

# Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology

chapter  
ONE

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**P** psychology provides the primary theoretical underpinning to the theory and practice of coaching. The theories of humanistic psychology and Carl Rogers (1961) have formed the basis for many of the skills and assumptions used today in the coaching engagement. Coaching has also been significantly influenced by the psychological theories of Fritz Perls (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1994) and Gestalt therapy; Abraham Maslow's work on self-actualization and peak experiences (1968); and Stanislav Grof (2000), Roberto Assagioli (2007), and transpersonal psychology.

## **CARL ROGERS AND THE CLIENT-CENTERED APPROACH**

There is probably no single person more responsible for shifting psychology from a pathological, childhood-focused Freudian orientation to a present-day, positive orientation than Carl Rogers. A clinical psychologist with a PhD from Columbia University, Rogers began developing client-centered or nondirective therapy in the 1940s. He opposed the assumption that the therapist knows more than the client or has a more informed understanding of the client's problem, and should therefore direct the progress of the therapeutic engagement. He

objected not only to explicit forms of direction, such as offering a diagnosis or giving advice, but also to more subtle forms of control, such as asking direct questions.

Rogers took issue with the psychoanalytic and behaviorist approaches that were dominant at the time. Neither seemed to offer a particularly optimistic or noble vision of the human predicament. Both could be seen to fragment and diminish the wholeness of the individual. Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, had emphasized unconscious motivation, often destructive or antisocial in nature; the inevitability of deep internal conflict; and the search for early trauma as an explanation of adult dysfunction. Behaviorism, which had grown out of Ivan Pavlov's study of the conditioned reflex, also put the focus on impulses and patterns of behavior beyond conscious control. From these perspectives, the individual is a stranger to herself. Certainly Jung, Freud's chosen successor, had allotted a more positive and creative role to the hidden regions of the mind, envisioning in the collective unconscious and the archetypes that inhabit it an ancient repository of shared wisdom. But the dominant view among Rogers's contemporaries was of the unconscious as a dangerous and disturbing terrain to be explored only with the guidance of a professional.

In contrast, Rogers argued that given a healthy therapeutic environment, people can be trusted to understand and resolve their own problems, that they are naturally inclined toward what is good for them, and that they have a huge capacity for positive growth. Rogers's work rested on several critical principles. To establish the right kind of environment, the therapist must first of all be genuine in his relationship with the client. In a word favored by the existentialists (a significant influence on Rogers's thinking), the therapist must be *authentic*. Rogers saw no place for the kind of professional façade designed to preserve the therapist's detachment, anonymity, or authority. It follows that the therapist might find it appropriate at times to disclose thoughts or feelings of his own. Just as important, there is no place for judgment. The therapist must communicate unconditional positive regard for the client, who should feel genuinely accepted and valued.

Within this relationship, the essential work of the therapist is to listen attentively to the client to understand the world as the client experiences it. This listening must be not only empathetic but accurate: the therapist should be willing to check that he has understood correctly. He must be sensitive to implied meanings as well as explicit ones, and to feelings and thoughts not fully grasped

by the client. The purpose of client-centered therapy is to enable the client to become more open to experience, to develop greater trust in herself, and to continue to grow, pursuing goals of her own choosing. This development of a stronger and healthier sense of self is sometimes referred to as “self-actualization.” Rogerian therapy imposes no particular structure and is not based on a set of techniques, but is highly dependent on the nature of the relationship the therapist establishes with the client, a relationship in which the therapist must be present in the most profound sense.

In the late 1950s, Rogers began working with other theorists and practitioners interested in promoting a more holistic approach to psychology, including Abraham Maslow. This led to the formation in 1961 of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, and it became possible for humanistic psychology to be identified as a “third force” in psychology after psychoanalysis and behaviorism.

Coaching clearly owes a great deal to client-centered therapy in its emphasis on treating the client with respect, trusting her instinct for what she needs, and allowing her to take the lead in shaping the purpose and direction of the process. It was important in its time as a corrective to what some have experienced as the disempowering experience of more traditional forms of psychotherapy. Perhaps its major drawback is that it does not allow any mechanism for feedback to assist the essentially healthy client in correcting unhelpful or dysfunctional behaviors.

