

Person-centered therapy and congruence

Person-centered therapy began formally with Carl Rogers.

Rogers affirmed individual personal experience as the basis and standard for living and therapeutic effect. Rogers identified six conditions which are needed to produce personality changes in clients: relationship, vulnerability to anxiety (on the part of the client), genuineness (the therapist is truly himself or herself and incorporates some self-disclosure), the client's perception of the therapist's genuineness, the therapist's unconditional positive regard for the client, and accurate empathy. Living in the present rather than in the past or future, with trust in your own thoughts and the accuracy in your feelings, and a responsible acknowledgment of your freedom, with a view toward participating fully in our world, are hallmarks of Roger's person-centered therapy. Rogers also claims that the therapeutic process is essentially the accomplishments made by the client. The client having already progressed further along in their growth and maturation development, only progresses further with the aid of a psychologically favored environment.

The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions Rogers (1957; 1959) stated that there are six necessary and sufficient conditions required for therapeutic change:

1. **Therapist–client psychological contact:** a relationship between client and therapist must exist, and it must be a relationship in which each person's perception of the other is important.
2. **Client incongruence:** that incongruence exists between the client's experience and awareness.
3. **Therapist congruence, or genuineness:** the therapist is congruent within the therapeutic relationship. The therapist is deeply involved him or herself --- they are not "acting" --- and they can draw on their own experiences (self-disclosure) to facilitate the relationship.
4. **Therapist unconditional positive regard (UPR):** the therapist accepts the client unconditionally, without judgment, disapproval or approval. This facilitates increased self-regard in the client, as they can begin to become aware of experiences in which their view of self-worth was distorted by others.
5. **Therapist empathic understanding:** the therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference. Accurate empathy on the part of the therapist helps the client believe the therapist's unconditional love for them.
6. **Client perception:** that the client perceives, to at least a minimal degree, the therapist's UPR and empathic understanding.

Three of these conditions have become known as the 'Core Conditions':

1. **Congruence** --- the willingness to transparently relate to clients without hiding behind a professional or personal facade.

2. **Unconditional Positive Regard** --- the therapist offers an acceptance and prizing for their client for who he or she is without conveying disapproving feelings, actions or characteristics and demonstrating a willingness to attentively listen without interruption, judgement or giving advice.
3. **Empathy** --- the therapist communicates their desire to understand and appreciate their clients perspective.

Rogers believed that a therapist who embodies these three critical attitudes will help liberate their client to more confidently express their true feelings without fear of judgement. To achieve this, the person-centered therapist carefully avoids directly challenging their client's way of communicating themselves in the session in order to enable a deeper exploration of the issues most intimate to them and free from external referencing. Rogers was not prescriptive in telling his clients what to do, but believed that the answers to the patients' questions were within the patient and not the therapist. Accordingly the therapists' role was to create a facilitative, empathic environment wherein the patient could discover the answers for him or herself.

Congruence in Rogers' words

"Genuineness in therapy means that the therapist is his actual self during his encounter with his client. Without facade, he openly has the feelings and attitudes that are flowing in him at the moment. This involves self-awareness; that is, the therapist's feelings are available to him to his awareness --- and he is able to live them, to experience them in the relationship, and to communicate them if they persist. The therapist encounters his client directly, meeting him person to person. He is being himself, not denying himself.

Since this concept is liable to misunderstanding, let me state that it does not mean that the therapist burdens his client with overt expression of all his feelings. Nor does it mean that the therapist discloses his total self to his client. It does mean, however, that the therapist denies to himself none of the feelings he is experiencing and that he is willing to experience transparently any persistent feelings that exist in the relationship and to let these be known to his client. It means avoiding the temptation to present a facade or hide behind a mask of professionalism, or to assume a confessional-professional attitude.

It is not simple to achieve such reality. Being real involves the difficult task of being acquainted with the flow of experiencing going on within oneself, a flow marked especially by complexity and continuous change ..." (C. Rogers 1966, p.185.)

"Can I be in some way which will be perceived by the other person as trustworthy, as dependable or consistent in some deep sense? Both research and experience indicate that this is very important, and over the years I have found what I believe are deeper and better ways of answering this question.

