PsycHealth

BOYD & associates
PSYCHOLOGISTS & COUNSELLORS
www.boydcounselling.com

Volume 33 **Spring 2024**

Boyd & Associates serving the community for 42 years.

No Bones About It: Dogs are good for our health, even in the therapy room!

Jean-Claude Bazinet, M.A., R.C.C.

"Please bring him back if you can, he makes such a positive difference," a client says to me at the end of the hour, much to my surprise, after the unexpected addition of my dog to a therapy session. This happened already ten years ago; I didn't have time to return home after a visit to the vet, and rather than leave the dog in the car alone, I had asked my clients if, exceptionally, I could keep my little dog in the room. Little did I know then that this would be the start of a new way of working, in tandem, and that my little dog, Leo, and later his successor, Yumi, would be of such service to countless clients, as well as lightening up the waiting area and the general atmosphere of our workplace.

But why bring a dog into a therapy office, one might ask? How could it contribute to the smooth flow of a session or to the well-being of a client (and therapist)? Questions, in fact, I had asked myself when I did an internship at Shaughnessy Hospital in the early 90s, after I'd noticed the presence of a small dog in the office of an older psychiatrist, but without further thinking about it until Leo first joined me in session. What Leo and Yumi were about to make me realize was that, indeed, the presence of an animal in a therapist's office has many advantages.

For one thing, a dog brings a sense of calm to a session. He's not at all preoccupied with what's going on around him. For him, the office is a second home where

continued on page 3

Boyd & Associates Counselling Inc.
202 - 1046 Austin Avenue, Coquitlam, BC V3K 3P3
www.boydcounselling.com/www.psychealth.com

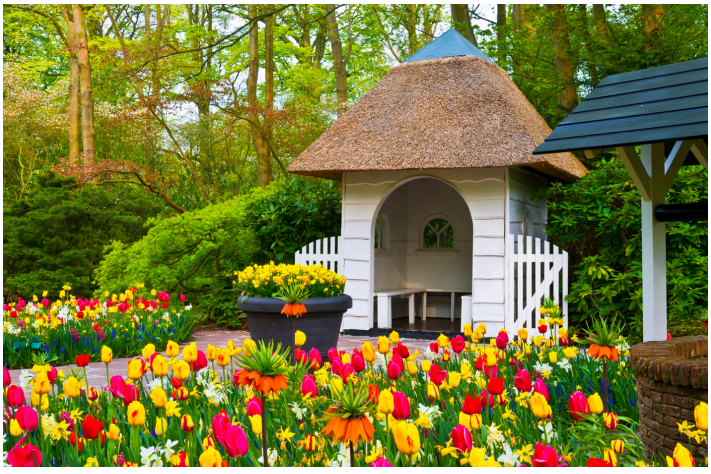
The High Cost of Disconnection

Nancy Michel, M.A., R.Psych.

An attractive 16 year old girl was describing how hard it was for her to go to school each day. She complained that while she had two friends at school, neither was in any of her classes. I suggested that this gave her an opportunity to reach out and make some casual connections with her classmates. She opposed the idea of even saying hi to a classmate, telling me that, "No one does that". When, in the past, a teen has resisted the suggestion of initiating a friendly gesture with a peer they didn't already know, I tended to interpret their reticence as a reflection of their own social anxiety. However, this recent conversation happened on the heels of a session with a 15 year old boy from a different high school who had just told me essentially the same thing, ie that "No one does that". Suddenly I *heard* what these students were saying!

A few days later I was able to run this by a few high school teachers I know. My nephew, a senior high science teacher, verified what my two teen clients had described. He told me that he was so concerned about the lack of connection he was observing among his students that he promised 5%, and then changed that to a 10%, increase in their final mark to any student

continued on page 2



The High Cost of Disconnection *continued from front cover*

who learned the names of all their classmates. While my nephew is passionate about teaching chemistry to his students, he recognised that it was even more important that his students learned how to connect socially.

Another astute 16 year old client shared her own observation that almost all of her classmates were "glued to their phones" while waiting for classes to start. She compared the phone to a security blanket, whereby one could "look" connected (rather than "needy") while, at the same time, avoid the awkwardness of connecting with those around them. It occurred to me that this apparent lack of connection among classmates would presumably make the classroom feel far less personal, less inviting and more intimidating than the high school classrooms I remember.

It seems that the university scene is not dissimilar. My conversations with college-aged clients have revealed how risky it feels to many students to connect with new acquaintances. One professor noted how subdued the university dining hall seems today compared to her own student years when the cafeteria was full of noise and activity. She observed that today almost all students were engaged on their screens rather than with peers sitting around them. Her observations are noteworthy in light of recent research findings showing that 60% of college students were feeling "very lonely most of the time". While connecting with others from a range of backgrounds, interests and ideas has been understood to be an invaluable opportunity of higher education, it appears that many students are graduating from university not having enjoyed this invaluable benefit.

