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Think It Over: Reggie Pawle Reviews the Merits of Morita Therapy

If you are depressed, or having anxiety difficulties, or your lack of self-esteem is really pulling you down, what is the most effective way to work with these kinds of difficulties? Many in the world of psychology assert that cognitive therapy is the answer to this question. Cognitive therapy works with a person's thinking patterns. The belief is that a person's thinking, emotions, body sensations, sense of self, etc., are all part of a system and that if a person changes one part, then the rest of the system will also change. Western cognitive therapists assert that thinking is the most accessible and the easiest part to change.

If this is so, then how do you change your thinking? The answer of Western psychologists has generally been that you identify both the ways in which your thinking is negative or harmful and the beliefs and values that you have that support these negative thinking habits, and then intentionally try to change these wayward ways. Various means are used to do this, such as interrupting your negative thoughts, talking back to these thoughts, doing reality checks on your thoughts (negative thoughts often are not realistic), thinking positive thoughts, adopting health-supporting beliefs and values, and doing visualizations. Behaviors are sometimes combined with the thinking techniques, an example being every time you catch yourself thinking negatively, you snap a rubberband that you wear on your wrist, and you tell yourself, "Stop!" I have seen many people greatly helped by this kind of approach.

Some people, however, have difficulties with this Western approach. Some do not like the good/bad split that is part of this way and say that it reinforces the sense that part of them is bad. Others report that they feel like they get into a battle within themselves, the good thoughts fighting it out with the bad ones. Rather than nurturing a sense of peace, they say the opposite happens.

I once asked a Japanese Zen master about how to handle a personal psychological difficulty. His response was, "You can either fight with it until you completely beat it up, or you can accept it as it is. Either is okay."

Western approaches to cognitive therapy tend to be, in the words of this teacher, the fighting style. Japanese approaches, however, tend to be the acceptance style. A good example of this is Morita therapy.

Morita therapy asserts that the most effective part of a person's psychological system to change is not their thinking, but their attention. The belief is that engaged attention with what one is doing is the most effective way to health. Morita claims people have more control over what they do than what they feel or think. We may feel the urge to over-drink every night, may think about the urge often, but we don't have to act out that urge. According to Morita thought, we need to accept our psychological experience as it is and instead engage our attention with our activity in each moment.

The Morita idea of neurosis is that our attention gets stuck or caught by something, 捕らわれ (*toraware*) in Japanese. A common experience of this is needing sleep because you have something important the next day, but not being able to do so because you can't stop thinking about the important activity. The solution to this dilemma is to free your attention so your mind can do other things, which in this case is stop thinking,

relax, and sleep. In Morita this is done by focusing on your activity and whenever you find yourself thinking compulsively, to shift your attention back to your activity. By persisting in this shifting, eventually your attention opens up and then your thinking changes as well. In Morita free attention is the key to health. One technique to assist this is a Morita diary, in which one writes down two things – what they felt at different times of the day and what they actually did at those same times. This helps a person see that their behavior is not dependent on their internal experience.

The Morita approach appeals to people who like a non-judgmental approach. However, for some it doesn't address directly enough their difficulties. Such people need an active sense, a sense that they are working with their difficulties. I have seen people become healthy through both approaches so I think it depends on the person. However, in either case, what seems to be most important is commitment to the way chosen, putting effort into the healing process, and really doing it. Without really engaging either way neither works.

For Western cognitive therapy information, consult the writings of Aaron Beck. A good application to anxiety difficulties is Edmund Bourne's *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. For Morita therapy information, consult the writings of David Reynolds. For psychotherapists, check International Mental Health Professionals Japan – www.imhpj.org, or contact Reggie Pawle, Ph.D., reggiepawle@yahoo.com, 075-724-1356.