

honesty, transparency & confrontation

*The Canadian researcher and psychotherapist Professor Leslie Greenberg has been a world leader in helping develop better understanding of how emotions can help or hinder our relationships and wellbeing. In his book *Emotion-Focused Therapy* (APA, 2001: pp 100-3) he has some fascinating suggestions on how a therapist or "emotion coach" may best open up about difficult feelings such as anger or boredom triggered in their work with clients. In many ways it is even more interesting to consider how relevant Greenberg's suggestions are to confrontation and honesty in other close relationships. Examples include communication within couples, friendship, peer group work, and parenting. A linking theme in all these relationships is that occasional disagreements and upsets are pretty much inevitable, but that overall there is a wish for the relationships to be caring, supportive and helpful. An implication is that the value of honesty and emotional transparency is to be assessed by how constructive it is for the individuals and relationships involved. This is what Greenberg has to say about honesty and confrontation in emotion-focused therapy:*

Authenticity or congruence can, at an initial level of analysis, be broken into two separate components: (a) the ability to be aware of one's own internal experience and (b) transparency, the willingness to communicate to the other person what is going on within oneself. Congruence thus clearly has two components: an internal component, which involves awareness of one's own flow of experience, and transparency, an outer component that refers to explicit communication.

The claim that being transparent is therapeutic requires specification of the set of preconditions and beliefs, intentions, and attitudes that are needed for this aspect of congruence to be therapeutic. To simply teach young or new coaches [*Comment: ... or couples, or friends, etc*] that they should be congruently transparent is not always helpful. This is because being transparent presumes a certain level of personal development and certain intellectual and value commitments. Congruence thus does not stand alone as a therapeutic ingredient [*... or as an aspect of close relationships*]. Therapeutic congruence, as well as involving awareness and transparency, also requires that the therapists' internal experience arises out of attitudes, beliefs, and intentions related to doing no harm to clients and to facilitating their development. This is the psychotherapy equivalent of a Hippocratic oath.

Being aware of one's own flow of internal experience and connecting with the essence of one's feeling are ... central ... to congruence. The internal-awareness component is the easiest aspect of the concept to endorse as universally therapeutic. It always is helpful for coaches to be aware of their own feelings and reactions, because this awareness orients them and helps them be interpersonally clear and trustworthy. [*Comment: "Universally" and "always" are terms that need to be used cautiously. Sometimes people can be excessively and anxiously aware of their inner sensations & feelings to the detriment of their ability to focus clearly on the outer environment. This over-anxious internal focus is unlikely to be helpful therapeutically.*] This inner awareness and contact involve being respectively open and sensitive to one's own moment-by-moment, changing experience and being fully immersed in the moment. With this type of presence in the moment and emotional awareness there is less likelihood of a discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal behaviour, and clients come to know that what they see is what they get. They learn that the coach has no hidden agendas. This helps the client feel safe and reduces interpersonal anxiety, which in turn allows clients to tolerate more intrapersonal anxiety and thereby to explore more deeply.

If coaches are not aware of their feelings in interaction with their clients they are unlikely to be effective helpers, because they will not have access to vital information being generated in their relationships. It would be like operating in the dark. Therapists know that they are most effective in helping others when they are clear & aware of their own flow of internal **[Cont.]**

experience, especially experience that is generated out of their moment-by-moment interactions with clients.

The case of transparency, or the communication component of congruence, is much more complicated than the self-awareness component. Being facilitatively transparent involves many interpersonal skills. **It involves the ability to express not only what one is truly feeling but also to express it in a way that is facilitative.** Transparency thus is a global concept for a complex set of interpersonal skills embedded within a set of therapeutic attitudes. This skill seems to depend on three factors: (a) the coach's attitudes, (b) on certain processes, and (c) on the coach's interpersonal stance.

First, and probably most important, congruent responses need always to be embedded within Rogerian therapist attitudes and need to be communicated nonjudgmentally. In life one clearly can be congruently destructive. Therapists know that being destructive is not what is meant by the term *congruence* as it relates to therapy, because the term *congruence* is really tacitly qualified by a number of other beliefs and views on *how* to be congruent. The coach's expression of him or herself needs to be done for the client's benefit. *[Comment: This emphasis on "for the client's benefit" applies to other close relationships where there is a sense of service such as parent-child or teacher-student interactions. With group work, friendships and couples the interaction is more "between equals". It may then be more appropriate to see congruence as best expressed in ways that are as fair and as constructive as possible for all the individuals involved including oneself.]*

