

Transpersonal Work: Moving toward wholeness

By Kai-Lin Yang, MA, RCC, Contributing Writer

Eastern philosophies and spiritual tradition have become more accepted in western society in the past four decades. These philosophies and traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, Yoga have significantly affected the development of psychology. Transpersonal psychotherapy is one of the most successfully developed psychologies of this movement. Although the term, "Transpersonal Psychotherapy" has become more known in the field of psychology it still seems mystifying to the majority of mental health professionals.

Ken Wilber (1979), one of the most prominent transpersonal scholars, illustrates this theory of human consciousness through the use of maps of the "spectrum of consciousness and "AQAL (All Quadrants All Levels)" (Wilber, 2005). These maps of consciousness are widely appreciated and utilized by many psychologists and scholars in the study of consciousness to visualize and understand the theory of transpersonal psychological development.

Transpersonal psychotherapy, the therapeutic arm of this field, facilitates the development of consciousness and studies the relationship between developing "consciousness" (understanding the potential of who you can be, somewhat similar to the gestalt therapy concept of being aware) and reducing psychological suffering. In transpersonal psychotherapy developing this consciousness is a step that we take beyond psychological healing. This is why many practitioners use the term "transpersonal work" rather than "transpersonal psychotherapy" in order to focus on the concept of transpersonal process (developing consciousness). In this article, I will describe what transpersonal work is, introduce how transpersonal work heals, and conclude with where else transpersonal work leads the client.

What is Transpersonal Work?

The pioneer of transpersonal research Stanislav Grof (1993) stresses that the essence of the transpersonal experience is "moving toward wholeness." He supports

the idea that as human beings we are capable of accessing our consciousness in a fuller way through transpersonal experience. Transpersonal work fundamentally facilitates the expansion of consciousness. This is similar to what many may be familiar with in Buddhist practice; focusing on the moment. Paying attention. When we begin to pay attention to how we are in the present moment there may be awareness as to how limited or restricted (family roles, jobs titles, incomes, appearances) we are in the world. This awareness can be the beginning of an exploration of our suffering. We are then able to discover how to be free from that suffering.

Transpersonal theory believes this process of seeing, exploring and freeing comes from an instinct in our being to naturally seek peace. Our consciousness will follow this innate tendency to expand, and as our consciousness continues to expand we will identify less with our societal status such as our family roles, jobs titles, incomes, and appearances. As our awareness and consciousness expands we become more than our physical bodies, more than our minds. We become more than our preconception of ourselves. As Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan (1993) stress, the transpersonal experience is when we expand our sense of identity or self.

How does Transpersonal Work Heal?

In transpersonal work the focus of healing is on what happens to the clients' consciousness rather than what their symptoms (such as anxiety, depression) are. Symptoms are a relevant reference to transpersonal therapists; however, they cannot limit the transpersonal therapists' perspectives in understanding how suffering occurs and presents itself in the clients' consciousness. Within transpersonal work, symptoms are the phenomena that naturally reveal themselves when the clients encounter difficulties in their daily lives. Symptoms will arise from the clients' unconscious as



emotional and/or behavioural disturbances when they struggle to deal with their difficulties. Nonetheless, transpersonal therapists will be able to see their clients' suffering beyond their symptoms.

Transpersonal therapists believe that when we try to pursue change and take on new challenges in our lives we often encounter a strong counterforce both internally and externally (homeostasis). Both our survival instincts (internal) and social conventions (external) suppress change since change implies unknown challenges, which in our unconscious level would be threatening to our surviving. Thus we stay in the state of "ordinary." According to Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan (ibid 1993), constantly staying in the "ordinary" consciousness stops psychological growth. Losing the opportunities to face unfamiliar challenges, we also lose our ability to deal meaningfully with life's difficulties and our chance for psychological freedom.

The first step in transpersonal work is to allow clients to see beyond their symptoms and how they become stuck in their difficulties. In this stage awareness is the catalyst the clients use to begin the transpersonal process. While transpersonal work promotes psychological freedom, clients first need to learn to recognize how they are locked into their psychological prison. This recognition is called awareness, self-awareness, or mindfulness, which is essential to many spiritual practices such as Buddhist meditation and yoga.

Through awareness clients begin the process of expanding their consciousness. They will see how they are restricted by their beliefs and how they suffer from their intense feelings. More significantly they will have the opportunity to see what they need to develop in order to transcend their suffering. Further work on awareness requires a greater depth of perceiving; it explores the experiences that take place on different levels of consciousness (body, mind, and spirit). Being more aware of what they need for healing and working on it more consciously, clients will be more confident to face and to overcome psychological challenges. As their confidence grows clients begin to feel freer.

In transpersonal work the experiences of overcoming psychological challenges and growing confidence facilitate clients to identify themselves with new "powerful selves" rather than their weaker and more limited selves. Our transpersonal experiences not only expand our consciousness but also often lead to spiritual development. That is why spiritual practices, which may range from meditation to yoga to "mindful" biking are important to transpersonal therapists. Guided and focused practice is foundational for the transpersonal therapist. They also need to support clients' spiritual development when it happens in transpersonal work.

Where does Transpersonal Work Lead Clients in Therapy?

Transpersonal work facilitates the development of consciousness and gradually allows the transcendence of psychological challenges. In my experience clients engaged in transpersonal work have become more skilful in discovering the root of their suffering through awareness. Their ability to overcome difficulties strengthens as their consciousness unfolds. As a result clients realize that continuing their transpersonal paths is key to maintaining their wellbeing. Transpersonal work is an ongoing process, which eventually the clients are able to practice on their own. I have observed lives being enriched with freedom as their consciousness expands on the levels of body, mind, and spirit. 🌳

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