### Coaching Applications

- **Establish collaboration as the basis for the coaching relationship.** It is your responsibility to actively engage your client in dialogue with such questions as *What would you like to work on today?*
- **Practice empathetic listening.** Attend carefully to your client’s experience, imagine that you are in her shoes, ask for clarification, and communicate to her your understanding of her situation.
- **Communicate to the client that he has the knowledge, emotional strength, and personal power to make the changes he desires.** Use his experience and understanding as the basis for your work together.
- **Work to create a relationship with your client that is caring and mutually respectful.** This relationship is fundamental to the success of the coaching endeavor. Metastudies in psychotherapy have demonstrated that it is the

relationship, not necessarily the type of therapeutic intervention used, that produces a positive experience and growth. The same is almost certainly true of coaching.

- **Be authentic in the coaching relationship.** Be yourself. Give open and honest feedback to the client to support her exploration and learning. At the same time, value her without judgment wherever she finds herself in life. This is what it means to hold her in “unconditional positive regard” and is fundamental to your role in empowering her to change.

## FRITZ PERLS AND GESTALT THERAPY

Approximately translated, *gestalt* is German for “form.” Gestalt therapy was founded in the 1940s by Fritz and Laura Perls. Rooted in the idea that the mind has a capacity to see things in their wholeness and to construct forms out of fragmentary information, it is concerned with helping the individual observe herself in the broader context of a web, or field, of relationships. It can be seen as a process of experimentation and observation. In contrast to a tradition of experimental psychology that has tended, on the model of the physical sciences, to break things down into their component parts, the Gestalt approach is essentially holistic.

The philosophy underlying Gestalt therapy is existentialist in its view that most people live in a state of self-deception, accepting conventional notions that obscure the reality of how the world is; that this leads to feelings of anxiety and guilt; and that to live authentically, people must continually rediscover and reinvent themselves. Therapists and clients engage in dialogue, with the aim of observing the process rather than its content. Dialogue is understood to include all forms of communication, such as body language and movement as well as speech. Perceptions, feelings, and actions are considered to be more reliable kinds of data than explanations or interpretations. Relationships experienced in the present moment, including that between therapist and client, are more immediately revealing as objects of study than what is merely reported, but external relationships can be effectively brought into the room and reexperienced.

During the session, the client will show behavior patterns that occur outside the session. Noticing these patterns will increase the client’s awareness of how she behaves in the world. This will enable her not only to accept and value herself as she is but also to change and grow and become more fully responsible. The role

of the therapist is not to lead or direct the process and not to put theory or interpretation in the way, but to be present without judgment, modeling authentic dialogue.

### Coaching Applications

- **Encourage self-observation so that your client is both *being* in the moment and *seeing* himself being in the moment.** Create greater awareness by helping him notice any disconnect between what he is saying and the behavior he is exhibiting. Be conscious of subtleties of body language, tone of voice, and other nonverbal indicators.
- **Be aware of the importance of cocreating a safe, open, and honest relationship with your client.** A feeling of profound trust is essential if she is to feel safe exploring unacknowledged or unrecognized truths.
- **In working with groups or teams, encourage awareness of what is *happening* in the group as opposed to what is spoken.** In other words, shift the focus from the content of the conversation to the process.

### ABRAHAM MASLOW AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Abraham Maslow, along with Rogers and Perls, is considered one of the founders of the humanistic psychology movement. Among the contributions for which he is best known are his Hierarchy of Needs model and the concept of peak experiences. The needs Maslow identifies, starting with the most basic, are physiological needs (food, shelter, water, sleep, sex); need for safety and security; need for love and belonging; need for self-esteem and esteem by others; and self-actualization needs. Maslow defines self-actualization as a sense of knowing exactly who you are and where you are going, and the ability to enjoy a state of completeness and wholeness in life. According to Maslow, a self-actualized individual experiences play and work as similar, has an increased capacity for spontaneity, and an acceptance and expression of the inner core of self.

Self-actualization can be achieved intermittently in what Maslow calls peak experiences. These transient moments of self-actualization can occur at any time in life, though Maslow felt they were more likely to occur during adulthood. Peak experiences take us beyond our ordinary perceptions and provide a moment of transcendence. They are nonreligious, quasi-mystical experiences that might

encompass a sudden feeling of intense happiness and well-being, a sense of wonder and awe, or fleeting moments of enlightenment.