When coaches express themselves genuinely, they need to do so in a *disciplined* manner. They do not impulsively blurt out whatever they feel in the moment but communicate important core feelings. To do this, they need first to be aware of their deepest level of experience, and this may take time and reflection. Next, they need to be clear on their intention for sharing their experience – that this sharing is for the benefit of the client or the relationship and not for themselves. It is also important for therapists to be sensitive to the *timing* of disclosure, sensing whether clients are open to what one has to offer or too vulnerable to receive it. Discipline thus involves the therapist (a) not simply saying whatever he or she is feeling and (b) making sure that what is expressed is a core or primary feeling rather than a secondary one. Another qualifying concept that I think helps clarify the transparency aspect of congruence is *comprehensiveness* – that congruence needs to mean "saying all of it". **The coach expresses not only the central or focal aspect that is being experienced but also the meta-experience, what is felt about what is being experienced and communicated.** Thus, saying that one feels irritated or bored does not comprise comprehensive communication. Coaches need also to communicate their concern about such a revelation potentially hurting their clients and express that they are communicating this out of a wish to clarify and improve a connection, not destroy it. This is the meaning of "saying all of it".

Being congruent may involve the therapist saying what he or she is feeling in his or her body at the time. It may involve speaking of a feeling that has been persisting over time and is not actually being felt at that moment in any visceral way. Also, being congruent may involve the therapist saying something that spontaneously captures the sense of the moment. The current or general feelings being congruently expressed may range from compassion to anger, from threat to joy and, depending on which emotion is being felt, it will be expressed in a very specific way, with its own expressive intentions. Anger, for example, may be expressed to set boundaries and to assist in resolving a feeling of being wronged; compassion may be expressed to share it and to comfort. Fear probably is usually expressed to inform the other person of one's reaction to him or her.

In addition to disclosing what one is feeling, being congruent might involve saying what one is thinking, disclosing an image, sharing a past experience of one's own, or commenting on the interaction between therapist and client. The intentions here may be to convey one's **[Cont.]**

understanding or deal with a relational difficulty. **A highly integrated or well-trained coach dedicated to helping will produce congruent responses of a different kind and quality than will an undifferentiated or egocentric therapist or a novice.** Being therapeutically congruent thus can be seen as involving a complex set of interpersonal skills as well as the intrapersonal skill of awareness.

Finally, it is the coach's interpersonal stance that is important in understanding facilitative transparency. **Affirming and disclosing stances are the key that make transparency facilitative.** *Affirming responses* are the baseline responses in supportive therapies. What does a therapist do when he or she is feeling not affirming but angry, critical, and rejecting and cannot get past this feeling? For a transparent response to be facilitative, feelings need to be expressed as *disclosures*. It is not the content of the disclosure that is the central issue in being facilitative; rather it is the *interpersonal stance* of disclosure that is important. Implicit or explicit disclosure involves a willingness to, or an interest in, exploring with the other person what one is disclosing. For example, when attacked or feeling angry, coaches do not attack but rather disclose that they are feeling angry. Coaches do not use blaming, "you" language; instead they take responsibility for their feelings and use "I" language that helps disclose what they are feeling. **Above all, they do not go into a one-up, escalatory position in this communication but rather openly disclose feelings of fear, anger, or hurt.** When the problem is one of the therapist experiencing nonaffiliative, rejecting feelings or a loss of interest in the client's experience, **the required interactional skill involves being able to disclose this in the context of communicating congruently that the therapist does not wish to feel this.** Or, the therapist might disclose these feelings as a problem that is getting in the way and explain that he or she is trying to repair the distance so that he or she will be able to feel more understanding and feel closer to the client. The key to communicating what could be perceived as negative feelings in a congruently facilitative way is generally occupying an interactional position of disclosure that is nondominant and affiliative. Thus, in the context of feeling angry, a coach's facilitative, congruent process involves first checking whether anger is his or her most core feeling; if it is, then this needs to be disclosed in a nonblaming, non-escalatory fashion. If the coach is feeling more hurt, diminished, or threatened, rather than angry, then congruence involves being aware of this & disclosing this in an effective manner.

For example, a very fragile and explosive client once told me during an intense encounter that she hated me because I was so phoney and that I acted so presumptuously in assuming that I understood what she felt. She said she saw me as a leech trying to suck her emotional life out of her and that although I professed good intentions I was really out to destroy her. Under this mounting, relentless attack I first felt defensively angry. I succeeded, however, in going beneath my anger and told her I felt afraid of her anger. Tears came to my eyes as I told that I felt hurt. This was disclosed without blame or recrimination and without an explicit power- or control-related intention to get her to stop – just a disclosure of what it felt like inside for me in that moment. This disclosure helped the client stop her attack and drew from her some concern for me. The skills of congruent responding in dealing with difficult feelings thus involve identifying one's own internal feeling response – this is the general skill of awareness – and translating this intrapersonal experience into affirmative, disclosing interpersonal responses.