I used to feel that if I fulfilled all the outer conditions of trustworthiness --- keeping appointments, respecting the confidential nature of the interviews, etc. --- and if I acted consistently the same during the interviews, then this condition would be fulfilled. But experience drove home the fact that to act consistently acceptant, for example, if in fact I was feeling annoyed or sceptical or some other non-acceptant feeling, was certain in the long run to be

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perceived as inconsistent or untrustworthy. I have come to recognise that being trustworthy does not demand that I be rigidly consistent but that I be dependably real. The term 'congruent' is one I have used to describe the way I would like to be. By this I mean that whatever feeling or attitude I am experiencing would be matched by my awareness of that attitude. When this is true, then I am a unified or integrated person in that moment, and hence I can be whatever I deeply am. This is a reality which I find others experience as dependable". (C. Rogers, 1961, p.50.).

Congruence in helping relationship.

Among the three conditions facilitating human relations, congruence is certainly the most crucial, as Rogers himself stressed on several occasions; in essence there is no empathy or unconditional positive regard authentic if the person is not congruent, that is not being in touch with your own emotional world and meanings or not being aware of what is going through its feel at that moment you meet someone else.

The work on congruence is therefore characterized primarily in the form of a self-awareness exercise that requires personal discipline and attention to interrogate ourselves, to be open to see our "lights and shadows", to be available to let the others see without be hiding behind professional facades.

A) The congruence: "passive" exercise, maintaining a "clear" background

The congruence thus described does not presuppose therefore the need to be verbally spelled out in the relationship. We may continue to send to another verbal messages of empathy or acceptance: the important thing is that our inner self is clear and authentic.

In trainings, this can be achieved through exercises of self-awareness: during role playing, laboratories, simulations of call, participants might be trained to stop and pay attention to their inner life; they should try to understand what they are experiencing at that moment (emotion), but also what kind of thoughts and feelings they're having due to the words or the issue of the conversation. They don't have to use that awareness to answers to the real situation, but it should be used as a check-up of awareness ("Where am I?" "What's happening to me?").

Some examples:

- Making a call simulation and sometimes stopping and contacting congruence (emotions I'm feeling, meanings , feelings , thoughts , etc.);
- Proposing interactions (songs, talks) after which ask about congruence;
- Working on existential issues to seize our background: e.g. relationship with death, disease, failure, suffering, madness, etc.;
- Working on some important emotions: relationship with anger, fear, shame, joy, impotence;
- Finally working on relationship with some relational issues: war, invasion, handling, addiction, complicity.

B) The congruence: "active" exercise, give feedback

In the last twenty years, as part of the person-centered, traditional positions on the use of priority "passive" congruence have been overcome as a consequence both of a more correct interpretation of Rogers' approach and of new social-economical conditions that now require a stronger emphasis on the relational boundaries and more respect for diversity. The experience in helping relationships shows that making transparent (and then declare verbally) emotions, sometimes even thoughts, can help the other person to grasp unaware aspects of himself (self-revelation). Moreover, verbal declaration of our perception, far from being a form of judgment, can become a very useful feedback that increases in the other person the self-understanding.

Certainly most of these tools can be used when the relationship has been already established, when a certain "alliance" between the two interlocutors has been created; and above all the use of transparency must not be dictated by emotional impulsivity (congruence doesn't mean spontaneous!).

1. How to decide when to become "transparent": the rectangle of the behavior of Gordon; centering on the needs of the person.

In Rogers' literature, as an indication for the verbal expression of the congruence there is a persistent and strong feeling regarding the way to be the interlocutor, rather than to a behavior, a speech, argument, etc. In these cases, the indication is to take the risk and to express our congruence. This is certainly a first important indication, that might be enough, especially when we feel a largely positive emotion or mood (affection, sense of closeness, gratitude, happiness).

