AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF BUDDHIST COUNSELLORS AND
PSYCHOTHERAPISTS

“MINDFULNESS: Theory & Practice for Helping Professionals”
Megan Thorpe

CORE PROCESS PSYCHOTHERAPY

What is Core Process Psychotherapy?
Core Process Psychotherapy is a Buddhist-based approach to psychotherapy which explores our inner process through contemplation and reflection, and bringing awareness to whatever is arising within us. In Core Process work we bring our attention to whatever is happening in the present moment and this is the basis of our exploration of thoughts, feelings, body sensations and responses. The ‘core’ is that part of us which is inherently OK; the part of us which is already enlightened, healthy, whole and free. It is this part which is often obscured by the way we have conditioned and shaped ourselves according to our past experiences.

The aim of Core Process work is not so much to alter our experience, but to bring awareness to it in order that we can begin to see ourselves more clearly, and therefore allow for the possibility of change if that seems appropriate. Through awareness, we are able to respond in a way which brings more creativity and flexibility into our lives.

Core Process Psychotherapy is a joint healing process, where the therapist and client are engaged in exploring the landscape together. While the focus remains firmly on the client and whatever the client brings, the experience is one of both client and therapist working alongside each other. The therapist acts as a witness to the process of the client whilst also remaining in touch with her own experience at any given moment.

Core Process is based within a Buddhist framework which offers us a way to enquire mindfully into our present experience and to gain insights into our lives and how we hold on to our suffering. However, the work itself does not require a commitment to Buddhism, or to any other particular way of thinking. The qualities of compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity form the basis of the work. In Core Process Psychotherapy we are trying to open up the space between the person and the suffering by allowing these qualities to be present alongside whatever difficulties and distress may also be arising.

In Core Process work the emphasis is always on what is arising in the present moment. There is no attachment to an outcome, no problem to be solved, no
thing to be realised; just attention drawn to what is happening now. Underlying everything is the belief that true healing is only possible to the extent that we can be present without judgement in our immediate experience. The key role of the therapist is to help the client bring their attention back to the present moment. Some useful questions which seem to help this process are very simple. "What's happening?" and "How is that for you?" are highly effective in bringing the client back to their own body and their own moment by moment experience. It is this contact with the client's own bodily experience in the present which leads the way to understanding more about what has happened in the past and is a key to opening up the possibility that change could occur in the future.

One of the strengths of Core Process is this way of bringing awareness to the body, as opposed to staying with intellectual processes and rational mind. While there is always a place for using our cognitive skills, it can be very easy to become trapped into explaining, rationalising and articulating in a way that is detached from feeling. By staying with what is happening in the body I am able to access my feelings more easily and be more fully with my experience, instead of talking 'about' it.

Core Process work uses the idea of the 'felt sense', a term coined by Eugene Gendlin, to bring attention to the body sensations and to try to get a handle on what is happening in the body. Another technique used is that of following the breath to bring awareness to body sensations and to allow the space to see what is going on underneath the level of mind chatter, which is usually so present on the surface. Mindfulness of the breath can be a way of deepening into what is happening and a way of slowing down the client's experience if it seems there is fear of the client being lost in it or overwhelmed by it.

The relationship between the client and the therapist is crucial in Core Process Psychotherapy. The quality of presence that the therapist brings to the therapeutic encounter is paramount. This is being able to be present to our own process as it arises and to be in contact with the client wherever they may be, and wherever their process takes them at any given time. This means offering full awareness as much as we are able. The intention is to remain open to the whole of whatever the client is communicating, and knowing when it is not possible to do this. The therapist follows her own process while staying focused on the client. This involves ways of listening, and giving attention that allows a special quality of relating to arise. It means listening from the fullness of my human condition to the fullness of another's.

This quality of relating is a key factor in the therapeutic relationship. The role of the therapist is to support the client and enable the client's process to unfold. If the therapist is truly working with the client there is no conflict of
interests, no steering the client along a particular path which the therapist feels should be explored. There is, instead, listening with all of our attention, reflecting back our perception of what is happening, awareness of our own experience in this process, and through this developing a relationship of trust, support, exploration and a willingness to see things as they are.

Transformation in Core Process work comes through acknowledging one's own experience, accepting it with compassion and understanding; allowing space around it and feeling it for what it is - an experience of self, but not the whole self. Knowing there is more and reminding ourselves that at the very heart of us is the unconditioned state of perfect wholeness, peace and love. Integration is possible when all of this is incorporated into our every day life and our experience of living at a day to day level, with all that entails. "Psychotherapy aims only to release the client into a fuller sense of their aliveness in the world. It is life that is the spiritual journey, and psychotherapy is only a small part of this."¹

Who Founded Core Process Psychotherapy?
Core Process Psychotherapy was developed by Maura Sills, who was born and educated in Edinburgh, Scotland. She came into psychotherapy through occupational therapy, specialising in psychiatry and work with people with addictions. She taught in England and the USA, and later ran a therapeutic community for former psychiatric patients. During the 1970’s she trained in Post-Reichian and Gestalt Therapies, and did intensive training at the Esalen Institute in California. During this time she was also exploring eastern spiritual traditions and became a Buddhist nun under the Most Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw of Burma, and trained in Buddhist studies and meditation practices. This profoundly affected her outlook on therapeutic process, and her work moved toward a synthesis, which became known as Core Process Psychotherapy.

In 1979 she was joined by Franklyn Sills, who brought with him a deep knowledge of Buddhist psychology and bodywork therapies. He was a Buddhist monk with the same teacher, and had training in western and Ayurvedic medicine, Polarity Therapy and Cranio-sacral Therapy. In 1980 they founded the Karuna Institute in Devon, England and together have been developing ways of integrating the psychotherapeutic and spiritual aspects of the work. The Karuna Institute offers professional training in Core Process Psychotherapy and compatible healing arts.

FURTHER READING:

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