

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) for ADHD

Ch. Jonathan Haverkamp

Abstract—Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) is a psychotherapy developed by the author, which can be applied to several mental health conditions, including attention deficit disorder (ADHD).

Index Terms—ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, communication-focused therapy, CFT, communication, psychotherapy, treatment, psychiatry

I. INTRODUCTION

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) can interfere significantly with a person's private and professional life. Often, there is a history of problems in school which cause low self-confidence and inhibit the evolution of a healthy belief in the own resources and talents. Impairments in concentration and focus can be so severe to make school work or performance in one's job impossible. This can cause huge suffering, as the individuals afflicted with ADHD and their family and friends often feel helpless in the face of the patient being unable to have success in professional, and often as a consequence private life.

Medication is frequently effective in treating the symptoms of ADHD. However, this should in most cases be accompanied by a course of psychotherapy to help with the secondary problems resulting from symptoms and to treat the condition itself. Treatment with stimulants for over a year has been shown to be effective, while there is still a debate about their effectiveness over the long-term.

A. Communication Patterns

ADHD exerts most of its harmful effect on daily life through the changes it causes in individual communication patterns with others and with oneself. Current communication strategies, which may have worked for a while, are not as helpful anymore, or may be outright damaging to the patient's happiness in life.

Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. works in private practice for psychotherapy and psychiatry in Dublin, Ireland. The author can be reached by email at jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com or on his website jonathanhaverkamp.ie. Copyright © 2017 Christian Jonathan Haverkamp.

In therapy, in the interaction between therapist and patient new communication patterns can be developed, which are better suited to help the individual meet own needs, wishes and aspirations in life. Patients suffering from ADHD have often developed maladaptive interaction strategies with their environment, which contribute to the life impairment brought about by the ADHD symptoms. One strategy developed in childhood as a response to a lower ability to focus may simply be an avoidance of anything that requires focus, as the patient has learned early in life that these tasks have been unsatisfying or led to negative feedback from the environment. Rather than making interactions and activities more interesting and meaningful to oneself, which can help improve the ability to focus on them, the patient learns to withdraw from engaging in life and from oneself. By helping individuals with ADHD to reconnect with themselves and the world, however, things become more meaningful again, and the ability to focus improves.

Communication patterns used in an interaction with oneself and in interactions with others are interrelated. Both entail observing and decoding flows of information, identifying relevant and meaningful messages, and interpreting them, and then responding by encoding and sending out information. Most of what humans do in life, and how they interact with themselves, involves this simple schema to some degree. Looking at present or remembered communication processes in therapy can be very helpful in making communication again a tool that benefits the patient rather than interfering with his or her life.

The ability to observe the flows of information and the reactions they cause, both internally and externally, is an important skill to build and shape in therapy. It helps the patient to develop strategies to interact with oneself and others over a life-time. It allows an individual suffering from ADHD to find motivation for relevant activities more easily and focus more easily on what is truly important to the oneself.

B. Understanding Communication

Understanding how communication works can be very helpful to a patient suffering from ADHD. This means not just explaining how messages and meaning are sent and received, but also to allow the patient to experiment in the therapeutic

setting. This should be the space where the patient feels safe and supported enough to engage in experimenting with communication which in the long-run is effective in dealing with the ADHD itself as well as the secondary communication and relationship effects.

The more a patient understands how meaning and relationships are created and maintained in relevant and effective communication, the more of a sense of control he or she will have. For a child it may also be helpful to demonstrate and experiment with the explanation in a playful way. This also helps strengthen the therapeutic relationship and build the motivation for therapy.

C. Focus

Activities and thoughts that are relevant and meaningful to oneself motivate. Unfortunately, many people in their work, at school or in social interactions feel a need to focus on things that on deeper reflection are neither very relevant nor meaningful to themselves. The two main problems commonly are that one may not know about what is meaningful and valuable to oneself, the other that one may be afraid to look for more meaningful and valuable alternatives to the present action or thought.

