



Positive Interpretation as a Tool in Psychotherapy

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Introduction

A human being is governed by his thoughts, and what we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, which will build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind. Buddha makes this point clear by saying “If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering will follow him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart. If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow” [4]. This clearly implies that an individual’s thoughts and emotions can affect one’s mental health. On the contrary, negative emotions can have a negative repercussion on mental energy; negatively affect the body, achievement, social contact, and spirituality; and lead to serious health problems. In connection with this, Gandhi said, “A man is but the product of his thoughts; what he thinks, he becomes” [6]. Thought has an immense power to bring into being the visible from the invisible, so it is of paramount importance to realize what we think, do, or say comes back to us. If individuals work on the capacity to change their thoughts, they can have a capacity to change their world [11]. Most often our irrational thoughts or cognitive errors dominate in our life, and these thoughts could be annoying, disheartening, and in some cases downright dangerous.

An ethnographic study conducted among 140 clients, in Ethiopia, showed the following common irrational thoughts or thinking errors: all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralizing, filtering out the positive, mind reading, catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, labeling, fortune-telling, and personalization [1]. After positive interpretation, most clients explained that positive interpretation will create real value in their life and help them to identify and build skills that last much longer than a smile. Most of the respondents affirmed that positive interpretation supported them to develop other life skills and gave them an increased sense of possibilities. Respondents mentioned that positive interpretation supported them to diminish routine stress and boosted their confidence. A significant number of respondents mentioned that positive interpretation ignited their mind to develop new skills and resources. Several respondents explained that positive interpretation enabled them to create a peaceful and balanced life principle across their body, achievement, social contact, and spirituality.

Because of our experience in childhood and cultural influences, individuals might lack the capacity to interpret problems positively. Lack of positive interpretation might be the triggering factor for deteriorating mental health, suffering from different psychosocial problems – a process where our conscious and subconscious minds play a great role.

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The responsibility of the conscious mind is filtering and scrutinizing thoughts coming from the outside and filtering messages to subconscious mind. What the conscious mind assumes and believes to be true, the subconscious mind will accept and bring to pass [10]. On the other hand, subconscious mind will have a responsibility to implement thoughts directly received from our conscious mind. It doesn't weigh the pros and cons of the thoughts. If it receives success, it will facilitate to implement success, and if it receives failure, it facilitates to implement failure. What you sow in the fertile lands of your subconscious mind, you will harvest in your body and environment too.

Generally, the human mind plays a seeding technique. Therefore, if we plant potato, potato comes out, and if we plant tomato, tomato comes out. However, it is impossible to expect potato after planting tomato. By the same analogy, if we plant positive thought, positive thought will come out, and if we plant negative thought, negative thoughts will come out. Every one's life is in his hands, to make of it what he chooses [7], and positive interpretation can serve as movers and shakers on one's life to create a stable mental strength: managing thoughts, regulating emotions, and behaving productively despite any circumstances. When people change their irrational beliefs to undogmatic flexible preferences, they become less disturbed [1, 2].

Definition of Key Terms

Thoughts

Thoughts are an idea or opinion produced by thinking or occurring suddenly in the mind. These thoughts can have a positive or a negative emotional valence. The happiness of individuals' life depends upon the quality of their thoughts [8] as negative thoughts produce negative actions and feelings, so positive thoughts produce positive actions and feelings [9].

Positive Interpretation

Positive interpretation is a technique used in Positive Psychotherapy after Peseschkian. It works by reinterpreting problems and avoiding passive attitudes, thus reflecting the ability of clients. With this interpretation, the therapist does not solely address the illness alone but also the subjective ideas about the illness as transmitted through the traditions of the family. In line with this, depression may be understood beyond the feeling of being sad or irritable, with predominantly passive attitude, and instead reflect the ability to react with deep emotionalism [12]. Another way to reinterpret depression is by looking at it as a result of depletion of the available energy during the period prior to the onset of the episode, and that the depressed state represents a kind of hibernation, during which the patient gradually builds up a new story of energy [3].

Irrational Thoughts or Cognitive Distortions

Irrational thoughts are unrealistic and generally negative thinking patterns that individuals might fall into and obsess over. These thoughts can be infuriating, discouraging, and in some cases downright hazardous. Thinking errors contribute to a lion's share for irrational thoughts. The most common thinking errors or cognitive distortions are all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralizing, filtering out the positive, mind reading, catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, labeling, and fortune-telling [5].

Applications

Positive interpretation is a core concept of the Positive Psychotherapy (PPT after Peseschkian – see Chap. 2) akin to reframing in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT after Beck). Positive interpretation should be considered across all five stages of PPT consultation: distancing/observation, taking inventory, situational encouragement, verbalization, and broadening of goals. To bring

effective positive interpretation, the therapist should be curious on the following points:

1. Understand the place of positive interpretation in the client’s cultural context.
2. Support the client to define positive interpretation.
3. Identify individual and social factors influencing positive interpretation.
4. Identify barriers to positive interpretation.

The therapist should serve as a facilitator in the process of positive understanding and should avoid advising, directing, and judging the client. Then, the therapist should support the clients to interpret their problem positively and should follow the process critically in each session and stages of consultation. To maintain the positive interpretation and eliminate potential relapse, clients should be checked regularly to reinterpret their problems during Positive Psychotherapy. Positive reinterpretations are thus basically a stimulus for rethinking old concepts and for seeing if there are not alternative interpretations and forms of treatment available for the patient [12].

