

# Spiritual THERAPY

## A new direction for psychology?

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**Forget the talking cure...** Psychologists are increasingly embracing the spiritual cure. The expanding field of transpersonal psychology suggests it may be the missing piece of the mental health puzzle.

**I** can't actually remember what happened. Even now when I read in my journal about that session, I wrote, "I don't know what was happening, it's like I was watching a movie." Yet I felt shifts take place that no amount of talking could ever resolve.'

Roxanne, who is 33, experienced her first family constellation therapy session when a friend of hers, training to become a facilitator, suggested she try it. 'At first I participated in a supporting role, but then I decided to constellate my relationship with my mother, a relationship I feel was estranged since the day I was born. I didn't mention it to my mother, and I can't recall how long after the constellation I could see or feel a change – I kind of just let life happen as it does. But small things changed. I felt my mom's behaviour towards me was different; she was more affectionate; she spoke to me differently; we were able to talk to each other without shouting. I felt lighter inside; I didn't have so much anger towards her any more. What I do recall is, perhaps six months after the constellation session, I expressed my gratitude towards her and apologised for what I had put her through in life, something I never would have done before. It's now one year and five months after that constellation and, while our relationship isn't perfect, it's so much better than it was.'

Roxanne has participated in many sessions, and credits the therapy

with bringing her greater peace and confidence. 'I feel I'm softer, kinder. Many people comment on how I have changed, and I do believe that this healing therapy has assisted me in a huge way.'

Family constellation is just one of many 'alternative' therapies growing in popularity with mainstream clinical psychologists.

Why is it labelled 'alternative'? Well, it departs from mainstream scientific models in that it involves elements of what can only be described as mysticism or spirituality. These therapies, when used in a clinical setting, fall under the umbrella of transpersonal psychology, a somewhat controversial branch of psychology that seeks to embrace all of human experience in its healing toolbox – including spiritual and even paranormal experiences.

While these sorts of experiences have long been embraced by religions, New Age and Eastern spiritual models, this new link to mainstream psychology is a fascinating development. Like church and state, it seemed that the schism separating spirituality and science in Western culture was a permanent one. How is it that they are increasingly finding common ground in the field of psychology?

### New ways to heal

Clinical psychologist Dr Cathy Geils was searching for meaning after her work in South African public hospitals had exposed her to unbearable trauma, fear and suffering. She was left feeling burnt out, ineffectual and hopeless.

'My training did little to help me make sense of what I encountered, or give me what I felt were sufficiently effective interventions the time- and resource-limited context required. I had an overdeveloped intellect, but felt overwhelmed by the emotional demands on my time and energy.'

The combined pressures of working in an understaffed hospital and motherhood compelled her to explore new healing modalities for herself and her patients.

'Using family constellations in my own healing journey, I have shifted previously intractable anger, depression, irritability, trauma and more, often by locating their origins in the larger ancestral field,' Dr Geils says. 'The practice of family constellations includes an experience of our ancestors within the interconnected field of reality that includes the dead. This field holds wisdom beyond the limitations of our personal ego and personality that guides the healing process.'

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### What is a 'family constellation'?

The idea behind this particular therapy is based on creating a 'constellation' of

representations that pertain to your particular problem. Placeholders – usually other people or dolls – are used to represent a person (for example, your mother or your boss) or a concept (like betrayal or money). These placeholders form into a ‘constellation’ that reveals itself through a process of questions and spontaneous interactions: you and your facilitator interact with the placeholders and they move closer to you, or further away from you, or closer to one another based on that interaction. The constellation they form in relation to you helps you to gain insight into the problem and, if all goes well, releases stuck emotions and reformulates unhealthy attachments or behaviour patterns.

So far so good. Some might put any therapeutic benefits down to the psychosomatic power of roleplay. But, for practitioners, the mechanism by which family constellations works is more mystical than that: by stepping into these roles, all participants drop into the ‘quantum field’ to access familial, ancestral or even past life information. Placeholders may experience feelings, thoughts, perceptions and memories that belong to the person whose role they are representing (without having any personal connection whatsoever). This is sometimes referred to as ‘surrogate perception’, and in this way, information may be gleaned beyond the immediately obvious.

(An interesting aside: Bert Hellinger, the German founder of family constellation therapy, cited his 16 years of missionary work in South Africa, specifically his exposure to Zulu cultural practices, as a seminal influence.)

It’s this ‘mystical’ quality that links family constellation work to other alternative therapies that clinical psychologists are increasingly embracing under the ‘transpersonal’ banner.

### Why ‘transpersonal’?

The word ‘transpersonal’ is used interchangeably with spiritual, but is arguably more useful. The words ‘spiritual’ and ‘mystical’ can be problematic because we tend to use them specific to our own context, which could mean anything from connection to the Abrahamic God to communing with angels, the dead, ancestors, past lives, a great spirit, nature or simply consciousness.

Transpersonal – ‘trans (across, over or beyond) plus personal’ – is more useful because it simply means ‘beyond the self’, in other words, beyond our own idea of who we are, which is pretty open-ended.

‘It refers to connectedness to a larger sense of being, recognition of the sacred, and possibly the sense of quest: that we all have a journey to make to reach that larger sense of being,’ says Johannesburg clinical psychologist Jeanine Lamusse. ‘When you bring psychology into it, transpersonal psychology becomes about how our sense of being, our sense of connectedness, our sense of what is sacred, and our understanding of growth interfaces with mental health and wellbeing.’

