



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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CONSTRUCTIVIST THERAPY

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Definition: Constructivist therapy helps clients to understand how they construe their lives and ways of behaving, thinking and feeling, and to explore new coping methods. They use metaphors, exercises, exposure therapy, experiences and experiments in everyday activities.

Elements: Clients are advised to explore new behaviours by exercises such as:
-mirror time - sit in front of the mirror, look at yourself, and dialogue with the therapist, self, and/or other real and imaginary characters
-meditate - attend to internal stimuli by focussing within yourself
-flow - put aside critical thinking and talk without stopping for 3 minutes
-write - write spontaneously without stopping for 3 minutes
-give your experience a new meaning by re-writing your own history and providing a new end

Related procedures: experience, existentialism, narrative therapy, rational emotive therapy self-reward, writing therapy

Application: Usually in individual therapy, but can also be applied in couple therapy or group therapy

1st Use? Kelly (1955)

References:

1. Kelly GA (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: Norton.
2. Mahoney MJ (1991). *Human change processes: The scientific foundations of psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.
3. Ronen T (2003) Client self-assessment of therapy process in the treatment of anorexia. *J Constructivist Psychology*, 16, 49-74.

Case illustration: (Ronen 2003)

Eve age 19 had been an inpatient for 4 years from age 14-18 for anorexia; she improved but remained on medication. She then sought therapy for anxiety, fear, obsessive-compulsive, social and work problems, lack of self-acceptance, and low self-image. During therapy for low self-acceptance, Eve repeatedly said she had "bad things" deep inside her, "the big black hole of nothing," "falling down into the nothing", "a big emptiness inside", and would never recover if these were not helped. These metaphors mirrored her images of herself, life, and others. She felt she could, like Alice in Wonderland, go through a looking glass to enter her internal world and escape reality. In each weekly session she used metaphors like throwing away her OCD and fears as if she was clearing away garbage.

The therapist asked Eve to imagine she was not alone in her hole of emptiness, to sense that someone else was there too whom she cared for, and to accept the therapist's offer of a rope ladder to help her climb out of the hole. Treatment aimed to help Eve accept and like herself. Eve was asked to rate her appearance every day and how she felt about herself compared to the day before and to her friends and family. The therapist

tasked Eve with doing mirror work in sessions and at home for a few minutes each day, starting with a small hand mirror to look at her toes on her left foot. Over the next 4 weeks, each day she had to look at an additional body part. In therapy sessions she showed her record of her homework and described how she'd done it. Gradually she looked at her body and then her face, and complimented herself on parts of her body, her whole body, and her mind and personality. Eve's improving self-evaluation became visible from changes in her appearance. In early visits to the clinic she wore long oversized black sweaters and tied her hair back carefully. Later she wore tighter-fitting clothes with red ribbons and multicolored blouses, let her hair down loose, and looked increasingly beautiful. After 6 sessions over 6 weeks she rated herself as "looking OK".