Children and adults with ADHD often do not have the opportunity to do things they enjoy, and that they feel are relevant to them, which usually makes the ADHD symptoms worse, as well as leading to underperformance and a worsening of the ability to focus. In those cases, where individuals can identify and engage in enjoyable and subjectively meaningful activities, high achievement is possible. For example, in the case of one IT specialist with classic ADHD symptoms in many areas outside his area of expertise, he was tremendously successful and happy in his job, because he was able to do the job he loved. The positive experiences and feedback from his job also translated into a happy family life despite a clear ADHD diagnosis.

This does not mean one just has to give children total freedom to 'find themselves', rather it is important to support them to find what is meaningful and important to them by fostering better communication with themselves and with others. The same also applies to adults with ADHD, who have often developed maladaptive communication patterns with themselves and others, which solidify and entrench the ADHD symptoms and impaired connections with oneself and others.

II. ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a mental disorder of the neurodevelopmental type. It is characterized by problems paying attention, excessive activity, or difficulty controlling behavior which is not appropriate for a person's age. The symptoms appear before a person is twelve years old,

are present for more than six months, and cause problems in at least two settings (such as school, home, or recreational activities). In children, attention deficits may result in poor school performance. Still, many children with ADHD have a good attention span for tasks they find interesting.

It is thus not a condition which interferes with the ability to focus and concentrate globally, but one that makes it important to help patients see enjoyment and meaning in everyday tasks. If something feels relevant, patients with ADHD often have less difficulty with it. The important task is to help the patient in seeing connections between things in the world, which makes it easier to see relevance and meaning in them.

A. Cutting Through Complexity

A greater awareness for how things work in detail and how they are connected, builds recognition for the meaningfulness of a task. One way to get there is to make complex relationships between tasks and own interests and aspirations easier to see. Schoolwork as an end in itself may not be very motivating, not just to people suffering from ADHD, but if a subject matter can be tightly linked to a unique interest, focus and concentration can often be restored. For someone with ADHD it is not enough to do things because one does them. They have to resonate with needs, wishes or values that need to be identified or felt first. People without ADHD may be content with postponing the reward for the task into the future, for individuals with ADHD, on the other hand, the reward needs to be closer at hand. The therapeutic relationship, supported by the flow of meaningful messages, should convey to the patient that tools to get what they need and want are available.

III. COMMUNICATION-FOCUSED THERAPY (CFT)

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) was developed by the author to focus more specifically on the communication process between patient and therapist. The central piece is that the sending and receiving of meaningful messages is at the heart of any change process. CBT, psychodynamic psychotherapy and IPT help because they define a format in which communication processes take place that can bring about change. However, they do not work directly with the communication processes. [1] CFT attempts to do so and can be used in depression [2], OCD [3], psychosis [4], bipolar disorder [5], social anxiety [6] and many other psychiatric conditions.

We engage constantly in communication. The cells in our bodies do so with each other using electrical current, molecules, vibrations or even electromagnetic waves. People communicate with each other also through a multitude of channels, which may on several technologies and

intermediaries. It does not have to be an email. Spoken communication requires multiple signal translations from electrical and chemical transmission in the nervous system to mechanical transmission as the muscles and the air stream determine the motions of the vocal chords and then as sound waves travelling through the air, followed by various translations on the receiving end. At each end, in the sender and in the receiver, there is also a processing of information which relies on the highly complex networks of the nervous system. Communication, in short, happens everywhere all the time. It is an integral part of life. Certain communication patterns can, however, also contribute to experiencing anxiety and panic attacks.

A. Autoregulation

Communication is an autoregulatory mechanism. It ensures that living organisms, including people, can adapt to their environment and live a life according to their interests, desires, values, and aspirations. This does not only require communicating with a salesperson, writing an exam paper or watching a movie, but also finding out more about oneself, psychologically and physically. Whether measuring one's strength at the gym or engaging in self-talk, this self-exploration requires flows of relevant and meaningful information. Communication allows us to have a sense of self and a grasp of who we are and what we need and want in the world, but it has to be learned similar to our communication with other people.

