

Ditch Linear Thinking

Use peripheral vision to create solutions.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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The Messenger

Source: Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

A common theme in my practice, as with many psychotherapists, is the presenting problem of not being satisfied with life, which in most cases leads to different degrees of "anxiety" and/or "depression." This is further exacerbated by increasing societal stressors. The therapeutic goal, quite understandably, becomes how to sustain a healthy "emotional balance" with others and one's environment.

Although it is easier said than done, an initial way of addressing this is to create a different perspective of what is maintaining a presenting concern. A prerequisite to addressing today's emotional challenges is a recognition of what is not happening, which produces this unsatisfactory feeling.

A major barrier to resolving this are "labels" that are encouraged by cultural attitudes and diagnostic procedures from insurance and medical bureaucracies. They are just not capable of describing the multiple intricacies of being human and hinder the segue to emotional healing. We tend to over-depend on certain words (i.e., there can be hundreds of patterns of depression), all of which are needed to communicate but have limited descriptive powers, especially without context.

You have heard the saying, "The name is not the thing." Our very own Western grammar fosters this by separating the subject and predicate. This hinders the potential to recognize our interdependency. What is needed is to find a means that can transcend language constraints by emphasizing the context rather than the content of what is occurring.

Being able to share mutually

The following is an example that benefited from creating a wider lens to resolve a pattern of chronic sadness: Samuel, 42 years old, came to see me for help. I did his Genogram (a trans-generational depiction of one's family legacy) to understand the patterns and influences of his life. He was of Italian and Irish descent, had one sister who was much older than he, and parents who worked long hours. He had been a classic latchkey kid, spending much of his time alone.

Samuel was married, worked as a paralegal, was in individual therapy for several years prior to our session, and was prescribed medication for depression. Without going further into more family of origin details, it was clear that his past supported, and had him tolerate, this present sense of despair. The diagnosis of "depression" weighed heavily on him. He felt he was letting people down who were now overly concerned about his disposition. Consequently, he thought of himself as not being worthy.

I asked him what he was not getting in life that produced these feelings. His answer after a long pause was, "I want to be heard about all I do for my wife, parents, and my law firm." It was apparent that there was little dialogue or discussion about these feelings with those who were important in his life.

After a few sessions in which I gained Samuel's trust, I asked him to invite those who were most significant in his life for an extended session. He chose his parents, wife, sister, and his best friend (who worked at his law firm) for the session. I had them break the ice by creating a wider shared context, asking them each to describe different perspectives on their relationship with Samuel and for him to do the same for all those present. After coming up with a few dozen unique views, with humor and tears, there was collective respect for understanding and acknowledging each other's role in Samuel's life as well as for all those in the room.

From this wider lens, what came to the surface that maintained Samuel's sadness was a pattern of communication that was informed by assumptions and projections. In this context, all were able to articulate without blame what was never discussed. It wasn't just Samuel who benefited from this exchange, but all felt a profound change in their relationships with him.

We had a few more sessions with his parents—and then he and his wife—to initiate different contexts to move forward. Samuel responded in a positive manner, and his presenting problems changed for the better.

Being able to care for each other

Given the prevalent hardships and concerns that many of us are experiencing, it seems more than reasonable that we all need to help take care of each other in different ways. There are an infinite number of possibilities that are available to us when we break out from the dependency on labels. My suggestion is to continuously ask how is it that we may have emotional pain.

By zooming in and out with a peripheral lens, one sees the present situation and simultaneously creates a wider perspective that can identify many formerly hidden concerns. By doing this, you will have ditched linear thinking and switched to being systemic, which offers a means to make use of our mutual needs to create solutions, some of which may be unpredictable, but surely rewardable.

To sustain your journey toward a healthier balance, seek out trusted friends and/or family members who will join you through collaborative, win-win dialogue. Be open to making sense of how and when you are interdependent with others. Allow yourself the opportunity to take advantage of having a peripheral vision as you move through new contexts and the many possibilities that await you.