Social connections span a range of relationships, from casual acquaintances to intimate friendships, and there is ample research showing how significantly all forms of social connection impact our overall wellbeing. Social connection is understood to be more important than nutrition, exercise or sleep to the quality of our lives, and to be critical to both our physical and mental health. The percentage of people reporting loneliness and depression is alarmingly high; this is true for all age groups, and for teens and young adults in particular. Loneliness has been declared to be a "global public health concern" by the World Health Organization, and chronic loneliness is understood to be more detrimental to one's health than smoking 12 cigarettes a day! Restrictions and isolation during Covid clearly interfered with the opportunity to practice social connection. Social anxiety, described most simply as fear of being negatively judged by others, and already at epidemic levels among adolescents prior to Covid, increased dramatically during the pandemic. One recent study found that 25% of women aged 15-24 years described suffering with social phobia during 2022. We know that social anxiety is most effectively addressed by taking action; that is, practicing the very prosocial actions that seem simply daunting.

Social connection is understood to be more important than nutrition, exercise or sleep to the quality of our lives, and to be critical to both our physical and mental health.

Awareness of the benefits of social connection to our overall wellbeing as well as acknowledging the costs of isolation and loneliness can be a starting point.

Awareness of the benefits of social connection to our overall wellbeing as well as acknowledging the costs of isolation and loneliness can be a starting point. Taking steps towards more frequent and meaningful social engagement promises huge advantages to our mental and physical health, including our mood and sense of wellbeing. In addition, there are significant benefits to those to whom we reach and even to those who simply observe the prosocial actions of others! What often gets in the way of our reaching out to those around us has been aptly described as "the awkward start-up cost", that is, the sense of anxiety and or risk we feel in connecting with someone we don't already know. It is always helpful to remind ourselves that, for almost everyone, being acknowledged, even with a simple "hi" from another is a positive and even heart-warming experience.

Highly recommended podcast- Feel Better Live More, with Dr Rangan Chatterjee #410 The Life Changing Power of Connecting with Others. Dec 2023

7 Tips to Help You Process Tough Emotions

David Lindskoog, M.A., R.C.C.

What exactly does it mean to "process your feelings?" It is certainly very common advice, and generally we tend to believe this to be true - identifying our emotions and expressing them in healthy ways is an important part of healthy human emotional development. But what exactly does this entail? How do we avoid simply stewing unproductively, getting stuck in painful feelings, or avoiding them altogether?

While no single approach will work for everyone, therapists have been processing the issue of how to help others process for as long as the profession has existed. Dr. Les Greenberg, co-creator of Emotion-Focused Therapy and previous director of the Emotion-Focused Therapy Clinic at York University, is a leader in the study of emotions and their value in therapy. In his book "Changing Emotion with Emotion" he provides an overview of the seven ingredients research tells us are needed for emotional processing to be productive, allowing us to gain something valuable from those painful feelings. Here are some tips!

1.Attend to the feeling. This is about becoming more aware of the emotion through the precious resource of attention. Pay attention to the feeling. What do you notice about it? What sensations, thoughts, images, or words come to mind?

2. Symbolize the feeling. Most commonly this is done with words, and why I and many other therapists constantly recommend journaling. But many find that forms of creative expression such as art, music, or movement work better for them. This can add valuable meaning to the feeling.

3. Be congruent. Now is not the time for sarcasm or nervous laughter. Try to match your mannerisms and non-verbal communication to the feeling you're having. If you are sad, try to keep a sad face and voice. If you are angry, put some assertive energy into your voice and posture. This helps you stay with the feeling long enough for it to be productive.

4. Accept the feeling. Acceptance is a very big and complex topic. But the old rhyme "you can't grieve what you can't believe" stands true. Painful emotions are difficult to accept, but try to assume the feeling is there to tell you something important.

5. Stay regulated. You need to maintain some distance from the feeling itself in order to process it effectively. Being overwhelmed is not productive, after all. Think of emotions as information, like a warning light on your car's dashboard turning on. You are not your emotions – you are the space and place where they happen.

6. Be an active agent. While you may not have chosen this feeling, you don't have to be a passive victim to it. Take responsibility for your feeling, and look at it as a personal experience, rather than something by external circumstance. Taking ownership of your feelings helps you to challenge the belief that you can be "taken over" by them.