Furthermore, the therapist should focus on major barriers to adopt positive interpretation: personal barriers, social barriers, and environmental barriers. Personal barriers to positive interpretation may include lack of information, low-risk perception, poor perception of benefits, and lack of skills and confidence. Social barriers are comprised of peer influence, social norms, and perceptions about what is normal. Environmental barriers involve poverty, laws, mental health policy, and lack of access to psychosocial services. The main task of positive interpretation is enabling clients to develop alternative attitudes toward their illness and in appealing to therapists to be flexible as possible in their treatments. The table below illustrates change perspectives in the process of positive interpretation [12] (Table 34.1).

Some positive interpretations are capable of being enlarged up on primary capacities, secondary capacities, body achievements, social contact, futurity, and model dimensions (I, you, we, primal we).

Table 34.1 Change perspectives in the process of positive interpretation

| Traditional interpretation | Positive interpretation |
|--|---|
| <i>Depression</i> | |
| The feeling of being despondent, with a prevailing passive attitude. Spiritual dejection, exhaustion | The ability to react to conflicts with deep emotions |
| <i>Phobia</i> | |
| Fear of certain objects, such as mice, dogs, spiders, or of specific situations | The ability to avoid situations and objects which are experienced as threatening |
| <i>Bedwetting</i> | |
| Bedwetting is a special form of uncontrolled emptying of the bladder. It occurs at night, when one is lying in bed asleep | The ability to recover earlier, not forgotten ways of reacting when faced with difficult situation. The ability to cry downward |
| <i>Paranoia</i> | |
| Madness, insanity, mental illness with primary crazy notions (delusions of persecution, grandeur, reference, among others) | The ability to see oneself as the midpoint of the world and its secret power |

Clinical Vignette

The Ability to React to Conflicts with Deep Emotion

The client is a 48-year-old engineer. He is the father of a son and a daughter. He was in the process of divorce when one of his construction sites burned; in addition, he lost a significant amount of money and changed his religion two times. He was diagnosed primarily with depression in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. After 2 weeks of intensive medication in the hospital, the client was referred to Positive Psychotherapy service.

During the first interview, the following irrational thoughts or thinking errors were observed in the client: persistent sadness; anxious or empty mood; feelings of hopelessness; pessimism; feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness; loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities, including sex; decreased energy; fatigue; and feeling slowed down. He was even reluctant to receive Positive Psychotherapy. However, he was expecting appropriate service

to eliminate his irrational thought and thinking errors and confusion and return to his normal life and reconcile with his wife, restart his previous business, and get rid of his superstitious thoughts. Initially the therapist requested the client to positively interpret his personal problem. He replied that depression is depression, and it is lack of interest in everything what else could be. Then, the therapist supported the client in interpreting his problem as the ability to react to conflicts with deep emotion and critically observed and checked clients' change across the five-stage consultation. The process also enlarged up on his model dimension, including dimensions of time, trust, and hope. During consultation, he realized that his life components are unbalanced and decided to give due attention on his body, futurity, and social contact (see Chap. 5 on "The Balance Model"). During the termination phase, the client explained that positive interpretation created a real value in his life and helped him identify and build skills that "last much longer than a smile." In addition, the positive interpretation supported the client being able to see other life skills and gain an opportunity to increase his sense of possibilities. Moreover, he mentioned that positive interpretation supported him to diminish routine stress and boosted his confidence and ignited his mind to develop new skills and resources. Because of this positive interpretation, he was able to create a peaceful and balanced life principle across body, achievement, social contact, and spirituality – the balance model.

Summary

Positive interpretation can serve as a guide to shape clients' irrational thought distortions or thinking errors. In Positive Psychotherapy (PPT after Peseschkian), the patient is coming to the psychotherapy room not only with problems but also with solutions. Thus, the relationship between the two parties should be therapist with therapist, and the client is not considered as a patient. This relationship will open a door for supporting clients to interpret their problems

positively. Positive interpretation can be influenced by a combination of personal, social, and environmental factors, and it may take some time to effectively bring impactful positive interpretations. Positive interpretation serves as a tool for clients in identifying and replacing irrational thoughts including all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralizing, filtering out the positive, mind reading, catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, labeling, and fortune-telling. Relapse or setbacks are common across the five-stage consultation phase, and changing the destructive things what an individual says to himself when he experiences the setbacks that life deals all of us is the central skill of optimism [13]. Therefore, the therapist should follow critically and check the status of positive interpretation in each session.

Key Points

We should give priorities to the following points during positive interpretation in Positive Psychotherapy (PPT after Peseschkian):

- Be informed that the patient is entering the therapy room not only with his problem but also with potential solutions.
- Understand the client's experiences and cultural values toward positive interpretation.
- Differentiate client's personal barriers, social barriers, and environmental barriers of positive interpretation.
- Support the client to interpret his problems positively and gear his interpretation with ability or capacity. Then, positive interpretation will create a fertile land for clients to eliminate his irrational thoughts or thinking errors.
- Relapse or setback is very common among clients. Therefore, the therapist should remind and support his clients to reinterpret his problem across the five stages of consultation

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