

2. Qualities of the CFFT Therapist

The CFFT therapist must be able to embody qualities of sensitivity, empathy, and attunement to other's feelings, while being authentic, direct, and not afraid of telling the truth as she sees it. She is a model for the family of being comfortable in herself, taking risks, valuing depth in communication, and seeing the humor and the paradoxes of being human. In CFFT, the therapist, as well as the family, continues to grow, thus making the work alive and exciting for both.

Authenticity

Since authentic interpersonal involvement is so crucial to this approach, the therapist models her own authentic expression of feelings with the family. Although sometimes taking charge of the sessions in a very “expert” way, the therapist does her best to create a balance between her therapeutic role and that of an “I-thou” relationship (2) with family members. She is not afraid to reveal her own feelings at appropriate times.

The therapist invites people to be *themselves*, by being *herself*. Rather than inappropriate self-disclosure, the therapist is attempting to be genuine about how she is feeling in the moment. This helps to create a container wherein self-exploration among family members is made more possible. By promoting authenticity and self-expressiveness in the family members and within the therapist herself, this model helps to free clients from rigid family rules and roles, and allows them to become more expansive in the ways they can interact with each other. Bringing her own energy and personality into the work, the therapist can be a source of inspiration and a model for the family members. With each new family, a new relationship is forged so that the therapist, as well as the family members, never stop growing. Being with families in this way keeps the work alive, fresh, exciting, and growthful. The therapist learns *with* her clients so that “burn-out” is less likely to occur. As in many other experiential therapies, such as Gestalt, CFFT is based on the idea that human growth is achieved through the quality of contact we have with others.

Focus on the Core

CFFT has been described as “going for the love” or looking for the feelings beneath the words. One assumption of this method is that love, or the desire to connect, is often a common feeling underlying many kinds of family interactions, and that a great deal of pain and suffering has gotten in the way of individual family members feeling and expressing that love for one another. Typically, families avoid talking about the issues that have come between them and that is a primary reason why they are experiencing conflict.

In CFFT, the therapist attempts to find these common desires for connection between family members and to point them out. She helps to build bridges where communication has broken down, by encouraging each family member to get to a deeper and more vulnerable place in himself or herself and in relation to the other. Healing can only come from a place of honesty and vulnerability, which is the basis of this approach. Family members are often awestruck when they discover their own heretofore hidden truths and express them to their loved ones.

Thus, the goal of CFFT is to help each family member communicate honestly and directly with one another, from their hearts as well as their heads. The therapist is trying to create an environment where the family members can hear each other, get things off their chests, communicate directly, and express themselves more fully than they have been able to do before. The hope is that by expressing their core fears and longings to one another in a deeply honest and connected way, the family members

can start to rebuild their feelings of trust for one another and will eventually be able to have more joy, aliveness, spontaneity, and depth in their relationships. This transformation can be seen to occur even in deeply dysfunctional families.

Truth

On the other hand, the CFFT therapist is also “going for the truth.” She is not afraid to be frank, to say what she sees going on in the family, and to call the dynamics as she sees them. Her candor about this impacts family members with a sense of their core interpersonal truths in the family. This, in turn, evokes vulnerable emotional states that allow for significant healing to occur in the moment. When the unspoken rules are finally spoken, the stagnant relationships uncovered, and the triangulations exposed, family members are able to engage with one another with a newfound freedom that would have been impossible before. In essence, the therapist is helping to **empower** family members to be their **whole selves** in relation to those closest to them.

While some schools of family therapy focus on rebuilding love among family members and others focus on therapists being more candid and/or confrontational, CFFT tries to incorporate both of these aspects of therapy, the yin and the yang. Thus, the CFFT therapist must be capable of having deep empathy and compassion for family members and, out of this compassion, be able to speak her truth as she sees it. Having natural grace in being direct is a helpful quality for the CFFT therapist to embody. Hopefully,

through her modeling of this wholeness in her communications with them, family members can learn to be both loving and truthful with one another.

Empathy

By definition, empathy is “the capacity for participating in another’s feelings or thoughts.” The German word for empathy, *emfuehlung*, means “feeling into.” The CFFT therapist feels into the feelings and ideas of the family members. She intentionally lets her boundaries become a bit more permeable with a view to letting in and soaking up just a little bit of each one of the family members with whom she is communicating. She needs to sense what each member is trying to express and ask questions or reflect their words in such a way that they feel heard and understood by her. Once this happens, the family member feels validated and can begin to express his core feelings and ideas to other members, with the eventual goal of relating empathically with one another without the therapist there to guide them.

Sensitivity and Attunement

The therapist using CFFT must have a high level of sensitivity to the feeling states of the individuals in the family, and to the energy of the family as a whole. She enters the session with an openness of heart and mind, and allows the family to present whatever in that moment needs to be the focus and potential

catalyst for change. The therapist working in this model is a verbal minimalist, speaking only when necessary. She is not there to take center stage, but observes carefully what is happening with the family until her interventions are needed and can be utilized in the best way possible.

Listening to Language

One way that the CFFT therapist picks up on the feeling states of the family members is by listening very closely to their use of language. Oftentimes a member will start to say something to another member and then fear will obstruct the flow of what he has begun to say. He may start to backpedal or sugarcoat what he is saying or go off on another tangent. Those are times when the therapist can take him back to his original statement by just uttering the last word he said before going in another direction. This gentle kind of intervention can help steer the family member back to the feeling he was expressing before the fear took over and help him to take the risk that he had spontaneously begun to take. The existential psychotherapist, Clark Moustakas, put it this way:

Words invite us to enter into the life of another and create new directions for our own living. Language lifts out and delivers over what would otherwise remain hidden. It makes possible liberation of thoughts and feelings, and frees one from habits and relationships that interfere with self-fulfillment. Language discloses the way things are and reveals what has been concealed.

While empathy, sensitive attunement, and listening are listed separately here, in reality they are all interrelated. Thus, if one is sensitively attuned and listens attentively, he is then in a position to “feel into,” or empathize with, what is going on for the client.

Humor

Because family therapy can be a frightening endeavor for most families to engage in, it is important that the sessions allow for some humor to balance out the seriousness of the situation. As the therapist and family get to know each other better, they will discover the extent to which humor, lightness, or playfulness can be a part of the sessions. It is important for all to keep in mind that even though the family is experiencing some difficult times, they are still capable of keeping their perspective, and that laughing together at certain moments can be very healing as well. As Bugenthal has described, “Humor in sessions is not a product of conscious intent to be funny on the part of the therapist (or the family members) but grows out of their serious and total involvement with the task at hand. Genuine humor comes out of a deeper fountain of being in touch with the paradoxes and surprises of life.” (4)

Analytical Mind

Because much of family therapy is detective work, it helps for the CFFT therapist to have an analytical mind. It is important to be

able to quickly grasp the various dynamics in the family and to verbalize them when it is appropriate to do so. Much of this work is done in short-term settings, so the sooner the therapist has an idea of what may be going on in the family, the sooner she can test out this hypothesis with them. The nature of family therapy is such that there is a great deal to pay attention to in any given moment. Having a facility with creating and exploring hypotheses about the family's dynamics will stand her in good stead using this method, as she will be quicker to sort out what may seem to be a very chaotic situation.