

A Brief Introduction to Jungian Therapy

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Search for Meaning

Many Americans are searching for deeper meaning in their lives. Just recently, a TV news survey asked viewers what one thing would most improve the quality of their life. The most frequent answer was “greater meaning in life.”

People from all walks of life are looking for more out of existence than simply adapting to society and living functionally. Many want the inner fulfillment of living an authentic, creative life connected to spirit. Jungian therapy is a means for achieving this.

Individuation and Psychological Symptoms

Central to Jungian therapy is the concept of individuation, referring to the psychological evolution of an individual over time. Jung used the term to describe a lifelong expansion of consciousness, as well as the development of an increasingly differentiated personality. Individuation involves the growth of a whole and unique human being and a concomitant deepening and widening of awareness. Jung felt that this was accomplished through the integration of unconscious contents and the reconciliation of opposites within the psyche.

While individuation is a process that occurs naturally over the course of life, it can be enormously facilitated through Jungian therapy. Therapeutically assisted individuation is not simply a luxury for individuals wishing to grow, however. From a Jungian perspective, psychological maladies result from

inhibited individuation. To the extent that we are unconscious and undeveloped, we are limited in our ability to respond productively, creatively, and adaptively to life. In fact, it was Jung's feeling that the greater the split between the conscious and unconscious mind, the greater the likelihood of neurotic, or in some cases, psychotic disorders. For Jung, psychological symptoms frequently signal the fact that our psyche is fragmented, unbalanced, and ill-adapted to reality. Jungian therapy helps us wake up to the unconscious dynamics creating our suffering.

The Self as Regulating Center

A unique aspect of Jungian therapy is the understanding that guidance for what we need to integrate to function fully comes from within ourselves. Jungian psychology proposes that there is a source of symbolic wisdom within each person's psyche--a regulating center that Jung calls the Self--that contains knowledge beyond what we know consciously.

Jung felt that the Self is constantly sending us messages, but due to their symbolic nature, we fail to appreciate their meaning. Jung and his followers developed methods of dream interpretation, creative expression, and creative imagination to help understand and integrate unconscious material. In Jungian therapy, symptom relief often accompanies the integration of these contents.

Four Steps

I have found that there are usually four steps in this process. First, it requires opening up the mind and heart to the signals from the unconscious--discoverable through intuition, feelings, inner vision, and dreams, as well as art, body signals, and synchronistic experiences. Then, it involves allowing the

images to express themselves more fully. Techniques such as dream interpretation and various forms of active imagination (e.g., imaginal dialogue) can be especially useful for this. The third step is identifying and confronting the inner and outer obstacles and adversaries to living of one's true self. Finally, it necessitates developing the courage, strength, and integrity to live one's truth in the world.

An Example

Say, for example, we are feeling “burnt out” and somewhat depressed. We try several different methods of self-help, but none seems to really help. Then, after beginning Jungian therapy, we have a dream that we are sailing on a ship to Hawaii, a ship on which an evil slave master is being overthrown.

Exploring the symbols in the dream, we might discover that Hawaii represents a new and refreshing way of life, one more connected with nature and instincts. We might also recognize that we need to emancipate ourselves from the negative taskmaster in our psyche, to whom we are enslaved. With the help of our therapist, we ponder and explore these issues and their significance in our life. This and other dreams to follow may then begin to transform us—and our depression—into a more instinctual way of living, closer to our own nature and the wisdom of the Self.

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