be linked to fears and a reluctance to evolve and change. Removing these barriers can lead to large increases in the quality of life.

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Introduction

This article was supposed to have as a title 'Change a Life', but as change is an interconnected event requiring changes to internal and external communication patterns, the title 'Changing Lives' seemed more appropriate. This article addresses some aspects of change which are frequently encountered in a psychotherapeutic practice. Some references are made in the following to communication-focused therapy (CFT) which was developed by the author for several mental health conditions (Haverkamp, 2010, 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

Most Never Make It

It never fails to amaze me and some of my patients how little other people 'deal with their issues'. Unfortunately, many people live their lives driven by their issues rather than by what they want and desire in life. It is not always possible to get what one needs, values and wants, but it should be possible to achieve this over the long-term. Many people resign themselves to an existence where they compromise heavily on happiness, satisfaction and contentment. Change does not mean that one has to change one's job from one day to the next or move to another country tomorrow. Just the opposite, the success stories are usually the gradual ones, where people make little steps in the right direction each day, week or month. This requires a sense of direction, but that is quite easy to achieve once an individual reconnects with himself or herself and becomes open to internal and external communication.

Disconnection

A significant obstacle to change is when people are disconnected from themselves and others. Every mental health condition from anxiety all the way up to narcissistic or borderline personality disorders comes with a partial disconnect, usually both internally and externally. Barriers to communication, disconnects, impede the flow of some meaningful information, which in turn causes a wide variety of symptoms. Anxiety, for example, is a symptom of a disconnect from one's emotions and other important information. A lack of information leads to uncertainty, which is always present when there is anxiety, and the worst kind of uncertainty is the uncertainty about oneself, one's emotions and thought processes. By improving internal and external communication patterns, therapy can reverse this vicious cycle between uncertainty, anxiety and barriers to communication. Since communication patterns can be relatively stable over time, in part due to autoregulatory processes, any changes to them can last for a long time into the future.

Why Change?

One might ask why change is necessary at all. The reason why change needs to be integrated in life is that our environment and our biology changes all the time. We have to adapt, but we also have to find objectives, goals, and make decisions that let us walk in a direction which is of meaning and value to us. Happiness, satisfaction and contentment are mostly a result of things being 'in sync' and making sense. So, if we orientate ourselves towards relatively stable parameters, our fundamental needs, values and aspirations, chances are high that life will make more sense over a longer period of time. This realignment, however, requires changes, not to the personality, but to the strategies we use in communication with ourselves and others.

Resolving Issues

An issue is defined as an important topic or problem for debate or discussion. This means that something needs to happen with an 'issues'. However, while many people are aware that they have 'Issues', they stop right there and are reluctant to have them 'debated' or 'discussed'. This means that there is an urge for resolution, but nothing is done about it.

Issues are a part of life. In themselves, they are neither good nor bad. They are just something that needs to be dealt with. If nothing is done about them, they tend not to go away. 'Debate' or 'discussion' already implies that they need to be communicated somehow. While external communication is not always necessary, an internal awareness and dialogue at least needs to take place. However, in most cases the external dialogue helps also with the internal dialogue, as they are closely linked.

Communication is thus the instrument to resolve issues, whether they arose from thoughts, external events or emotions. All these reflect the transfer of information in some way or other. These communication processes happen all the time and they do not even require conscious awareness for some of their work. However, their functioning depends on the communication patterns a person uses. Communication patterns are ways of communicating, forms and sequences, one uses to shift information within oneself or in interactions with others. Some may be more adaptive and better functioning, while others are maladaptive and poorly functioning but have not been 'updated' yet.

Even in a mythical happy place, where we can always get what we truly want and need, we would still need to communicate these needs and wants. Unfortunately, for most people the difficulties in resolving issues begins with the inability to say what they need and want. An issue is thus both, a nuisance and a wake-up call to reflect on what we truly need and want and to learn what we need, want and value.

Everyone has 'issues'. Realizing that it is not just you who has them, but everyone else as well, is an important first step towards a better interaction with the world. If you feel bad when talking to someone, this person might trigger some unpleasant experiences from your past, but it could also be the case that this individual has some unresolved issues and consequential unhappiness which you pick up on and then feel yourself. Unfortunately, in many interactions, especially fights and confrontations, most people do not really talk about the underlying emotions, such as 'hurt' and 'disappointment', but about the issues on the surface. "You are wrong about how to select our kid's school" "No, you are" etc. The underlying issues may

actually be the hurt experienced from bullying at school in one parent's past experience and the anger from never being good enough for one's father in the other parent's past experience. Only when talking about the underlying 'issues' is a real resolution possible, which may require a third person observer, such as a therapist or a very good friend.

