

2 chair work. The empty chair technique

There is no longer a couch in psychotherapy

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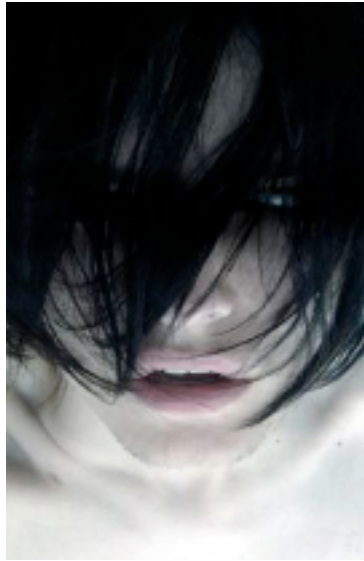
I will call it the empty chair technique, and you know what, when I began on this career path I was amazed that people could do it and I was even more amazed when I did it!! So what is "it". A person sits in a chair and then an empty chair is placed in front of the person about 4 or 5 feet away. They are then asked to imagine some person or some part of them self in that chair and start talking to them/it. Weird, I know. But people can actually do it. I know, I couldn't believe it either until I saw it with my own eyes.

Some can find it a bit silly or too odd for them to talk to an empty chair. In such instances the therapist can modify the situation so the client can actually do 2 chair with out there even being another chair to talk to! But they are doing the same psychological process as occurs with the procedure described in the above paragraph.

There is a thing people can do and that is called 'Projection'. They can kind of put a part of them self out on to some one or some thing in the world. So a person who is angry can project that anger onto others and they will then see others out there as angry when in fact most of them aren't. This is how the empty chair thing works. People project some part of them self into an empty chair.

I have never seen such intense emotions of anger and hatred, fear and terror, sadness and grief, despair, love and affection and so on all expressed to a empty chair!! When first asked to do it most feel a bit odd talking to an empty chair, most get over that in about a minute and then project out onto the chair with sometimes such powerful emotions attached.

People discover all sorts of things such as the lost child part of them self. Because one was abused, scared or maybe just consistently ignored sometimes the emotional part of our self goes and hides away. A fairly normal thing for kids to do. If mummy is angry then a good, effective solution is to go and hide. Problem solved (in the short term). The problem is if it happens over and over eventually the child gets forgotten about. Our inner emotional self is lost, we forget about it.



Lost child

When that happens people start doing odd things because their basic needs are not met for a significant period of time. For example our need for affection is not met. A woman starts to find that she is being promiscuous. Her needs for affection are not being met and she discovers that sex seems to somehow feed that need a bit and so she starts to confuse affection and sex. Empty chair sometimes allows this lost child to be found again.



Surviving via promiscuity

Sometimes there just seems to be no hope. Whatever you do is wrong. If you say

yes it is wrong and if you say no it is wrong. Or mummy is just so preoccupied with her own 'shit' she just has no emotions left over for you. (This is not her fault as she probably had a mummy who was the same). You live in an emotional desert and you starve for feeling. Common in habitual drug users.



The despair that can lead
to habitual drug use

Other times it is the opposite. Some one discovers in the empty chair that there is a happy, cheerful girl. The good girl. We get lots of mummy and daddy's attention. They dote on me but there seems to be some conditions on such attention. It is conditional attention. I get lots of attention when I am happy and good and people notice me and say how sweet I am. Mummy and daddy like that. If I am not happy and not 'performing' then I either get told off in some way or just ignored. So in adulthood even when I am at my partner's funeral I find I am smiling.

Sometimes we have a situation where there is a distance between the idealised self and the real self. We all have an ideal for self in looks, in education, in sport, in popularity, in success, in being a parent and so on endlessly. Then there is the reality that is different from the ideal. For most the difference is not all that large. But sometimes people put the ideal in the empty chair and it becomes obvious that the difference is a huge chasm, as big as Ayers Rock. These people suffer as they strive to achieve the unachievable. Often they are olympic athletes. "If I win olympic gold then I will be a worth while person" is the magical belief. Even if they do happen to win it, it still doesn't fill the void.



In search of the ideal self

The best thing that a psychologist can hear is a person say, "I am happy with who I am". That is music to my ears. We are all fucked up a bit. That is human nature. If one can see the bigger picture and create a life for self where one can live with the good bits and the not so good bits then one has got it together. One is "cured". If you can love who is in the empty chair, then my job is done.

The empty chair - part 2

The paradox of the empty chair technique

In the previous post I discussed the empty chair technique. It can be a powerful psychological technique indeed, but as with everything it has its down side. Two such problems come to mind.

The first is the compartmentalisation of the personality. Humans are able to project parts of themselves onto an empty chair. That is they can visualise and feel like there is a part of their personality external to themselves. They can project it into an empty chair. This as mentioned before can have many positive therapeutic advantages as one can firstly become aware of it and then establish a new understanding of it.

But it does have an inherent flaw in it as it compartmentalises the personality. The happier individual is that person who is integrated. They see and feel like they are a whole, one person. They do not feel like they are a collection of bits or parts of a personality. The empty chair technique highlights the bits as separate from each other.

Indeed there are a collection of emotional disorders that are exactly that. Those people who feel they are just a collection of bits and not an integrated person. These are called the dissociative disorders, with the most prominent one being the Multiple Personality Disorder. The Doctor Jeckl and Mr Hyde. The bits of the personality feel like they are separate and not joined.

Well by its very nature the empty chair technique promotes dissociation as it splits the personality into parts. So one should be careful of using it with those who dissociate as it could just promote the psychopathology.

The other paradox of the empty chair technique is its potential to develop self hatred. Often in the empty chair we place the Critical Parent ego state, or the internal critic as it is known. People with a high internal critic do not like themselves. They spend a good deal of their time criticising self. Telling self how bad they are and this can lead to things like depression. Depressives often have a big internal critic.



The internal critic

In the empty chair we can ask people to place this part of self and then get them to reject or get angry at that part. Well this is feeding the pathology. If someone has a self hatred, then to get them to be angry at another part of self is only going to increase the problem. It feeds the pathology.

In a previous post (12. Methadone - a chemical solution to a chemical problem) I highlighted a inherent flaw in the methadone treatment of heroin addiction. By its very nature it says "Take this drug to stop taking drugs". A double message which contradicts itself.

Well the same applies in this instance of the empty chair technique. If someone

has a high internal critic and you get them to put the critic in the empty chair and ask the person to be critical of it then you are giving a double message to the client. You are asking the person to criticise the internal critic for criticising self. A double message to say the least. That can encourage the pathology as much as counter it.