At one point Maslow developed a set of qualities that characterized a self-actualized individual. Some of the qualities he posited included

An ability to see problems in terms of challenges and situations requiring solutions

A need for privacy; being comfortable with being alone

The reliance on one's own judgment and experiences; not being influenced by social pressures

The ability to accept others as they are and not attempt to change people

Being comfortable with oneself, with a sense of humor about oneself and an ability to see others as completely separate from oneself

A sense of excitement and interest in everything

The capacity to be creative, inventive, and original

## Coaching Applications

- **If appropriate, use Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model to help your client understand himself in terms of his needs, desires, and aspirations.** Like the balance wheel (see Chapter Twenty-Five), Maslow's hierarchical pyramid and definition of a self-actualized individual can be used as templates to give structure to an exploration of issues in your client's life.
- **Invite your client to consider the moments in her life when she has felt self-actualized.** Think about appropriate ways of asking this question. When has she experienced a sense of acceptance, wholeness, or fulfillment; been at her most creative; realized her full potential? When has she been at one with herself, at peace with her work and her life? There are times when focusing on a peak experience from the past may help create a sense of possibility.

## STANISLAV GROF, ROBERTO ASSAGIOLI, AND TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

In the 1960s, Maslow's study of peak experiences made a significant contribution to the emerging field of transpersonal psychology. Another leading figure was Stanislaw Grof, who directed research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center

and went on to become scholar-in-residence at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (see Chapter Twenty). Grof became interested in what he identified as nonordinary states of consciousness, studying the impact of LSD on the mind, and later developing breathing techniques to achieve similar effects.

Transpersonal psychology explores states of consciousness that have been traditionally associated with mystical and spiritual experiences. Proponents of transpersonal psychology state that if these experiences can be accessed, they offer the potential for joy, insight, and healing. Whereas mainstream psychology has tended to marginalize these experiences or identify them as symptoms of mental illness, transpersonal psychology sees them as glimpses of a greater reality.

To this extent, the roots of transpersonal psychology can be traced to various religious traditions, particularly to eastern traditions that emphasize meditation and mindfulness. More immediate influences include Carl Jung, who envisaged a collective unconscious in which reside the archetypes of shared human experience. In addition, Roberto Assagioli, a friend and colleague of Carl Jung, worked on the concept, proposed by Jung, of psychosynthesis—a coming together of personal growth, personality integration, and self-actualization. His goal was a direct experience of the pure self at a spiritual level. Like Grof and Maslow, Assagioli researched the higher levels of human awareness.

The application of transpersonal psychology to coaching is less well established, although there are strong philosophical links between Gestalt and transpersonal approaches. In fact, Gestalt is often viewed as a transpersonal approach.

## Coaching Applications

- **Listen to your client.** What needs does he express? What needs is he not yet able to identify or ready to acknowledge?
- **Be open to a view of life's mystical dimension that you don't happen to share.** Your client may feel attuned to the transpersonal and the transcendent, or may think of herself as a rationalist and a skeptic. Whatever your own view, be responsive to hers.

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## Additional Reading

Assagioli, R. (2007). *Transpersonal development: The dimension beyond psychosynthesis*. Findhorn, Scotland: Smiling Wisdom.

The most recently published book by Assagioli discussing his research into altered states.

Boeree, G. *Personality theories: Abraham Maslow*. Available on the Web at [www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html](http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html).

Good and thorough introduction to Maslow's theories and the concept of self-actualization and peak experiences.

Cox, E., Bachkirova, T., & Clutterbuck, D. (2010). *The complete handbook of coaching*. London: Sage.

An excellent overview of coaching theories in a more academic context, including a theoretical essay on transpersonal psychology.

Grof, S. (2000). *Psychology of the future: Lessons from modern consciousness research*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Grof's most recent book describing his research into consciousness. Helpful reading in this area.

Kirschenbaum, H., & Henderson, V. L. (Eds.). (1989). *The Carl Rogers reader: Selections from the lifetime work of America's preeminent psychologist, author of On Becoming a Person and A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

An excellent overview of Rogers's life and work.

Leary-Joyce, J., & Allen, M. (2010). *The Gestalt coaching handbook*. Available on the Web at [www.aoec.com](http://www.aoec.com).

An online publication that supports coaches in understanding the application of Gestalt to coaching.

Maslow, A. H. (1999). *Toward a psychology of being* (3rd. ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Maslow's most well-known book on his theories and their application.

Perls, F. S. (1992). *Gestalt therapy verbatim*. Gouldsboro, ME: Gestalt Journal Press.

A collection of talks by Perls, originally published in 1969, with commentary. Gives a good sense of his dynamic personality.

Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A way of being*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Rogers's classic text on self-actualization and how to facilitate this process.