

Are You Making A Hell Of Heaven?

by

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Somewhere in England during the 1600's, the poet John Milton, in his epic Paradise Lost, stated, through the voice of his character Satan, "the mind is its own place and, in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." I can think of no better nor more eloquent statement to summarize the teachings of Cognitive Therapy. Cognitive Therapy acknowledges that the mind is a powerful place; it operates on the premise that our thinking is the precursor to moods and emotions, both heavenly and hellish. It is not the outer event that makes us feel any particular way but how we interpret and evaluate that event that makes us feel happy or sad, depressed or joyful, frightened or safe, energized or lethargic.

Basically, our thinking (i.e., our mind), determines whether or not we feel as though we are in heaven or hell. We could be in the middle of a snowstorm, cold and wet, and feel as though we are in heaven – or hell. Likewise, we could be on a tropical beach walking along a white sandy beach during sunset totally depressed – or elated. It depends so much on the workings of our mind. The underpinnings of Cognitive Therapy, now referred to as Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), go back a long, long way. Phrases such as the Christian based "as a man thinketh, so is he" and the Buddhist based "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world," predate modern CBT. CBT is actually an outgrowth of Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), now referred to as Rational Emotive-Behavior Therapy (REBT). RET became popularized in the mid 1950's by Dr. Albert Ellis whose classic book A Guide to Rational Living outlined the basic tenets of RET. Today, scores of books are available on this subject. Considering that CBT/REBT is considered one of the most effective non-chemical treatments of depression and anxiety, it's worth some investigations. A great deal of literature on the subject is available freely on the Internet.

Essentially, CBT/REBT lays out several fundamental faults in thinking which can easily cause a person to feel depressed, anxious, frightened, frustrated or angry, to name a few of the more common negative emotions. Through awareness of these faulty patterns of thinking, which are often well established in the mind from years of repetition, change can begin. Once a person becomes aware of these irrational thoughts, they can be challenged and changed to more reasonable, realistic patterns of internal dialogue, referred to as "self talk." Everyone engages in self-talk. It is as normal as breathing.

The problem is the content of our self talk. We are often terribly unaware of what we are telling ourselves. Self talk occurs subconsciously and quite rapidly. Unbeknownst to the conscious mind, our self talk can be excessively demeaning, demanding, degrading and downright mean. The result is often depression, or anger, or sadness, or frustration. Self talk

can even prompt a person into violence. In fact, many domestic violence prevention classes throughout the nation base their curriculum on CBT/REBT information. Self talk isn't the only culprit in creating our moods and emotions. We also think in pictures. Self talk is often the generator of mental images which also cause us to feel, and act.

Mental pictures can make us feel happy or sad, motivated or apathetic, depressed or highly expressive, heavenly or hellish. Mental pictures can prompt us into action with an effectiveness equal to repetitive television commercials. Taken together, our self talk and our mental pictures are largely responsible for how we see the world, how we see ourselves, how we behave, what goals and dreams we have, how we engage in relationships, how we deal with failures, setbacks and obstacles in our life....basically, how we live – and who we think we are. Self talk and mental pictures create our self image, our self concept. Counselors and therapists aren't the only ones who work with this information. Highly successful individuals are keenly aware of how important self talk and mental pictures are to performance. Top notch sales and marketing executives and athletes around the world spend a great deal of money attending workshops and seminars all about improving their ability to use self talk (often referred to as “affirmations”) and their mental pictures (referred to as “visualization”) to enhance performance and build a more positive self image. Because CBT/REBT is such basic mental health information, it really should be part of all high school curriculums. But, for the most part, it is not.

Unfortunately, most young adults, when they graduate from high school, don't know how to use their most human asset: language. Specifically, the kind of language we use on ourselves, the kind of language that goes on inside the mind, beneath the surface, out of sight and yet extremely potent in its ability to determine our moods and our behaviors. Anyone can begin to learn about this field of psychology as a practical matter. It is one of the more respected and well researched areas of “self-help.” There is ample information readily available. Counselors and therapists in every area are versed in this “theory” and ought to be able to work with any client who requests CBT/REBT as it relates to their specific issues be it relationship issues, grief or loss, addictions, depression or anxiety, panic attacks, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders or any number of psychosomatic ailments. Even those who suffer from purely biological diseases can benefit from CBT/REBT because how we think about our illness can compound the illness – or can help heal the illness. CBT/REBT also works very well in the relatively new field of email based online counseling which is more geared towards thoughtful written expressions and replies - all through email.

Online counseling is anonymous, generally bypasses the rapport building, the beating around the bush and the resistance so common in face-to-face counseling and often provides in-depth, detailed information which can be re-read and re-viewed at the client's leisure. Online counseling is also not bound by appointments, driving time, parking spaces and the “50 minute” hour. It is very flexible and accommodating.

Future articles will focus on the specifics of CBT/REBT providing basic information and instructions on how to apply this model of personal growth from dealing with negative emotions and a poor self image to improving relationships and achieving goals.

You can find more of these articles at
http://www.openmindcounseling.com/articles_library.htm