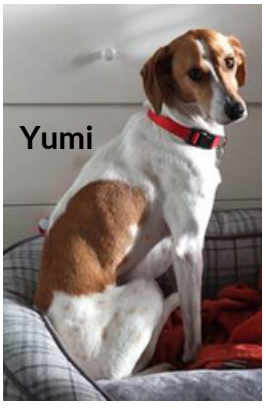
7. Encourage differentiation over time. Emotions are highly and frequently changing inner experiences. Try not to become "stuck" in one part of the emotional experience. Rather, be curious about how the feeling shifts and new aspects emerge as you explore it. You may be pleasantly surprised!

All of the above assumes that your feelings are what therapists call "primary adaptive emotions" – that is, that they make sense given the situation you are in. Sometimes, this is really difficult to tell! So don't beat yourself up if these don't work out for you every time. In the end, you may not come to a grand insight or major sense of relief from following these steps, but this is a skill that can be practiced and refined. And if you or someone you care about could use some help with that skill – well, I may know a therapist or two who could help with that….

Reference: Greenberg, L., (2021). Changing Emotion With Emotion: A Practitioner's Guide. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000248-000

No Bones About It *continued from front cover*

his master seems to have many friends, and he looks forward to seeing them, especially as most of them seem to return on a regular basis! This has a relaxing effect, both for the client, who is delighted to see a welcoming animal again, and for the therapist, who begins the session on a positive note. What's more, a dog can have a particularly acute sense of human distress. How many times have I seen one of my dogs approach a client at a particularly difficult time, sometimes jumping on the couch and cuddling up to him or her (and sometimes even slipping between two partners who were particularly tense!).



For some, the simple act of stroking an animal can prompt the brain to release mood-boosting hormones such as serotonin and oxytocin, helping to improve overall mood and feel a sense of relief, which can be particularly important when dealing with the impact of trauma, chronic stress or emotional turmoil in one's life. And to end on a positive note, to my surprise, in the last ten years, not once has a client complained about the presence of an animal in the therapy room, proving that the age-old adage that a dog is a person's best friend is probably true for most of us.

Boomer Upgraade

Denis Boyd, M.A., R.Psych.

Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1965) are entering into their "winter years" and in the process are facing a variety of stressors which they may not know how to manage. Mis-managed stress (distress) can contribute to a variety of mental and physical health challenges.

When Boomers were children and young adults, the popular method for dealing with difficult issues was to push the feelings away and to move on. They were not encouraged to acknowledge their upset. If they did try to share their sadness or worry, they were often labeled "weak" or "suffering from nerves."

We now know so much more about the destructive side effects of burying distress. Many illnesses have been linked to accumulated stress and this is explained very well in, "When the Body Says No - The Cost of Hidden Stress" by Dr. Gabor Maté.

The time has come for an "upgrade" in the way we manage the stressors/losses in our lives. Stuffing emotions away leads to a build-up and an eventual "explosion." It is as if we are human "pressure cookers" and when we load up to our personal limit, significant problems can arise.

When I ask clients what they currently do to manage the stress in their lives, they generally tell me what they did in the past or what they plan to do in the future. Most of them do not have any sort of stress alleviation "program" apart from exercising or engaging in a variety of distractions. Exercise and distractions certainly have a place, but they don't tend to lead to a marked release of pent-up feelings.

An essential part of the upgrade for managing stress requires an "attitude change" related to the emotional side of our lives. We need to move from denial and avoidance to a willingness to experiment with acceptance and the sharing of feelings.

A stress management upgrade involves developing a couple of "outlets" for the day-to-day distress we encounter and internalize; we need to release by sharing it in some way.

There are two simple outlets for distress: one is to write about our feelings and the second is to talk about them. These ideas are difficult to embrace in the sense that they are the opposite of what many of us have been taught to do in the past. It may seem awkward and strange to consider sharing our inmost feelings, but this discomfort will eventually pass, and the benefits of this release will become apparent.

Writing to a friend or keeping a journal can both be effective means for relieving stress, as long as there is a focus on feelings, and not only on activities. Some of us are more comfortable expressing their upset in an email, others in a journal; both are valid and effective.

Clients generally come to their counselling session with a burden of upset related to any number of situations. When I listen attentively, acknowledge possible feelings and refrain from jumping in right away to give advice, my client relaxes and often will leave our session much more at ease, often commenting on how different they feel.

Sharing one's journey and its impact with another person can be particularly valuable as we often may not discern what we feel about a given situation. An empathic (emotionally focused) listener can help us to tune into ourselves. We need to unlearn the impulse to reflexively stuff away emotions which arise during any given day.

Baby Boomers are getting older and with aging come a variety of life changes related to health and community. Friends become ill and die and grief becomes a frequent visitor. Grief and distress are very similar and can be processed in the same upgraded fashion.

There is no need to wait until one is "older" to improve the way we deal with the distress/grief in our lives.