
COMMUNICATION- FOCUSED THERAPY (CFT) FOR OCD

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Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) is a psychotherapy developed by the author, which can be applied to a number of mental health conditions, including obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). The flows of internal and external communication maintain the functioning and the development of the individual in the world. If a communication pattern or channel does not serve its intended purpose anymore, it can lead to a disconnect from oneself and from others. The disconnect internally and externally shows itself in different symptoms. The disconnect also contributes to more uncertainty about the own basic parameters, such as values, needs and aspiration, which can then lead to maladaptive decisions in life. Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) works directly with communication about communication to restores the autoregulatory processes that can help to reverse the condition.

Keywords: OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder, communication-focused therapy, CFT, communication, psychotherapy, treatment

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Introduction

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) was developed by the author to deal directly with the communication processes most forms of psychotherapy work with indirectly. As obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) has its cause in unresolved emotional pressures and a malfunctioning in the selection and processing of information, improving internal and external communication pathways usually leads to a remission of the symptoms. However, since there is a significant element of learned thought patterns, the therapy can take a couple of months.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), interpersonal psychotherapy and psychodynamic psychotherapy are often used to treat OCD. They focus on learning and internal conflicts which are also forms of communication patterns. (Haverkamp, 2017a) CFT tries to achieve these results more directly. (Haverkamp, 2017b) CFT uses such techniques as creating awareness, observing, experimentation with the solicitation of feedback and other techniques. (Haverkamp, 2017b) Several case studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach (Haverkamp, 2012b, 2012a, 2012c, 2012d, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015, 2015).

Psychodynamic Psychotherapy and CBT

Both therapeutic approaches have shown effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety and panic attacks. Both have theories about the underlying maladaptive mechanisms they address. CBT sees learning processes and certain cognitive thought patterns as central, while psychodynamic considers conflicts and certain dynamics within the psychological structures as central. However, they achieve their results through changes in internal or external communication patterns, even though they see this only as a result of the healing process rather than as the cause of it.

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT)

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) was developed by the author to focus more specifically on the communication process between patient and therapist. It requires a setting in which it is possible for the patient to freely develop new patterns of communicating, first with the patient, and then internally. The therapist facilitates this process and creates the space in which this is possible. It is then an active process in which the therapist asks questions and together with the patient observes and reflects on communication patterns. This feedback is not so much about a specific content but about how the patient uses communication to search for and receive meaningful messages from the environment and then processes and sends new messages. The internal changes in affective states or obsessive thinking are a consequence of changes in internal communication, while external changes in the world are a consequence of changes in external communication patterns. (Haverkamp, 2010, 2017b)

Communication has rules which are stable over time. This makes a communication-focused approach much more effective than working on content or psychological processes which are subject to change over time. Awareness of communication patterns, whether internal or external, as long as they are relevant in providing and sending meaningful information, lays the foundation for any future work on them. For example, a patient who has difficulties drawing healthy boundaries with his boss, does not have a difficulty with boundaries as a fundamental problem but uses, often subconsciously, internal communication pattern and external communication patterns which are not helpful. Fears underlying an anxiety to say 'No' are a product of a deficit of meaningful information, which creates uncertainty, and the timid voice used in the interaction reduces the ability of the boss to receive and understand the message, which means the situation persists.

Understanding OCD

OCD and anxiety are related to how people communicate with themselves and with others. An obsessive thought or a compulsive behavior is a reaction to an increase in anxiety, which in turn is a reaction to a reduced capability to communicate an emotion or some other meaningful information. The pressure of the anxiety tries to get the system to an adjustment through greater receptivity of information. However,

if there are some maladaptive communication patterns which were never corrected, the underlying emotional or cognitive conflicts cannot be resolved because it would require effective communication pathways to do so. If one is stuck in a job which is not fulfilling but at the same prohibits oneself to become aware of it, that is to receive the information that could resolve the conflicts. Conflicts usually exist in places where there is not enough information. With enough meaningful information every conflict can be resolved, emotional or otherwise.