However, sometimes it is not enough to decide to make it transparent. An additional indication could be to understand if this transparency is useful for the interlocutor or if it longer meets our own needs. What when the experience or emotion are not only persistent but also so intense to make us difficult or impossible to listen? Here we can really benefit from a better insight of Thomas Gordon. This author, who has worked extensively in education, showed how we can divide the behavior of others in acceptable behavior (that arouse emotions even negative, but acceptable for us) and unacceptable behavior (that arouse emotions unacceptable for us). As we recognize the emotions acceptable? Obviously distinction cannot be in subjective terms. We need a way to be able to discern, everyone for himself, when someone else's behavior is unacceptable, because it arouses emotions that inundate us and prevent us from listening. An instrument is to listen to our physical alarm bell. Our body gives us some signals: "I cannot stand it down"; "I feel a knot in my stomach"; "It creates an unbearable tension"; "I feel nauseous". These sensations express non-acceptance that requires to express our discomfort, addressing and confronting the other person. As without being judgmental and offensive?

2. Give feedback: avoid being judgmental and offensive. On many occasions, we are able to discipline ourselves and to avoid judgments by listening; this attitude actually allows others to feel understood and accepted. Nonetheless, when someone exceeds certain boundaries and limits, our

endurance can also "blow up", suddenly leading us to a verbal aggressive and judgmental attitude. Instead it is important to be able to manage our anger and aggression. To this end, several authors, including Gordon, underlined the usefulness of learning to speak, when we compare or when we have to say something, in terms of I-message (message in first person). It needs:

- a. to give an accurate description of the unacceptable behavior;
 - b. express the emotions and experiences we feel because of such behavior;
 - c. explain concrete effects of the behavior for us, others or himself;
 - d. express clearly our expectations of changing.
3. Overcoming technical rigidity: creativity. The constant exercise can lead over time to be more creative in expressing transparency when something is unacceptable to us.
4. The feedback. Last area of congruence "active" is the "simple" feedback. For many of us, to know how the others see us and our behavior is interesting and curious. In this case, a theoretical model is very useful: Johary window. When the relationship is strong and firm (as those with frequent callers) messages about how I see you or how I see your situation can be useful feedbacks. However, this kind of feedback must be used very carefully, in specific situations and after being trained.

Credits

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Bibliography

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"Parent Effectiveness Training book" by Thomas Gordon, La Meridiana

ANIMALS IN DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS

Team building exercise

GOALS:

To become familiar to each other in a (new) group and to create a good atmosphere for working together

TIME:

1 hour

MATERIALS:

Glue, colored paper, scissors, big toe markers, scotch tape, construction paper.

SETTING:

A big space where little groups can work in distant places that enhance their concentration. The group is positioned in a circle when it works as a whole, during the debate.

EXECUTION:

Step 1:

Trainer invites people to think and choose their favorite animal

Step 2:

Trainer invites people to create a dress to represent their favorite animal using the material at disposal. The dress may be a symbol representative of the animal, a part of this, or what you prefer (e.g. for the elephant may be the proboscis, for the bull may be the horns, etc.)

Step 3:

While time is going to finish conductor puts signs to the walls, in distant places. Each sign has the name of the typical environment where animals live such as desert, wood, the sea, farm. Trainer can use construction papers or paintings previously created. Then he/she invites participants to wear their dress and go under the sign indicating the habitat of the chosen animal.

Step 4:

At this point, little groups are formed. Each group has to invent a story with the following characteristics:

- ✓ Characters of the story must be the animals gathered in the group
- ✓ The story must take place in the environment shown in the paper

Step 5:

Each group has to show others the result of its own work (it can be done through a reading of the story, or by miming the story, or through a short theatrical or singing text)

Step 6:

The trainer stimulates a debate regarding to the game just ended.

In particular, participants should be supported to express:

- What do they think of the atmosphere that has been developed within the group during this task,
- feelings experienced during the exercise
- ultimately how they feel now that they are talking about.

Appendix 1

Guide for trainer – what to say:

Step 1:

You have 2 minutes to think and choose your favorite animal.

Step 2:

You have about 20 minutes to create a dress with which to represent your favorite animal using the material at your disposal.

The dress may be a symbol representative of the animal, a part of this, or what you prefer (for example for the elephant may be the proboscis, for the bull may be the horns, etc ...)

