



Reframing for (

The Use of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Po

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything is worthy of praise, dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8).

For many years ministers have employed the findings of psychology in their work. With parishioners, youth, the elderly, in religious formation programs and other venues, various psychodynamic approaches (Freudian, Jungian and object-relations theory) concerned with the past and the unconscious have been utilized in the service of pastoral/spiritual guidance.

However at this juncture, ministry needs to incorporate not just past understandings of the human condition, but also must seek to employ other more recent advances in psychology to foster the pastoral care functions of healing, nurturing, guiding, reconciling and change. This can be done by employing the findings and publications on both cognitive-behavioral therapy and positive psychology.

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THEORY

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) provides insights into why people feel the way they do and how both affect (mood) and behavior are determined to a great extent by



Change:

Positive Psychology in Pastoral Ministry and Formation

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their cognitions and beliefs (schemata). Given this, effort needs to be made in ministry and formation programs to help people experiencing distress to examine their own cognitions (ways of thinking, perceiving and understanding) to see what distortions might be present that are causing the individual difficulties. In addition, there is interest in CBT to have people engage in behavior that would have a positive impact on their feelings—even if, sometimes *especially* if, their inclinations are to do nothing. (An example of this is when people are “feeling down” or actually experiencing clinical depression. While the belief may be, “I really don’t have the energy to go out or interact with others,” they are encouraged to do so because depression and activity don’t like to live together.)

Cognitive-behavioral therapy recognizes that psychological problems are often negatively impacted by dysfunctional thinking. Originally developed by Aaron Beck in the 1960s, this short-term, structured psychotherapy was first used with clients suffering from depression but has since been expanded to include other mood disorders, trauma, substance abuse, and the improvement of everyday living in our desire to respond more fully to God (which is of particular interest to us here). The underlying assumption is that life experiences create core beliefs and schemas (a way of responding based on one’s relationship to self, others and God). These, in turn, drive intermediate beliefs which are personal rules, attitudes and assumptions. And so, when an incident occurs, automatic thoughts are generated that impact behavior and mood.

Cognitive theory and therapy can be helpful because there is a bias for action and an emphasis on working with the present as a way to alleviate the symptoms of psychic distress as quickly as possible. As a result, pastoral ministers/formators and those whom they guide are invited by this theory to collaborate on identifying a dysfunctional cognition based on a core belief and working on decreasing negative affect while increasing coping skills related to the negative, unexamined, automatic thoughts the person may have.

Distorted thoughts can come in a variety of different forms. Examples include *catastrophizing* (I am going to lose everything), *magnifying* (this is the worse thing that could ever happen to me), *overgeneralizing* (everyone thinks this way about me), *jumping to conclusions*, *selective negative focus*, *emotional reasoning*, *"shoulds,"* *polarized (all or nothing) thinking* (if we don't do it my way, it is wrong) and *personalizing* (he doesn't like me because I didn't go out to lunch with him). While many people may fall into using this type of unexamined, negative thinking from time-to-time, it becomes especially problematic when it becomes the default way of thinking. Unfortunately, this may happen when someone is at a low point during their spiritual life, formation program, or day.

Negative thinking is quite common and it is easier to give it more weight than anything positive. Often we can hear a compliment or affirmation only to have it dissolve when negative stones are thrown and hit their mark. Thus, it is important that people be educated to recognize negative thinking in order to link it to depressive or anxious feelings that may result. Then, the negative self-talk can be replaced with a more realistic thought or belief. In addition, the use of realistic positive language is central to helping people make changes.

