Jeffery Smith: How therapy works

Proactive Mindfulness January 2022

The following are notes written by Jeffery Smith to go with the podcast published in January 2022.

Overall:
For the first 100 years of psychotherapy as a profession, fragmentation into schools was inevitable because one school's theory was as good as another's. There was no scientific basis for homing in on a universal core. As a result, while much has been learned, most therapies are weak in explaining precisely how they work. This leaves a gap and an opportunity to bring 21st Century science to bear to fill in what was previously unknown. I'm proposing a 5-step pathway.

Step 1. Sharpening our view of what psychotherapy treats, response patterns arising from a mind evolved for survival, that are less than optimal for current conditions.
We call them EMPs, Entrenched, because if they weren't then professional psychotherapy would not be necessary; Maladaptive, because they represent the mind's attempts to mitigate threats, and Patterns, because they are likely to be repeated. These are the primary targets of psychotherapy, and cover problems from anxiety, based on patterns evolved millions of years ago, to personality problems arising from early development, to addictions adopted in adolescence.

Step 2. Incorporating evolution and neurophysiology to understand common features of EMPs.
They represent responses to conditions appraised as threats.
They are triggered by core (limbic) emotions, which serve as the brain's way to signal a threat.
They include patterns of response.
Both appraisal and response are held in memory.

Step 3. Bringing in science from the learned fear paradigm elucidating how change can take place in established patterns.
Only two are known and the requirements for the two are essentially the same: Activation of the old pattern along with exposure to an "antidote."
Extinction involves temporary inhibition originating in the cortex to suppress EMPs.
Memory Reconsolidation renders information in memory volatile for a few hours when circuits are activated in a context where there is a "collision" with contrary information. This is permanent.

Step 4. Requirements for change: The same for both known mechanisms allowing change in patterns recorded in memory.
Activation of the old pattern including limbic core emotion is not necessarily conscious. When it is, what is conscious is more elaborated, but the thing that tells us core emotions are in an active state is affect, that is, emotion accompanied by bodily changes. Thus affect is the therapist's indicator of deep activation.
Approximately simultaneous exposure to contradictory information, which may be cognitive or experiential, and causes "prediction error."

Step 5. The conditions in step 4 are confirmed in multiple ways by formulations from contemporary psychotherapy:
The Corrective Emotional Experience of Alexander and French, in which expectations within the relationship are contradicted by observation.
Mindfulness in which simultaneous awareness of the experiencing self meet the greater perspective of an observing self.
Insight, in which transference experience is viewed from an outside perspective.
Exposure Therapy in which experience is activated in a context of observation.
Behavior therapy, where automatic thoughts are activated in a context of observing and behavior change can uncover and activate emotions in a context of observation.
Other examples can be found in essentially all effective psychotherapies.

Jeffery Smith MD knew, as a Stanford freshman, that he wanted to be a therapist. Coming from an academic family, that was his entree into what, in the early sixties was called "the real world." Twelve years later, no less enthusiastic, and married to a French wife, he finished residency in New York and began to practice. An abiding interest in how words exchanged and relational events are able to foster change soon became the theme of his professional life.
Mid-career, his interest in therapeutic action dovetailed with a mission to move the field of psychotherapy out of the era of competing schools to one where therapists follow fundamental processes and choose techniques according to client needs. Towards that mission he started www.howtherapyworks.com, wrote a textbook, Psychotherapy: A Practical Guide, books for lay people, and established Howtherapyworks Training, a "nondenominational" online program for intermediate to advanced therapists.

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