Step 3:

Now you have to wear your dress and go under the sign indicating the habitat of your chosen animal

Step 4:

At this point, you have 15 minutes to invent a story with the following characteristics:

- ✓ must have as protagonists the animals gathered in the group
- ✓ must take place in the environment shown in the paper

Step 5:

Each group has 5 minutes to show others the fruit of its own work (it can be done a reading of the story, or mime the story, or prepare a short theatrical or singing text).

Step 6:

Now let's discuss together the game just ended.

In particular, we try to share:

What do you think of the atmosphere that has been developed within the group during the task, the feelings you have experienced during this game and ultimately how do you feel now that we are talking about?

PATH FOR EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

GOALS:

- Help people to recognize and properly verbalize their emotional reactions
- Enable people to use their emotional awareness as a tool during an interview or a call (this exercise is preparatory for the Triad Game)

TIME:

2 hours for a group of 18/20 persons

MATERIALS:

- Materials/products for sensory stimulation: 2 stimuli for each sense (see step 2) --- 1 for each participant
- paper, pens

SETTING:

The group is positioned in a circle when it works as a whole. Then people is arranged in pairs and work in private spaces that can enhance concentration.

EXECUTION:

Step 1

Trainer introduce the work and explain goals and staging. It is crucial that everybody has a clear idea of how to proceed in order to manage the work in couple by themselves.

Step 2

Couples are formed. Both participants experience each sense. Couples can choose the order in which to address the five sensory stimuli: sound, touch, sight, taste, smell.

Some examples: grapes and earth (touch); photos of shared moments (sight); pineapple and tomato (taste); audio files of recorded rain, sea, traffic, etc and a piece of music (sound); coffee and dried flowers (smell). The materials can put in a carton box or replaced as you want but containers must be opaque in order to hide the contents. Participants should be encouraged to keep their eyes closed when using senses other than sight. Just ready, couples ask their trainers a "sense" (every couple chooses the order) and receive the containers with products, a product for each member of the couple. Alternately (first one and then the other) the members of the couple explore, across the designated sense, all sensations procured by the element / stimulus.

After each load, with the help of a grid, run through the four phases of the communication of emotions: 1) define the feeling / emotion; 2) indicate the intensity (starting from 7 because participants identify sensations to which they give value); 3) describe the physical signals that accompany the emotion; 4) explain extensively felt emotion and the story that goes with it --- the goal is to allow the listener to understand what we mean by a word expressing emotions.

Each member work alone for the first 3 phases, but at point 4 they work in pairs verbalizing to each other the felt emotion.

Then they move to the next sense.

Step 3

After the experience , trainer ask to participants if anyone wants to share short reflections on the experience.

Afterwards, the trainer stimulates a debate on how to use emotional awareness and expression skills during a call.

Trainers remind that the expression of emotions during a call must be functional for the correct development of the relationship and cannot be separated from respect for people.

This experience must be followed by an exercise on the correct use of congruent communication, e.g. Triad Game or simulations of calls.

Appendix 1

Some starting point about emotions...

Emotions seem to rule our daily lives. We make decisions based on whether we are happy, angry, sad, bored or frustrated. We choose activities and hobbies based on the emotions they incite.

"An emotion is a complex psychological state that involves three distinct components: a *subjective experience*, a *physiological response*, and a *behavioral or expressive response*." (Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2007)

To understanding exactly what emotions are, researchers have tried to identify and classify the different types of emotions. In 1972, psychologist Paul Eckman suggested that there are six basic emotions that are universal throughout human cultures: fear, disgust, anger, surprise, happiness, and sadness. In 1999, he expanded this list to include a number of other basic emotions including embarrassment, excitement, contempt, shame, pride, satisfaction, and amusement.

During the 1980s, Robert Plutchik introduced another emotion classification system known as the "wheel of emotions." This model demonstrated how different emotions can be combined or mixed together, in much the way that an artist mixes primary colors to create other colors. Plutchik suggested that there are 8 primary emotional dimensions: happiness vs. sadness, anger vs. fear, trust vs. disgust, and surprise vs. anticipation. These emotions can be combined in a variety of ways. For example, happiness and anticipation might combine to create excitement.

In order to better understand what emotions are, let's focus on their three key elements.