Quite frequently, a psychological issue creates the illusion that life will improve if a simple 'solution' is found – even if the path there leads to misery for oneself and others. 'Dealing' with it in a constructive way, on the other hand, would mean accepting the event and seeing it as something that happened in an interconnected world. We may not accept that we do things in a counter-productive or even hurtful way because we do not want to accept that we have been treated badly or disrespectfully by someone in the past but recognizing that people are often hurtful because they have issues and not because we have done something wrong may be helpful in reaching this acceptance. It also makes it easier to tell someone that he is treating me badly, because I am confronting him with his unresolved issues rather than saying that he is a bad person.

Many people are afraid to deal with their issues. We all see our issues – on some level. Many people are not aware how their past life experiences are still controlling their actions and interactions today. Unfortunately, the exclusive focus in many places on cognitive behavioral therapy models leaves out what we learned from psychodynamic psychotherapy. The past matters to the extent that it has emotional significance to us, and it does because our memory links emotions to experiences. To resolve this, we have to become aware of the differences between a situation in the present and an experience in the past. This in turn requires at least some awareness of the past.

Life's Story

Humans need the sense of wholeness about the story of their lives. 'Things have to make sense in the greater scheme of things', and especially so does one's life. However, this also requires that we integrate our life experiences into our mental representation of our life's narrative. Stories need to be told, so talking about one's life with another person, such as a therapist, helps to feel the reality of the story. The more one is connected to oneself and the world, the more information is available that can add to the sense of meaning one perceives in one's life story. People who are more disconnected from themselves perceive less meaning in the world because there is less cognitive and emotional information to attach to one's memories, and thus the story of one's life. Working on internal and external communication patterns can so enrich the richness one perceives about one's life story. The goal is, however, not to communicate more but to use the process better to one's advantage, and as a result also to the benefit of others. Improved communication can so also facilitate to reach goals that are important to oneself.

Many people do not think of their life as having a story, although they crave for stories in the form of films, books, celebrity reports and more. One way to build the own confidence and self-esteem is to become aware of the story of one's life. The story is still unfolding and developing, but to reflect on this process in itself can lead to a deep appreciation of it. A story is essentially a sequence of interactions, the log of meaningful information being exchanged, and the promise that there is some logic or meaning behind all

this. Stories are used to express and communicate what cannot be put in a simple sentence. Communication is thus at the heart of a story, as well as the instrument that makes it work.

Fit

Real change means it fits into the dynamics of one's life over time. If change does not fit with one's basic values and aspirations, it will not last long. However, identifying one's values and genuine interests requires accepting all facets of one's past life because it is also in the more difficult moments where they shine and become apparent. This can help to lead to better and longer lasting change. Stability in life, making better decisions and working towards goals all become easier when people know more about themselves and the world. This means being open to new meaningful information from oneself and from others, which may sometimes induce fears or anxiety. Everyone has had hurtful experiences, and they make one feel more vulnerable. Hurtful experience includes also situations where one's needs, also the emotional needs, were ignored or disrespected. In some people hurtful experiences can lead to more disconnectedness, mostly out of fear, while in others they can start a process towards greater insight, understanding and a better communication of the emotions triggered by these experiences. There is a choice.

Therapy should help increase the fit between the individual wishes, needs, values and aspirations and the world through awareness for and insight into both the worlds on the inside and on the outside. Reflecting on and changing internal and external communication can change the world as one perceives it and what is achievable in the world. Awareness that there is a lack of fit between one's needs, values and aspirations and how one interacts with the world and with oneself can be an important motivator for change, and on reflection it can provide a direction for change. Therapy should help in developing this awareness and building on it constructively. However, this requires a special focus on how meaningful messages are exchanged, sent and received, since this is how wishes and needs are met on the outside and on the inside, and this is also how one can develop awareness for the two worlds and see meaning in them.

The Present, the Past and the Future

The past is the past and the future has not happened yet. Dealing with one's issue should not retraumatize or make someone feel worse. Rather, it is about taking a more reflective look at what happened. If others do not treat us well, as children we often tend to see the reason in ourselves, which can have a negative effect on self-image and confidence later in life. One reason is that children see themselves as being more at the centre of their universe. Usually this changes as children turn into adolescents, and then into adults, unless there is a traumatizing situation which freezes the process. Then, the adult still feels responsible for things he or she has no control over and often tries hard to make sure other people only think positively about oneself. One sees oneself as the cause for the emotional states of others.

Awareness and insight into internal and external communication can break these cycles, whether they are caused by experiences in the distant or more immediate past. When drawing better boundaries, it may also help to keep in mind that everyone has 'issues', the other person and ourselves included, and that we only have some direct control over our own emotions but not over another person's. This means we all

have to 'discuss and debate' our own issues and resolve them. While one can offer another person support or help, one cannot resolve an issue for someone else. In any case, dealing with one's own issues achieves greater happiness and makes the world a better place for everyone.



Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. MLA (Harvard) LL.M. trained in medicine, psychiatry and psychotherapy and works in private practice for psychotherapy, counselling and psychiatric medication in Dublin, Ireland. The author can be reached by email at jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com or on the websites www.jonathanhaverkamp.com and www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie.

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