Generally, it is easy to find something negative about ourselves and even easier to make negative comparisons with others. However, maintaining perspective in light of these challenges is where the real work begins. Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters to a Young Poet*, offers:

Only someone who is ready for everything, who excludes nothing, not even the most enigmatical, will live the relation to another as something alive and will himself draw exhaustively from his own existence. For if we think of this existence of the individual as a larger or smaller room it appears evident that most people learn to know only one corner of their room, a place by the window, a strip of floor on which they will walk up and down. Thus they have a certain security. And yet that dangerous insecurity is so much more human which drives the prisoner in Poe's stories to feel out the shapes of their horrible dungeons and not be strangers to the unspeakable terror of their abode. We, however, are not prisoners. No traps or snares are set about us, and there is nothing which should intimidate or worry us. . . . We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. Has it terrors, they are our terrors; has it abysses, those abysses belong to us; are dangers at hand, we must try to love them.

To accomplish this depth of self-awareness so that change becomes more readily possible, a number of steps can be either taken by oneself or with a spiritual director, formator or

counselor. They include: exploring the cognitive appraisal of an event, revisiting the emotional arousal it caused, and examining the resulting behavior that one undertook. As part of this recollecting process, it is important that both the objective (what actually happened) and the subjective (what beliefs and judgments one has made about the event) be examined. With this process the person can then be encouraged to uncover the style of her/his thinking process as well as examine the accuracy of the conclusions being made.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Another even more recent advance in the behavioral sciences that can be helpful in pastoral ministry and formation is positive psychology. Its goal is to encourage the field of clinical psychology not to see itself as merely being a "repair shop" for emotional difficulties (as important as this role is), but also to help people uncover their signature strengths. By drawing attention to people's gifts, talents and virtues, people can then build upon what is good instead of solely focusing on correcting what is problematic.

The discipline of positive psychology is about living well. It is prevention-focused and works to expand existing competencies. It looks at people's past experiences and how they have adapted to become who they are today. It also examines their sense of personal contentment and how their attitudes and optimism influence their future. By taking this perspective, people are encouraged to question themselves professionally and personally in a whole new way. According to Martin Seligman (2002), initiator of the contemporary positive psychology movement:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about positive subjective experience: well-being and satisfaction (past); flow, joy, the sensual pleasures, and happiness (present); and constructive cognitions about the future—optimism, hope, and faith. At the individual level it is about positive personal traits—the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent, and wisdom Psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage; it also is the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it is also building what is right . . . the major strides in prevention have largely come from a perspective focused on systematically building competency, not correcting weakness This, then, is the general stance of positive psychology toward prevention. It claims that there is a set of buffers against psychopathology: the positive human traits.

Positive psychology is not a psychological "concealer" that hides the real blemishes of life, nor is it an emotional or spiritual cortisone that temporarily eliminates unpleasant life experiences. Instead, it is a more dynamic way for people to view their state of being and be freed from the bindings of a solely negative focus. Although positive psychology is centered upon the individual, it also integrates the strengths of supporting institutions such as families, schools and churches so it is a natural approach for persons involved in pastoral ministry.



Positive and negative emotions are designed to have specific purposes in our lives. Too much of one without the other to balance it could be problematic. Peterson (2006) notes that:

Negative emotions alert us to danger. When we experience a negative emotion, our response options narrow, and we act with haste to avoid whatever danger is signaled. In contrast, positive emotions signal safety, and our inherent response to them is not to narrow our options but to broaden and build upon them. The evolutionary payoff of positive emotions is therefore not in the here and now, but in the future. Perhaps it is advantageous to experience positive emotions because they lead us to engage in activities that add to our behavioral and cognitive repertoires.

Research has also shown that a positive outlook can contribute to longer, healthier lives, richer marriages, more productive work environments and closer friendships. In addition, this optimism improves resilience, strengthens coping skills and moves people from survival to enrichment.

