

Can Psychoanalysis Make You Smarter?

By Lawrence D. Blum, M.D.

No therapy claims to make people smarter, but I wouldn't be surprised if sometimes psychoanalysis does just that. To be smart it helps to know things. Yet while infants are born with ample curiosity, as they mature into children and adults, there are many things they prefer not to know. Conflicts between curiosity on the one hand, and anxieties and guilts about knowing on the other hand, are an inevitable part of growing up. Psychoanalytic therapies are those treatments in which the therapist's job is to help people face what they have repressed and what they don't want to know.

The Old Testament is one of the foundational texts of western civilization, and one of the first things it attempts to establish is that one shouldn't be curious about or know certain things. The forbidden fruit is forbidden knowledge, and, especially, the Bible makes clear, it is sexual knowledge. In fact the Bible uses the verb "to know" to mean both to understand and engage in sexual intercourse, as though these were one and the same. The story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden is an enduring dramatization of one of the great dilemmas of early childhood: wanting knowledge of sexuality (one's parents' and one's own), along with fear of knowing, and expectation of punishment for it.

Babies, necessarily, are born researchers. Some of their earliest efforts are to distinguish between what is "me" and what is "not me." Transitional objects help with this. Babies are eager to distinguish between male and female, young and old. As children, they want to know

where babies come from and how they themselves came to be. When given honest answers, they often refuse to believe them; fantasy, limited cognitive capacity, and limited tolerance of unpleasant feelings readily trump reality. Mommy and Daddy did no such thing!

In our culture most children who learn about parental sexuality in their first few years manage to forget or repress this knowledge by school age. When there has been excessive exposure to parental bodies and sex, children's repressive efforts can be particularly strenuous and extensive, and normal, essential curiosity, and interest in learning and knowing, can get inhibited or repressed as well. Learning difficulties may then ensue.

Sexual matters, however, are hardly the only things that people don't want to know. There are all kinds of wishes that people become expert at avoiding, not knowing, altering, or reversing. How many of us like to acknowledge (note the word "know" in there) our murderous wishes or our envious feelings? Few adults recognize how much children envy grown-ups and how much of childhood is imbued with death wishes. Children often want to magically dispatch their younger and older siblings, not to mention their parents who tell them it's time for bed or that they can't have more candy. Most of these angry, jealous, murderous wishes get repressed as children grow and become more subject to guilt and more oriented toward reality. But this is why people love violent movies: we get the vicarious gratification of seeing other people carry out so much of our own repressed and disowned nastiness.

For the large majority of people with reasonable control of their behavior, it is not the presence of violent or sexual wishes or angry, lustful, or envious feelings that causes trouble; rather it is the ways that people often deal with these wishes and feelings. They inhibit themselves to make extra-sure not to carry out wishes that they are not even consciously aware of, and unknowingly punish themselves for them. A doctor who is hyper-dedicated to goodness,

tortures himself with excessive worry about his patients (which can lead to subjecting patients to unnecessary procedures), and who drives himself to exhaustion with overwork, may be punishing himself for, and trying to compensate for, long repressed angry death wishes of childhood. Medical smarts need to be accompanied by emotional smarts.

Psychoanalytic work to overcome barriers to knowing may thus make people smarter in an additional way: by raising “emotional IQ.” In psychoanalytic therapies, people get to know their own minds in ways they didn’t imagine, and a frequent unexpected result of this is coming to understand other people better. Learning about one’s own ways of avoiding uncomfortable feelings and unwanted wishes can make it much easier to recognize, and to accept, similar processes in others. It is not a coincidence that psychoanalytically trained psychiatrists have been selected to be deans of medical schools in proportions well beyond their limited numbers. Empathizing with and understanding other people’s personalities and conflicts are as important as understanding molecules or budgets.

For the majority of people in our culture the biggest barrier to knowledge is not the lack of availability of materials with which to learn. Rather, it is the obstacles within ourselves, the hidden anxieties that make us feel disinterested or avoidant, the guilts that make us deny what we know, that are often most limiting. Mind and experience constantly influence brain circuitry. Psychoanalysis will not alter your brain circuits to give you perfect pitch or make you a math whiz. But can psychoanalysis help to break down barriers to connections in one’s mind, and make the mind run with greater ease? Can it make you smarter in ways that are useful? That’s my bet.

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