



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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INTERNALIZED-OTHER INTERVIEWING

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Definition: A method to explore, enhance, and/or modify a client's inner experience of another person's inner experience, and potentially alter the virtual and lived relationships between the client and the other person.

Elements: When a therapist anticipates that an experiential shift within a client, of another person's experience and/or their relationship with that person, might move therapy forward, the therapist may invite the client to try an "experiment" of internalized other interviewing. *"When we get to know someone well, we create an image of that other person within ourselves and the 'other' becomes part of us. By questioning that 'other' within you, and inviting you to respond from as deeply as you can enter into that person's inner experience, rather than role playing that person's outer visible behavior, some interesting understandings might emerge. Are you willing to try that?"* If the client accepts, the therapist addresses the client in the other person's name (to ground him/her in the experience of the other) and asks reflexive questions whose content varies enormously according to what is salient in the clinical situation. For instance, if a man has abused his wife, the therapist could ask his internalized wife about her experience of that abuse and what concrete changes she'd value in her husband; this could help him enter into his wife's fear and pain and appreciate more fully the consequences of his actions. If a woman is depressed with self-deprecating thoughts, the therapist might interview several of her significant others in turn, asking each one what they appreciate, admire, value and respect in her so that she can appreciate herself through those other people's eyes. The therapist ends internalized-other interviewing by thanking each internalized other of the client and then, using the client's own name, asks about his/her experience in being interviewed as the other. If the internalized-other person has actually been present during the interview, the therapist asks that real other person *"Which of (the client's) answers as you 'fit' for you and which reflected significant misunderstandings?"*, in order to facilitate further congruence between the other person's real experience and the clients' understanding of that person's experience. An internalized-other interview might last 5-20 minutes as part of a session and may be used again in subsequent sessions.

Application: May be carried out in individual therapy, couple therapy, family therapy, grief therapy, training, coaching, supervision, etc.

Related Procedures: becoming; empathy; family constellation; gestalt therapy; meeting one's 'distributed self'; experience-of-experience questioning, psychodrama; two-chair dialogue.

1st Use? Epston (1988)

References:

1. Epston D (1993) Internalized other questioning with couples: The New Zealand version. Chapter in *Therapeutic Conversations* edited by Stephen Gilligan and Reese Price, New York: Norton Press.

2. Nylund David, Corsiglia V (1993) Internalized other questioning with men who are violent. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 2: 29-34.
3. Burnham J (2000) Internalized other interviewing: evaluating and enhancing empathy. *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 140: 16-20.
4. Tomm K, Hoyt M, Madigan S (1998) Honoring our internalized others and the ethics of caring: A conversation with Karl Tomm. *The Handbook of Constructive Therapies*, Edited by Michael Hoyt, p198-218

Case Illustration: (Tomm, unpublished)

A middle-aged divorced man, Bob, had extensive drug and alcohol abuse and recovered substantially during several years of involvement in AA and therapy. After having been 'clean' for a few months, he became acutely suicidal on suddenly realizing that he'd been taking cough syrup for a cold not just as an expectorant but for its 'codeine kick.' He was seen the next morning in a consultation interview. No one had criticized him for his misuse of the medication, yet he felt it reflected a profound failure on his part after so many years of treatment for his addictions, and that he "might as well get it over with."

The therapist asked Bob: *"Of everyone who knows you, who would have been most upset if they'd known you abused the codeine?"* Bob: "My mother, Agnes." Though Bob had not seen or spoken with his mother for years (because they'd had so much conflict), he was invited to speak from the 'I position' of her inner experience. Th: *"Let me speak to you as if you were Agnes for a while. Agnes, is it true that Bob got into a lot of trouble because of his drug abuse?"* B: "Yes, he certainly did!" Th: *"Is it also true, Agnes, that you criticized him a lot for abusing drugs?"* B: "Yes, I guess I did." Th: *"Is it reasonable to say that you came to rely on criticism as a way to raise him?"* B: "I suppose so." Th: *"If you were aware that your criticism may have been internalized over the years, so that he became so critical of himself for using, that he was now contemplating suicide for having taken the codeine, would you have some regrets for having resorted to so much criticism in your efforts to raise him, Agnes?"* (After a long pause) B: "I think I would." Th: *"If you were to express those regrets, and perhaps even apologize for criticizing him so much in the past, would he be able to accept your apology?"* B: "I think he could." Th: *"And if you actually did apologize, do you imagine that Bob might be able to forgive you?"* At this point Bob began to weep heavily. The questions seemed to have triggered a shift within him from a pattern of his internalized mother blaming/shaming him, to her apologizing and him forgiving her. Had Agnes really been present to witness his answers, she'd have been invited to comment so as to further potentiate the effect of this healing process. This internalized-other interview lasted about 10 minutes during a single consultation.