### Science vs spirituality

This is the controversy of transpersonal psychology: How can a discipline that claims to be scientific promote the use of ‘spiritual’ healing methods?

‘Despite having an incredible amount of backing from rigorous scientific study – because transpersonal psychology studies everything from shamanism, spiritual emergence, psychedelic treatments and energy psychology to the various emanations of trauma and human growth – it’s often discounted because people haven’t had a personal experience of these things. It touches on parts

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of ourselves that are territories of heated debate and deeply personal, so it elicits heated subjective criticism – regardless of how objective the science is,’ Lamusse says.

What makes it a challenge to study, she adds, is that the tools of science are not suited to it. Results cannot be replicable or repeatable when studying something like near-death or transcendental experiences, for example. ‘And people often use science as a religion rather than seeing it as a tool with limited scope and application.’

What drew Lamusse to this field of study? ‘I’ve had some experiences that I couldn’t explain,’ she says. ‘And, growing up, I’d had exposure to quite a few people who had seen spirits, including my priest. When my own clients started talking about seeing spirits, I thought, this is something I have to investigate professionally, because I could tell that they weren’t psychotic.’

### Hallucinating your way to health?

My own first experience of transpersonal therapy in a clinical setting was holotropic breathwork, facilitated by a psychologist I hoped would help alleviate my crippling anxiety and self-doubt. The first time I tried it – deep, rhythmic breathing, accompanied by loud, stirring music or drumming – I had a fit of the giggles and could not continue. It was too absurd, I thought.

A year later, I was convinced to try again. After some minutes of deep breathing, I experienced an intense resistance in my body, my mind telling me to stop immediately, but I continued and eventually broke

through a kind of threshold where the resistance gave way and I floated into a hallucinatory experience, only dimly aware of my surroundings.

I wandered through a forest, was visited by my childhood dog,

**‘I felt I had located my true north, and could calibrate my internal compass accordingly.’**

which was a great comfort, and towards the end I felt something pushing against my throat, wishing to emerge. From my mouth I pulled a long cord that, as I watched, transformed into a kaleidoscope of butterflies. I began to laugh and experienced a state of intense bliss that lasted for hours. But it wasn't just physical bliss – it felt like truth. I felt I had experienced myself for the first time completely free of the strictures and expectations placed on me since birth. I'd had what is often referred to as a 'peak experience', and it represented a turning point in my self-perception. I felt I had located my true north – somatically rather than cognitively – and could calibrate my internal compass accordingly.

## Altered states

There's no denying that altered or 'peak' states of consciousness have been valued throughout human history for the expanded awareness they bring. Traditionally, these experiences have been interpreted for the individual by the spiritual 'trustees' or experts of their time,

and sought by those seeking enlightenment through meditation, fasting, isolation, focused breathing, ingesting various substances, dancing, pain and pleasure.

Since the 1960s, (thanks to LSD and the introduction of meditation to the West) there's been a scientific interest in 'peak states', which could include anything from mystical visions and gnosis (or 'downloads') of insight to blissful feelings of peace and oneness with all of existence.

These states have often been placed in the same category as psychoses like schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. But there is no evidence to suggest that they point to mental illness – quite the opposite. Mental illness is more likely to occur in individuals who have no frame of reference in which to assimilate these experiences. Religion used to fulfil this role, but an increasingly secular world has resulted in a new interest in ancient traditions that included women and nature in their understanding of the divine (paganism, for example), or a more philosophical view of our relationship with the cosmos (Buddhism). Today, this can be seen in a plethora of theories on how to access this connection under the 'New Age' banner, from the practice of witchcraft and magic to tantra, reiki, shamanism, mysticism and psychedelic rituals, to name a few.

Recently, Johns Hopkins Medicine researchers reported that, in a small study of adults with major depression, 'two doses of the psychedelic substance psilocybin, given with supportive psychotherapy, produced rapid and large reductions in depressive symptoms, with most participants showing improvement and half of study participants achieving remission through the four-week follow-up.'

In the Sixties, psychologist Dr Stanislav Grof began to study the

effects of LSD on mental health in a controlled environment, finding the results to be overwhelmingly positive. When LSD was outlawed, he sought to recreate the same altered state of consciousness legally, and developed holotropic breathwork, which is what I tried. Today, it is widely used by clinical psychologists around the world.

Dr Grof believes that these altered states of consciousness release us from the vice-like grip of our conditioned selves and allow the psyche's natural healing process to kick in, helping to heal trauma and increase feelings of wholeness and connectedness.

But you certainly don't have to get 'high' to benefit. Art therapy is a seemingly benign but effective example: being guided by a facilitator to bypass your brain's linear, language-oriented thinking patterns and express yourself through painting or drawing can change the way you usually engage with a difficult topic – it alters your state of consciousness.

'Mainstream psychological theories are unable to account for human consciousness because it is not a function of brain processes,' says Dr Geils. 'Various thinkers have posited that consciousness originates beyond the brain: Dr Grof, Ervin László, David Bohm, Aldous Huxley and Ken Wilber, among others, all hypothesise that underlying, permeating and connecting all of reality is a creative, aware and intelligent pulsating unified consciousness field that is the original source of all being.'

Whether or not you believe in a transpersonal or spiritual dimension to our lives, there is no doubt that, collectively, people yearn for a deeper, more expansive panacea for our personal and collective condition than purely cognitive or behavioural approaches could ever supply. ❖