The Subjective Experience

While experts believe that there are a number of basic universal emotions that are experienced by people all over the world regardless of background or culture, researchers also believe that the experience of emotion can be highly subjective. While we might have broad labels for certain emotions such as 'angry,' 'sad,' or 'happy,' your own unique experience of these emotions is probably much more multi-dimensional. Consider anger. Is all anger the same? Your own experience might range from mild annoyance to blinding rage. Plus, we don't always experience 'pure' forms of each emotion. Mixed emotions over different events or situations in our lives are common. When faced with starting a new job, you might feel both excited and nervous. Getting married or having a child might be marked by a wide variety of emotions ranging from joy to anxiety. These emotions might occur simultaneously, or you might feel them one after another.

The Physiological Response

If you've ever felt your stomach lurch from anxiety or your heart palpate with fear, then you realize that emotions also cause strong physiological reactions. Many of the physical reactions you experience during an emotion such as sweating palms, racing heartbeat, or rapid breathing are controlled by the sympathetic nervous system, a branch of the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system controls involuntary body responses such as blood flow and digestion. The sympathetic nervous system is charged with controlling the body's fight-or-flight reactions. When facing a threat, these responses automatically prepare your body to flee from danger or face the threat head-on.

While early studies of the physiology of emotion tended to focus on these autonomic responses, more recent research has targeted the brain's role in emotions. Brain scans have shown that the amygdala, part of the limbic system, plays an important role in emotion and fear in particular. The amygdala itself is a tiny, almond-shaped structure that has been linked to motivational states such as hunger and thirst as well as memory and emotion. Researchers have used brain imaging to show that when people are shown threatening images, the amygdala becomes activated. Damage to the amygdala has also been shown to impair the fear response.

The Behavioral Response

The final component is perhaps one that you are most familiar with – the actual expression of emotion. We spend a significant amount of time interpreting the emotional expressions of the people around us. Our ability to accurately understand these expressions is tied to what psychologists call emotional intelligence and these expressions play a major part in our overall body language. Researchers believe that many expressions are universal, such as a smile indicating happiness or pleasure or a frown indicating sadness or displeasure. Cultural rules also play an important role in how we express and interpret emotions. In Japan, for example, people tend to mask displays of fear or disgust when in the presence of authority figure.

Emotions Vs. Moods

In everyday language, people often use the terms 'emotions' and 'moods' interchangeably, but psychologists actually make distinctions between the two. How do they differ? An emotion is normally quite short-lived, but intense. Emotions are also likely to have a definite and identifiable cause. For example, after disagreeing with a friend over politics, you might feel angry for a short period of time. A mood on the other hand is usually much milder than an emotion, but longer-lasting. In many cases, it can be difficult to identify the specific cause of a mood. For example, you might find yourself feeling gloomy for several days without any clearly identifiable reason.

Sensation and perception

Sensation is the function of the low-level biochemical and neurological events that begin with the impinging of a stimulus upon the receptor cells of a sensory organ. It is the detection of the elementary properties of a stimulus.

Perception is the mental process or state that is reflected in statements like "I see a uniformly blue wall", representing awareness or understanding of the real-world cause of the sensory input. The goal of sensation is detection, the goal of perception is to create useful information of the surroundings.

In other words, sensations are the first stages in the functioning of senses to represent stimuli from the environment, and perception is a higher brain function about interpreting events and objects in the world. Stimuli from the environment are transformed into neural signals which are then interpreted by the brain through a process called transduction. Transduction can be likened to a bridge connecting sensation to perception.

Appendix 2

Form for the path

1. That's you! (definition)

2. How strong you are (intensity from 7 to 10)

3. I know you're true because... (describe physical sensations, memories, ...)

4. I introduce you (verbalize emotions)

To print in 5 copy (1 for sense) for each participant

TRIAD GAME

GOALS:

To facilitate trainees' self-evaluation, with trainers' support. Volunteers can test their attitudes such as motivation, disposability to active listening, communication skills and psychological maturity.

TIME:

2 hours for a group of 15/18 persons

MATERIALS:

Papers and pens in order to take notes

SETTING:

The privacy of the sub-groups is fundamental, thus a big space is needed where sub-groups can work quite far from each other.