One way to measure the richness of life is to consider the impact of “flow.” Identified by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, this psychological state of being is the overlap of refined skill, single-mindedness and joy. For individuals who experience flow, time seems to stand still, there is no self-consciousness, and the activity brings a sense of completeness. By guiding novices, parishioners, students and others through a discovery process that highlights their most rewarding activities and encouraging a steady diet of them, we are better able to help them tap into the positive energy in and around them—what some of us would refer to as grace. Employing positive psychology as a tool in pastoral ministry offers a reflective grid,

then, that centers on experiences, events, behaviors, cognitions, gifts, talents and conditions to be recalled, celebrated and reinforced. By intentionally reviewing these contributions, greater insight can be achieved both personally and professionally with those that one guides. In the book *Bounce* (2006), one of the coauthors of this paper details a number of questions to guide such an exploration of “Positive Psychology and Self-Questioning/Reflection.” Likewise, he also includes recommended readings and simple suggestions based on positive psychology research that can strengthen well-being, foster flow, improve quality of life and increase happiness in a variety of ways.

Deriving honest meaning from our experiences and testing our perceptions can offer a freedom that may be unknown or elusive up to that point because of the negative beliefs being held. And so, it is with having both cognitive and positive psychology as a back drop (see additional resources on these areas listed at the end of the article) that we wish to now briefly discuss the concepts of reframing for change to see how they can be applied to pastoral ministry.

REFRAMING FOR CHANGE

Cognitive reframing is an intervention that helps a person create new meaning from distressing situations where irrational, distorted or imbalanced thinking has affected his/her behavior, mood or both. With the collaboration of a spiritual/psychological guide or on one’s own, maladaptive thoughts or narrow ways of viewing events are identified and new ideas are generated to allow perception (and ultimately both feeling and behavior) to be modified even though the precipitating event actually remains the same.

Most dysfunctional thinking styles have taken a lifetime to develop and persons need adequate space to consider a re-conceptualization of their thinking and beliefs. This cycle of cognitive appraisal, emotional arousal and behavior is also continuous. Once again, the goal of reframing for change is not designed to deny realities but *to look into them with a sense of openness and hope*. Its goal is to help raise recognition as to where the persons being guided are in their cycle of change so as to bring it to light for them. With that awareness, people coming for guidance can begin connecting their maladaptive thoughts and incomplete or inaccurate personal assumptions. And by practicing reframing in spiritual direction, pastoral care or formation sessions, pastoral ministers can derive new insights and enhance their well-being.

The fundamental components of reframing for change in practice are: hear what persons are and are not saying, acknowledge what they are feeling and thinking, and help them to gain insight into the *full* experience. Often we debate whether the glass is half-full or half-empty. In reframing, our interest is in the entire glass, both the represented signature strengths and defenses/growing edges. The goal is not to eradicate the defenses or situational challenges, but to recognize them for what they are while simultaneously applauding the gifts in all parts of ourselves or the persons being guided. While looking at our unhelpful tendencies can be beneficial for growth, if we look at them *exclusively* then it will only lead to discouragement.

Just as mattes and frames can bring different details to the foreground in a painting, the use of CBT and positive psychology in the practice of reframing allows one to recast certain details of the story or shed light on faulty beliefs. And just as viewing a painting from a variety of angles brings perspective, the pastoral minister or formator becomes an observer of the “paintings” of the person being mentored. This helps the person become more fully self-aware in order to

secure or regain personal power, and to adopt new contexts for perceiving events, their vocation and life.

The practice of reframing benefits from a *sound relationship, openness and humor*. Regardless of what approaches to spiritual direction, formation or counseling are employed, the relationship is key. Although there are many psychological theories and techniques that can be used to intervene, studies have shown that it is the relationship between the helper and the person being guided that plays the most significant role in healing. Thus, rapport and a sense of trust are critical.

It can sometimes be difficult to decipher why an individual is stuck. Therefore, an open mind is also essential. From a psychological and spiritual point of view, the presenting problem noted by a person seeking support is not really the complete problem, so constant re-conceptualizing (as verbal and non-verbal information is presented) takes place. By embracing a “what if” mentality, some of the potential challenges being experienced can be illuminated. And finally, sometimes life can be taken far too seriously. By employing humor appropriately, a logjam of emotions can be released unexpectedly as well.