Giving patients with ADHD a greater sense of being in control of their own destiny and interacting with others and shaping the world in a way which gets their needs and wants met. Even though young patients with ADHD seem demanding and in control of things in a wild way, at the core they are very conscious of not being in control over events in life. There is the constant sense of not getting what one needs and wants, especially in older patients, which leads to misdiagnoses of personality disorders, particularly narcissism or dissocial personality disorder. It is important to see the ADHD with its maladaptive communication patterns with oneself and others at the core.

B. Reconnection

In ADHD there is often a strong sense of disconnect, which also causes a loss of insight into what is meaningful and relevant to the own person. This, however, makes it more difficult to find the activities and relationships that one can more easily focus on and engage with. Reconnection on an emotional level means reflecting on activities and interactions in the past which generated positive feelings, reconnecting on a cognitive level means reflecting on one's thought patterns and content, often with the help of a therapist.

The therapeutic setting has the advantage that the focus is on this reconnecting work and there is little distraction from other people and everyday life demands. The work of the therapist is to support the patient in this journey of reflecting on interaction patterns and reconnecting with self and the world.

IV. UNDERSTANDING ADHD

Someone suffering from ADHD can focus quite well on things that are motivating. However, for things that are not motivating it can be far more difficult to focus and concentrate on. Thus motivation, or seeing relevance and potential excitement and satisfaction, in things is probably more relevant to someone suffering from ADHD.

Many therapeutic approaches target the focus or concentration rather than motivation. However, changing motivation and making things more meaningful may be a better long-term strategy. This can develop if changes in perspective lead to the perception of more meaning in oneself and in the world around, in behaviors and thoughts.

A. Disconnection

There is a vicious cycle in which the symptoms of ADHD cause a disconnectedness from oneself and others. This not only leads to feelings of loneliness, but also to a loss of a sense of effectiveness in the world, the ability to effect changes and to get ones needs, wants and aspirations met. The disconnect is often a result of the perceived failure in carrying out tasks which seem effortless to others, like schoolwork or otherwise simple repetitive tasks. Later in life, they can lead to resignation on the job and resentment towards others. Of course, at the core is anger, hopeless and helplessness about oneself. The antidote to this is the reconnection already mentioned above.

B. Motivation

Motivation is a key parameter in ADHD because if one is genuinely motivated about an activity, the ADHD symptoms often vanish, particularly the difficulties in focus and the tendency of the mind to wander. Using better communication with oneself and others to build motivation is usually the best way to achieve a more permanent effect. The patient should develop the skillset to be able to motivate myself or herself to choose and do the things in life which are relevant to himself or herself.

V. MEANING

In therapy an important part is to rediscover meaning, and find it in the things that are relevant to the patient. Relevant is anything that is close to his or her values, basic interests, aspirations, wants, wishes and desires.

Seeing communications as meaningful requires perceiving a relevance to oneself in them, as well as a message that can bring about some change. In many situations it may be that it is difficult to spot meaningfulness in something before it has been tried out, but people often engage in it anyhow if they believe that it holds the potential to be meaningful. Much in the world would never have been accomplished without this course of action. To people suffering from ADHD, such a way of doing things seems to be closed off. The emotionally felt relevance and meaningfulness has to be there right away. So, an important question becomes how to bridge this gap in time. CFT aspires to do just this by working with meaningful messages in the exchange between therapist and patient.

VI. EXPERIENCING THE WORLD

Communication helps in identifying and finding meaning, either communication with oneself or with others. The exchange of messages is like a learning process in which meaning can be identified, found and accumulated. Through meaningful interactions one accumulates more meaning, more connectedness with oneself and the world and reduces the need for thoughts and behaviors which are triggered by fears, guilt, self-blame and other negative emotions. This also helps against depression and anxiety.