EXECUTION:

Sub-groups are formed by 3 persons and are supported by a trainer who deal with organizational aspects and take part in case of high emotional tension. Trainers lead debates at the end of each call, too.

Within each sub-group, each member will act 3 different roles:

- *caller who expresses his/her own actual discomfort, not necessary a dramatic discomfort (5 min.)*
- *volunteer who listen to the discomfort and make interventions for facilitating caller's full expression (telephone answer)*
- *observer who gives feedbacks at the end of each call. His/her observations cannot get about caller's story, but only about the help-relationship.*

Then people change roles, thus everybody acts as caller, listener and observer.

At the end of each call trainer asks:

- ✓ to the observer: what he/she has observed
- ✓ to the listener:
 - a. what he/she feels off-key in his/her interventions
 - b. what he/she would do again or not
 - c. if he/she's satisfied of his/her answer

✓ to the caller:

1. how he/she felt
2. what helped him/her
3. what stopped or displeased him/her
4. what he/she wished that listener did

When all calls end, participants gather in a single big group into and have a debate about this experience, especially in accordance with the values of help-relationship: empathy, congruence and unconditional acceptance.

Example:

1 case. Young girl, frequent caller, anorexic with a history of violence and abuse.

V. Hello

C. Hi

V. Hi.

C. ...

V. How are you?

C. Fine.

V. Do you want to talk with me?

C. Yes but I don't know what to say, I feel the desire to talk with someone but I don't know what about

V. No specific idea?

C. No

V. But you're ok. Are you?

C. Yes, I am.

V. Are you alone? Can't you talk with relatives or friends?

C. My mother is here but I don't want to get out of my room

V. Do you just want to spend some time chatting with someone else?

C. No. I want to talk about myself but...it's difficult...I don't know

V. Where do you think we could start from? Maybe, you could tell me what you had in mind before dialing our number

C. I don't know

V. Don't you remember your thoughts?

C. No

V. And your feelings?

C. I'm fine

V. So, you're fine and you don't know what to say

C. Yes

V. And how can I help you? What do you expect?

C. I don't know... together

V. What?

C. To talk

V. Well, I'm trying but you should tell me something about your emotions

C. I can't... I don't know....

I think I'm stupid and I feel so angry for my behavior

V. You're angry and you don't like to have so many difficulties in talking

C. mmm

....

V. Something else?

C. Together

V. You know...I feel uncomfortable with your request. When you say "together" I have the feeling that you mean "you" and that I was supposed to take the initiative, but I cannot hazard a guess about what you want to say. This is not my responsibility

C. ...
V. Am I wrong?
C. ...
V. During our calls, I have the doubt that you always repeat the same sentences. It seems as you memorized some answers and you're reading the same script every time
C. It's easier...
V. I don't understand. What's easier?
C. When you ask how I am...it's easier to say "fine". In the past, I felt very bad. I know what is a deep suffering. Now I'm no more so bad. Actually...I'm not that fine but not even bad
V. Maybe you could try to explain. You could say I'm not bad but I would like to be better
C. ...
V. So, you would like to change something else in your life. Starting from where?
C. Are you angry for my lies?
V. No, I'm not. When you lie or hide during a call, you're losing an opportunity to be helped. This script damage yourself, not me
C. So we can talk?
V. Of course yes
C. well...I still cannot eat. And I'm not able to be touched, not even from my mother. I would like to reach the solution faster. My psychologist says I have to wait and be patient. I trust in her but sometimes I'm scared. I don't know if I'm able to heal
V. You don't know if you have the resources for winning this battle?
C. I'm stupid
V. Why do you think so?
C. Because it's true. I did this to me.
V. You're scared because you think to be able to damage yourself and non to take care of you
C. Yes. I don't want to disappoint friends...doctors....family...
V. Seems to be a good network. Could they help you if needed?
C. Yes...I think so.
V. I'm happy. You found a supportive group. Are you still scared?
C. Yes but less. "Step by step" says my doctor.
Thank you for your time.
V. You're welcome. Bye.
C. Bye