Reframing for change can be a powerful tool in helping individuals reshape their perceptions. However, even the most brilliant reframe can be rejected or stymied because of an individual’s deep-rooted belief about himself/herself or the world. In the book *Crossing the Desert* (2007), we see some of the reasons why we can be our own worst support when negative thoughts refuse to be loosened. They include:

- Projecting the blame onto others because when we give away the blame we also give away the power to change or improve our situation.
- Condemning ourselves. God does not do this; when we do it, especially when we think we are simply being honest with ourselves about our faults, little hope remains for change.



- Discouragement that deflates us until there is no energy to move forward;
- Forms of anger, hurt, fear and lack of trust that keep us paralyzed from acting in a beneficial way.
- And, our most powerful enemy, a lack of humility, which prevents us from enjoying the fruits of a full awareness of both our true gifts and growing edges.

These resistances should be viewed with tenderness so they can be transformed into gifts. They offer windows into our personality and may be central to the reframing process. To unpack these gifts, practice, persistence and an appreciation that grace gives in sometimes unusual or unexpected ways are all essential. CBT and positive psychology are evidence-based theories that have been tested. With practice on self and others, they can add a new dimension to direction, advice-giving and counsel. They also offer a new path of exploration which may be uncharted, so gentle persistence may be necessary because there will be steps forward and back during the entire process of change. And finally, we must not forget that, in the end, no matter how efficacious our approach, it is in the end about experiencing grace. We are imperfect and our best intentions may fall short. Grace bridges those gaps and enriches the shared journey by encouraging us all to be open to “make all things new” –including ourselves.

REFRAMING FOR CHANGE IN THE PASTORAL SETTING

For pastoral ministers and spiritual directors, a little bit of knowledge can be a powerful thing in the case of the principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy and the approaches of positive psychology. For instance, knowing how systematic negative perceptions maintain negative emotions and dysfunctional behavior will lead the pastoral person or the formator to help those they are guiding to question their thinking and test the accuracy of the predictions/interpretations they are making based on such thinking and beliefs. In the case of mild depressive thinking, this may cut through the psychological difficulty sufficiently to surface the spiritual issues that need to be faced. In other cases, it may uncover the extent of the problem to the point where therapy can be logically suggested and more openly received.

To provide a sense of what we are referring to, the following several common distortions illustrate how people (and perfectionistic Christians in particular) fall prey to thinking errors that cause depressive feelings and an overall sense of discouragement:

- Unless I am perfect, I am not measuring up spiritually (black and white thinking).
- If everyone doesn't appreciate my homily or pastoral work then it means most of those responding well are just being nice and I am really not good at what I am doing (catastrophizing).
- I should be able to say yes to all the pastoral demands made of me (tyrannical “should” and “must” statements).
- If I make a mistake I should criticize myself (self-blame rather than self-understanding).

- If people I serve or work with think less of me, then I should think less of myself (negative self-evaluation).
- I can predict negative events (negative outlook that is the result of untested assumptions).

In looking at such distortions, more general questions can be asked about the situation that has given rise to such distortions. These include:

- What do I find most upsetting about the event I am describing?
- Have I tried to look at this event and my reactions from different angles?
- What does this issue ask me to let go of?
- If this difficulty can be avoided, why am I not avoiding it?
- If this problem is unavoidable, how can I face it directly?
- What am I being asked to learn about myself from this event?
- What is the “gift” amidst the pain or annoyance that I am missing and what approach will help me find it?

An illustration of this last point is the example of a student who considered himself a person of peace, a spiritual seeker, and someone who valued self-knowledge. During the first few classes though, he became more and more upset by the passionate statements and reactions of a student who sat a few rows behind him. The more she got emotionally aroused by the material being presented, the more upset he would become.