Emotional conflicts, such as sadness about a loss but anger at the person one loves, can be resolved once one has more information. However, when people get stuck in these emotional conflicts they shut down instead of opening up which would allow the information to stream in to resolve the conflict. CFT tries to reverse this by reducing the fear of a free and open communication while exploring patterns which can support this process.

Information needs to be meaningful to be helpful. Taking more charge of the internal communication through awareness, experimentation and internal and external feedback also leads to a greater sense of self, efficacy and agency. This also helps against the anxiety and reduces the OCD. Over the long run the new patterns will offer stability against the OCD. Communication itself is an autoregulatory process which provides the information so that individuals can adapt to their environment and to each other.

Connection

Connection is a result of the dynamics of communication processes, but at the same time it also links people over time. A connection is a promise that over time a meaningful communication will continue, which has a benefit to all involved. A connection is a win-win situation. Hate, envy and others occur if there is an information deficit, if the communication between people is somehow compromised. Whether one speaks of nations or on an individual level, obsessions and compulsive behavior are a result of a deficit in meaningful communication.

Interpersonal Triggers

OCD is usually triggered by stressful situations. However, often these situations have a strong interpersonal element. The end of a relationship may be such a trigger. Since relationships are promises of future communication, the breakdown causes strong emotions, which in turn can cause anxiety if there is no pressure valve for the emotions, such as sadness, anger, frustration, fear, or a host of others. Anxiety is the result of a disconnect if the individual emotions cannot be identified.

OCD often occurs when a relationship breaks apart or some other interpersonal change or issue occurs. The result is often communicative patterns that are maladaptive to the individual. These changes in communication patterns are what causes then the problems to the individuals because. Cycles of thinking or acting to suppress the anxiety becomes less and less effective as the communication patterns used are maladaptive. As the end of the flow of the information in a rumination or obsessive thinking are no longer any meaningful and relevant outcomes. The content of an intrusive thought may be bizarre and anxiety provoking

Maladaptive Communication Patterns

Often, there are already maladaptive communication patterns before, that cause the problems in the relationship or interpersonal interactions. The advantage of seeing these issues with oneself and others as maladaptive communication patterns, makes it easier to treat any symptoms that are caused by it because communication patterns can be changed. Various techniques have been described elsewhere. (Haverkamp, 2010, 2017c)

Maladaptive Communication patterns are at the heart of many psychiatric conditions, including depression, psychosis and others. Qualitatively and quantitatively they should be seen as being on a sliding scale of maladaptive communication patterns. What is maladaptive about them is that they do not bring the system to a better-informed state with better regulation, better decisions and a greater sense of self and agency in the environment.

In the case of OCD internal maladaptive communication patterns include the following:

- Observation deficit: The inability to observe own communication, including the maladaptive communication patterns (which it shares with many other conditions)
- Information selection deficit: information is not filtered out adequately. As the anxiety increases the filter is probably becoming even less effective
- Source mix-up: Usually in the case of OCD internal emotions are projected into the environment, but since seeing or making structure in the environment does not reduce them, the OCD continues. For example, hand washing or counting tiles does not take away the feelings of helplessness, abandonment, sadness or anger.

In the case of OCD external maladaptive communication patterns include the following:

- Decoding deficit: less meaning is identified in messages from other people; understanding is reduced
- Encoding deficit: information, whether from emotions, thoughts, memory, perceptions or all four, cannot be packaged in a message to the extent which would be useful

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) focuses on a greater awareness for these and other communication problems. Often, awareness in itself is enough to resolve the problem, while in others experimentation and reflection are needed to bring about a change. Overall, it is important to remember that the change has to be in how information is communicated to effect a change, which is more important than the actual content, while the latter can be helpful in identifying the former though.

