



Maturity and Growth, Part 4. A Nurturing and Fertile Environment

We now turn our attention to a “helping” environment – the one that is most constructive in bringing about maturity and growth. Recall that we have said that the individual has a more mature orientation when he feels free to express himself spontaneously without feeling emotional restraint. He does so with more appreciation for, and functional use of all that is part of his self that is unique and different. He is aware of all of who he is, and feels confident, creative, excited, and safe in engaging fully with the world in each passing moment. He has developed relative immunity and tolerance to the opinion of others when they represent threats to satisfaction of his basic human needs. He persists in living exactly as he fully is, guided by his intrinsic nature.

In a moment, we’ll take a look at a particular example of a “helping” environment: one that exists in the psychotherapist’s office. In this setting, scientific inquiries have been made to determine which characteristics of the therapist produce “best” proven results for mature living. Before we do this, I want to highlight the needs that appear in the middle of the Maslow hierarchy: They are belongingness, love, respect, and self-esteem. For now, take a minute to think about different environments: Those that include family, friends, or teachers. Or perhaps consider work. What kinds of interpersonal interactions do you sense have been subtractive in meeting these needs for you? Which have been supportive?

Let’s move along. So here are the most important characteristics of a therapist in a helping relationship with a client:

- 1) Empathic understanding of the client by the therapist
- 2) Unconditional positive regard for the client
- 3) Congruence of therapist’s feelings and what he says to the client
- 4) Therapist’s responses match client’s affective, emotional expression

Empathy refers to deeply experiencing the emotions of another person. And understanding (as in empathic understanding) means a *desiring* to understand. A therapist, with a real desire to understand a client’s perspective, would persist with the client in his attempt to understand until the client felt understood. At this point, the client would indicate that the therapist’s communications to him matched with his feelings.

Unconditional positive regard means taking on a positive emotional disposition with respect to the client as a human being, regardless of his faults. In my experience this is difficult to do, as we are generally quick to judge and label others. In my view, this positive orientation only comes about through a direct experiencing of both the imperfections and the innate goodness in people through extended, close interpersonal contact. We don’t come by it often in our often materialistic; time is money, day-to-day existence. I also don’t believe it can be assimilated through reading or philosophizing about it. As I consider this positive affective orientation towards another, and think of examples, I am reminded of the Bible’s description of Jesus’



unconditional love of man and woman, from all walks of life. I think it is also represented in mother's love for her newborn.

Finally, this brings me to the notion of "congruence". Can a person be disappointed and angry with another, yet still express love? I believe so. A therapist, aware of lack of therapeutic progress, can become frustrated with a client's continued intellectualizing and storytelling, but still be understanding and caring of his client. His impatience materializes because of his caring, and wanting more for the client. If the therapist is truly congruent, then this will come out in the way the therapist expresses himself, emoting both care and frustration concurrently. And all of his messages, both verbal and non-verbal, deliver the same feelings of this wanting more, and yet caring. His expression is congruent with all of his true feelings. And he still has a positive regard for the client.

Now I would like to tie some concepts together. In considering the four components of a most helping therapeutic relationship, consider how these characteristics would or would not be conducive to bringing about meeting human needs in the middle of the Maslow hierarchy. Could an optimal therapeutic disposition foster acceptance of self, belongingness in a relationship, as well as mutual care and love? I believe the answer is clearly "yes".

It seems reasonable to now extend our discussion of a helping, therapeutic environment into the home, with a family. As parents, we must ask ourselves whether it is possible to adopt the same, helping orientation that is present in the therapist's office. This is exactly the question that was originally asked by Carl Rogers, and later his peer Tom Gordon, in developing his skills training programs for parents, teachers, and teens (P.E.T., T.E.T, and Y.E.T). I should emphasize the word "skills", and ask you to reflect back on the notion of congruence. A parent deploying empathic communication and words, as an example, without feeling empathy would be incongruent. The words wouldn't match the feelings. This would be most "unhelpful" in a very negative way, and the statistics certainly bear this out.

I hope by now you are asking yourself "How can I, in a very real sense, reorient my emotional way of being so that it is truthful, congruent, and helpful?" I want to share with you my personal experience to consider. I have come to learn that skills training of the mind, per se, can be accomplished in a classroom with traditional instructional methodologies. This is what we all experience in school where we load facts into our brains. Training of the heart, on the other hand, and the resulting "helpful" orientation, is a different matter entirely. It has become clear to me that *experiencing for oneself* a helping environment is the only way to receive the necessary emotional learning of the heart.

As I have participated personally in many hours of facilitator training in therapeutic and helping environment, I become more sure and resolute. As I work through my own personal problems with professional colleagues, I find that my personal needs for love, acceptance, esteem, and belongingness are continuously met. Then in turn, I find myself able to be more and more loving and accepting of others, faults and all. Without this personal experiencing of a helpful, supportive environment, I find that my attempts to use the tools and skills of effective



communication seem to me more contrived, phony and manipulative. My motives and my words seem incongruent.

Through difficult emotional work over many hours of encounter work with others, I have come to appreciate the requirements of educating the heart. But when the process starts to take hold, true empathic, authentic, and congruent interpersonal communication becomes possible. The essentials of a truly helping environment begin manifest themselves. Combined with effective communications skills training, the fertile soil of growth and actualization comes about.

If you are interested in setting up a family environment for your teens to mature and grow, visit us at teen-encounters.com or call (714) 963-3000.