The teacher of this course on the integration of psychology and spirituality had developed a good relationship with the man, so he waited until he had seen these reactions a number of times. After the fourth class he asked the young man if he would remain after class. The man said he would and once the classroom was emptied, the professor mentioned the woman in question who was so outspoken. In response, the young man showed his upset at her. When this happened, the instructor quietly said, “She is your spiritual director.” He replied, “I’ll have to think about that.” To which the professor simply said, “I didn’t ask you to think about it. She is your spiritual director. Now see what she can teach you about what you are holding onto, the source of your own upset in yourself, and what God is calling you to understand about yourself and your ego in this reaction of yours.”

Reframing is most powerful when the issue is immediate, filled with emotion, and the call to look at it is made at the most opportune time. Once the student had time to process this request, he could reflect on the situation, learn from it and become freer than he was in the past. This was not because the environment changed but rather because the perception of it and himself changed.

At the very least, then, cognitive psychotherapeutic principles can aid those in spiritual direction, formation or pastoral guidance to think as clearly as possible and be alert for erroneous beliefs and distorted thinking patterns as well as new opportunities to learn and see even the negative as positive opportunities for growth and change. Moreover, these may be general in nature or tied to certain religious beliefs—a place where the pastoral minister can be of help.

Positive psychology principles, as was noted, do not gloss over a person’s defenses, sins or faults. However, they also do

not ignore someone's gifts and talents. As a matter of fact, when people present their shortcomings, the way these shortcomings are dealt with is by surfacing their gifts and the situations when these gifts become the very problems they are worried about. Let's look at an example of this.

A young man in formation comes in to see his novice master and expresses dismay that he is not getting along with his fellow novices. He says that he knows it is due to his blurting out his opinions on things and the fact that even though he feels his comments are correct in many instances, they don't like him expressing them so readily, and he can see their point. He is too outspoken and maybe this means he doesn't belong in the religious order and should leave.

From a cognitive standpoint, the novice director points out that the novice is jumping from one specific position—this style of behavior is not being accepted well—to a very broad one—I don't belong in this order. He then moves to a positive psychology orientation and says the following: "One of your wonderful gifts is that you are passionate about life and that is such a beautiful gift. Too many of us are too blasé about life or hold back. You don't." (And at this point cites examples of how his initiative and energy made a positive difference.)

He then goes on to say, "I think the question facing us is how to prune this gift from God so it doesn't become a problem for others and yourself." The novice responds, "How would we 'prune' this gift? It doesn't feel like a gift now." The novice master replies, "Yes, it doesn't feel like a gift because under certain situations it isn't. Pruning would involve looking at those situations where your gift is, well, in fact a true gift to others and when it isn't so we can see what you were thinking and feeling before you used your gift in an inappropriate way. By doing this, you can enjoy your gift and others can as well. You will also learn more about when and under what circumstances within you, your gift fails to be so. This is a great opportunity for spiritual and psychological growth. I am glad we are speaking about it. Now, let's look at what you were thinking and believing just prior to this last episode that you brought in today."

Persons seeking to find God and themselves through being both clear and gentle with themselves or those individuals they are called to guide will find a friend in both cognitive behavioral therapy and positive psychology. We have just touched the surface in introducing some of their concepts and approaches here. Rather than being solely instructive, we have primarily sought to create an interest in reading further in these two areas. Many in spirituality have utilized those psychologies that emphasize the role of the unconscious and early life experiences and this information is very important. What has been emphasized here, though, is that psychology has even more to offer those in ministry since those other approaches debuted. While a farmer certainly was happy to have a horse and plow rather than working on the fields by hand with a hoe, he also was happy when tractors became available. Just as theology and spirituality are dynamic, so is psychology. Both cognitive-behavioral therapy and positive psychology are—in the metaphor used—new tractors to be employed. We hope that our comments on them and their application to ministry will encourage you to read further, seek supervision in these areas, and take this "psychological tractor" to help plow the spiritual fields you are being asked to till in yourself and others.

RECOMMENDED READING

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