Meaning

Obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors lack meaning in the sense that they do not bring about a benefit for the individual. Instead, they act like a drug which brings a temporary relief but requires ever increasing doses as it builds tolerance. In the same way, an individual suffering from OCD needs to engage in ever increasing obsessions and compulsions to hold the anxiety at bay. At some point, the daily range of activities becomes so limited that a normal life with work and social relationships is no longer possible. The patient becomes so caught up in the obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors that the world shrinks to a little box with potentially enormous pain and distress. But worst of all, the focus on the

obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors deprives other aspects in life of their meaning. The obsessions and compulsions can communicate meaning, such as the one contained in the underlying conflictual emotions or thoughts, but the anxiety which is maintained by the subjective need to suppress the urge to decode and interpret the emotions often blocks this. The therapeutic solution is thus to open up the communication of the signals contained in the emotion to the conscious part of the brain and to interpret them. This may happen not directly but by focusing on how emotions are communicated externally between patient and therapist.

Intrusive Thoughts

Everybody has intrusive thoughts. However, a patient suffering from OCD focuses more on these thoughts than someone else. As the anxiety causes this shift in focus, the shift also increases the anxiety. As long as the underlying emotional and cognitive conflicts are unresolved, this vicious cycle will continue.

Intrusive thoughts are attributed a relevance which they otherwise would not have. An important step in therapy thus is to make the person aware of how OCD attaches a meaning to a thought which is random in nature. The meaning attached to it, however, is not random but is a reflection of the underlying emotions. The maladaptive communication patterns are thus blocking the signals from the emotions, while amplifying less meaningful information.

To break through the vicious cycle of OCD, in which emotions like fear and anxiety cause safety thoughts and behaviors, which in turn reinforce feelings of fear, loneliness, sadness, and so forth, it is helpful to focus on identifying what is meaningful and having more of it in life. Communication helps in identifying and finding meaning, either communication with oneself or with others. The exchange of messages is like a learning process in which meaning can be identified, found and accumulated. Through meaningful interactions one accumulates more meaning, more connectedness with oneself and the world and reduces the need for thoughts and behaviors which are triggered by fears, guilt, self-blame and other negative emotions. This also helps against depression and anxiety.

Perceiving more meaning also makes interacting with others and oneself more meaningful. This has a positive effect on one's interaction patterns, how and in which one ways one relates to one's environment and exchanges messages with it.

Values, Needs and Aspirations

Often, individuals suffering from anxiety or burnout have become uncertain about what is really important to them and the fit between these values and interests and their current life situation. Whether in the professional or romantic realms, getting what one needs and values makes happy in the long run, everything else does not. If I value helping people, it is important that I do that to make me happy, content and satisfied. Since these basic parameters stay relatively constant in the long run, identifying them can also create a greater sense of stability, security and predictability as to one's own inner world. Reconnecting with oneself and getting a better picture of them not only leads to better decisions, but also to a greater confidence in oneself to chart a long-term course which lowers anxiety considerably. As situations, people and activities can be sought which are more congruent with one's needs, values and aspirations the potential for emotional conflicts is reduced.

Getting an eye for what is meaningful helps in identifying the own values, needs and aspirations. In this sense, meaningful communication is a learning process in which a sense for relevance can be nurtured. Changes in one's life begin with the ability to select and filter information, such as that contained in perceptions and thoughts, to make it useful. In OCD, this filter does not work efficiently. However, through interactions with the outside world, the filter with regards to the inner world can be reestablished and maintained.

A change in course towards getting more of one's values, needs and aspirations fulfilled is better done in gradual shifts because it reduces the anxiety levels that promote OCD symptoms. Gradual shifts also prevent overshooting and make the adjustments easier. Overshooting may occur if one changes one's job or other aspect in life so radically that the targets are missed and finetuning to adjust is no longer possible. If, for example, a patient who worked in a bank now works for a charity, because he finds this more in tune with his needs, values and aspirations, he may be more valuable and useful to the charity working in finances than auditing farms in remote areas. He may, of course on deeper reflection also find that the

bank serves many social and economic functions which are not addressed by the charity. This is one reason why not only connection with one-self but also with others is important to make better decisions in life and have a strong sense of direction.

Meaningful Messages as the Instrument of Change

Communication is the vehicle of change. The instruments are meaningful messages which are generated and received by the people who take part in these interactions. In a therapeutic setting, keeping the mutual flow of information relevant and meaningful brings change in both people who take part in this process. The learning curve for the patient may be steeper in certain respects because he or she spends less time in this interaction style than a therapist.



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