

A short comment on Ed Ford's therapy

Unedited posts from archives of CSG-L (see INTROCSG.NET):

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[From Bill Powers 930430.0600 MST]

Either I woke up dumber this morning or several people on the net woke up smarter yesterday. Some really illuminating posts today!

Rick Marken (940329.0930) --

Your discussion of changing perceptions was also illuminating. I wish I had thought of the "within perception" and "across perception" way of putting it.

Ed Ford is really talking (in one context) about the "within perception" idea, which does not require reorganization, but the change he is advocating relies on accumulating new experiences, not on either forcing another person to behave differently or hallucinating the other person behaving differently. This is what his use of "Quality Time" means. Ed advocates making a plan for spending considerable amounts of time with another person doing things pleasing to both of you. The result of this is to build up a store of memories in which you can legitimately and without hallucinating perceive the other person as being pleasant and good to be with.

Not being a theoretician, Ed doesn't dwell on why this works. We who like to explain things before we can bring ourselves to do them, however, can see that there are two processes going on. First, in order to make a plan for a new way of behaving, the person MUST move up a level. It is necessary to look AT the reference signals that normally operate automatically and determine how you are behaving. The only way to look AT a reference signal is to occupy the next level up -- which also happens to be the level where you must be to CHANGE a reference signal consciously. To make a plan for quality time, two people must move up a level enough to change the normal routine behaviors that are simply playing out the conflicts that are causing the problems. Instead of coming home, flipping on the TV and opening a beer under the mutely resentful glare of your wife (which will soon cease to be mute), you think "Oh, yeah, we made this plan, didn't we, and Ed is going to ask if we actually did it. Uh, honey, uh, should we try that going for a walk thing?"

Going for a walk, if both people actually enjoy it, will start building up memories of pleasant association with the other person; I think Ed is right about that. But to my mind, the most important thing has already happened by the time the walk begins: the people involved have somehow managed to move their awarenesses to the level where they can change the routine reference signals that normally run their lives -- the plans they are already carrying out. You can't flip on the TV and open a beer, and at the same time be going for a walk. Ed makes a big deal about commitment to a plan. A plan isn't just a good intention; it's something you promise Ed to do, and promise your wife to do, promise yourself to do. The biggest step is making the commitment, because to really make it you have to be working at the level that can actually alter the plan under which you're already working.

So Ed's approach is actually a sneaky way of getting people to move up a level. It isn't the particular new plan that matters; what matters is being in a position from which you can actually change plans. Ed has a way of doing that. There are probably lots of other ways, but Ed's way has one great advantage: he's actually doing it with real people.

The same goes for prioritizing. Ed never tells people what priorities to choose, which goal to place before others in importance. He just persuades them to consider the conflicting goals, and to assign some sort of relative importance to them. Sneaky, again. In order to do that, where must the person be operating from? Obviously, from a level where the various (now lower-level) goals can be observed! And that is also the level from which they can consciously be changed. As long as you're working at the level that is governed by those goals, all you can do is experience the conflict. Only from a higher level can you alter the goals and resolve the conflict.

Again, "prioritizing" is just one way of doing this. What matters is being in a position to consider the goals together. You might actually alter the goal-settings, or replace some goals with others. But the important thing about telling people to prioritize is that it does get people to go up a level, and Ed is actually getting them to do this and not just talking about it.

Of course all this requires reorganization, which is random and unpredictable in its effects. Reorganization is not under conscious control; it simply starts when errors are big. So you have to learn to allow errors to be felt. If you recognize that reorganization is unpredictable, you won't expect it to work the first time. You'll learn to recognize the symptoms of random change, and to stick with it until finally something better turns up, whatever it may be. When you make a new plan, or re-prioritize, you may generate a lot of new conflicts. So you keep changing plans and re-prioritizing, pretty much at random, until the new conflicts go away, as eventually they will. Then you will slobber all over Ed thanking him for the wonderful things you have actually done for yourself. As Ed will tell you.

Best to all, Bill P.