

Breakout Session: The language of Connection

I have come to understand that connection is a basic human need. We yearn for connection, we seek it, and we hurt when it fails. A connection may be broken, lost, or simply not yet made. But all suffering begins with the experience of disconnection.

As a psychotherapist, when I confront the suffering of my clients, it is vital for me to remember this. I need to remember that our exploration together is in the service of connection: in finding ways to connect in a world that promotes isolation, tolerates cruelty, and encourages fear. A world where finding one's truth, one's passion and one's path becomes lost in chaos and coldness. Living in such a world, finding a way through our suffering, coming to terms with ourselves, these are the paths to connection. In connection we can find self-acceptance, love, and meaning. In connection we can find hope for ourselves and the floundering world around us.

A psychotherapeutic relationship can facilitate our lost ability to connect. In a psychotherapeutic relationship, it is okay to flounder, to examine the person we are in relation to another, without judgment, but rather with encouragement. We can let go of defenses, of walls and fears that imprison us and deny us self-understanding, clarity, and the ability to develop satisfying relationships. We can discover ourselves.

We cannot empathize with others without first empathizing with ourselves and recognizing our right to be whole, to heal, to a life of meaning and the pursuit of happiness. Sometimes this means rejecting a destructive individual outright, disarming them, taking them down, drawing a line in the sand, saying no, giving voice to our very legitimate anger. In drawing this metaphorical line in the sand, we create the opportunity to connect. In saying no, we open the door to yes. We are holding ourselves in high value, in high esteem, and accepting no less from others.

Oftentimes we logically equate our suffering with external circumstances. And when we are hurt by others, this is indeed the case. But as strange as it may seem, destructive acts are an attempt to connect. Destructive behavior arises from a suffering we cannot fathom. Destructive individuals have cut themselves off from their humanity and of the humanity of others. They are lost, desperate, fearful, terrified at their isolation, and so further lash out, hoping someone will hear the abandoned, terrified crying child. I am not the first to say this and I reiterate, as others have before me, that recognizing the suffering of another from a place of compassion does not equal condoning or even forgiving the hurtful behavior. It merely provides perspective.

With this perspective, we can choose to accept this attempt, to embrace it. We can show one another that it is possible to have the connection we seek without being destructive. What if we could lovingly accept each person's attempt to connect, however it is expressed, take it in into ourselves, experience it as an opportunity to enrich our own lives? Can we not reject destructive values, words and actions without rejecting the suffering and isolated person? Do we not have so much to offer one another, and do we not deprive ourselves when we reject the attempt of another to connect? What if we could see in each interaction the reaching-out of another, a call for love and compassion, and offer it up generously? What kind of world we have then? And how rich would our lives be?

This is a tall order, and surely not the first time such a question has been asked, especially in the times in which we live. There is no hope for this if we do not begin with ourselves. With self-compassion, self-empathy, self-value, and a commitment to our own healing. When we realize that we deserve it, we will realize that others do as well, whoever they are.

How we talk to each other, the choice to communicate rather than label, to empower rather than assume, is essential in achieving these goals. This is difficult, because the mental health system is set up to name behavior before and even instead of engaging with the individual in question. We have our own special language. Manipulative, attention seeking, delusional. Words that appear clinical, but in fact create rigidity and separation and thus, in my view, undermine healing and recovery, of which the cornerstone is connection. Our breakout session will be a discussion on how we can reflect these values in our work and our communication with clients and with one another. Please bring examples of difficult conversations.

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