Perceiving more meaning also makes interacting with others and oneself more meaningful. This has a positive effect on one's interaction patterns, how and in which one ways one relates to one's environment and exchanges messages with it. The fact that meaning can be created in an interaction, or any instance of communication, can be liberating from someone with ADHD because it means one does not have to wait for meaning. It is already there, if one just engages in it.

VII. COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

The patterns in which people communicate determine the benefits the communication process. If the interaction patterns are not helpful in understanding messages from another or not helpful in reacting to the messages from others, they are not doing what they are supposed to do, or at least not fully. Then it is time to change them, which can be accomplished in the therapeutic setting, which not only provides feedback (to both, therapist and patient) and fertile ground for experimenting with new communication patterns, but also gives everyone participating in it the opportunity to feel how specific communication patterns feel.

In ADHD, the communication space of a therapeutic setting can help the patient to find more confidence and experience more authorship in affecting the dynamic, as well as develop insight into oneself and how to see more meaning in the world. The interaction with another human being can bring about the discovery of more meaning in the world. That is a basic axiom of communication theory, and shows again and again in the practice of psychotherapy.

VIII. VALUES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS

Often, individuals suffering from ADHD have become uncertain about what is genuinely important to them and the fit between these values and interests and their current life situation. Whether in the professional or romantic realms, getting having one's needs, values and aspirations met, makes happy in the long run. This also applies to obviously altruistic situations. If I value helping people, it is important that I do that to make me happy.

Some people need to spend more time by themselves, while others thrive in social settings. In the end, a mix appropriate to the individual leads to the greatest motivation and positive feelings. This applies to many personality and character attributes as well. Some can slowly change over time, but many, such as a person's core values, change little, if at all. Particularly for an individual with ADHD, it helps to have a good grasp of what they are, because pursuing them can lead to a much better focus and greater satisfaction and success. For everyone, but particularly for those with ADHD, a major task in life is to steer one's life in the direction of one's basic interests, values and aspirations.

To discover what is meaningful it is helpful to spend some effort on identifying values, needs and aspirations. This process can be very helpful to adults, but may be more difficult in children and adolescents who are still developing and understanding of these parameters. Helpful here could be engaging in play or other activities where they can be identified. In adults this can be accomplished within a normal psychotherapy setting.

IX. MEANINGFUL MESSAGES AS THE INSTRUMENT OF CHANGE

Communication is the vehicle of change. The instruments are meaningful messages which are generated and received by the people who take part in these interactions. In a therapeutic setting, keeping the mutual flow of information relevant and meaningful brings change in both people who take part in this process. The learning curve for the patient may be steeper in certain respects because he or she spends less time in this interaction style than a therapist.

A. *Better Communication Patterns*

For patients with ADHD, communication patterns have often developed as short time strategies at first, and were then kept for the perceived lack of better choices. Often, they become quite maladaptive over time, partly because of social isolation or conflict due to worsened ADHD symptoms, which can make them even less suited to benefit the patient. As described above, to get out of this vicious cycle awareness and insight into present patterns and the development of new patterns is key.

B. *Towards Interests and Values*

Behaviors and activities will only increase satisfaction in the long run if they take into account the basic interests, values and aspirations of the individual. This requires identifying them first, as described above, and then finding ways to implement them more into the person's life. Fears and conflicts may need to be addressed, which are often associated with more substantial changes in a person's life.

C. *Individual Success*

Succeeding in life is both an individual and communal accomplishment. Communication with oneself and others is the important link and mechanism in attaining it. Especially for someone suffering from ADHD, failures at school or on the job often lead to less self-confidence and secondary psychiatric symptoms. To turn this around, it is important for the person suffering from ADHD to develop the communication skills and insight to reconnect with oneself and the world around.

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