

The King's Psychotherapy

by Lawrence D. Blum, MD

In *The King's Speech*, Prince Albert gets the royal treatment—by being treated the same as everyone else. Like the commoners who consult Lionel Logue, Prince Albert is helped to confront his avoidances, to tolerate his feelings, and to understand his fears and fantasies. A humane respect for emotional problems may be uncommon among humans but is captivating in this movie that has proved more popular than anyone expected. Albert's good fortune, his path toward emotional liberation, is that his speech therapy incorporates so many features of psychoanalytic therapy.

When Prince Albert turns to Logue for help with his debilitating, humiliating stutter, Logue promptly refuses special requests—house calls—for royalty, insisting on “my house, my rules.” He also makes the provocative demand that he and the prince should

call each other by first names. Logue thus indicates to the prince that he will have to struggle with his shame and anxiety as anyone else would—royalty offers no protection from human emotions. He also immediately shows his patient that the relationship between them is a matter for observation and discussion. This setting of a framework that will allow the therapist and patient to examine and discuss the relationship that develops between them is a fundamental psychoanalytic principle. It gives patients a new window on their own minds and how they relate to other people.

Logue next devotes much effort to showing “Bertie” that his stuttering is aggravated by his anxiety: it is diminished when he is distracted by music, and he has less inhibition of speech when he can curse or sing. This recognition paves the way to help Bertie look more deeply at the substance of



Colin Firth plays King George VI, who, to overcome his stammer, sees Lionel Logue, an unorthodox Australian speech therapist played by Geoffrey Rush.

the emotional struggles that interfere with his speech. In psychoanalysis, this process of clarifying present concerns to reveal more hidden matters is called analyzing defenses or “resistances.” When he has successfully overcome some of his initial objections and feels less ashamed, Bertie can gradually see that as an adult he is continuing the fearful mental battles of his childhood. Bertie then tests out some of his long-suppressed challenges to his old adversaries, his father and brother, in his relationship with his therapist. As Logue tolerates these challenges without being injured and without criticizing or attacking his patient, Bertie starts to feel free to find his own voice.

Unconscious, leftover struggles from childhood influence all of us. The opportunity to play out, observe, and alter them in relation to the therapist is one of the most important contributions of psychoanalysis. If you've ever wondered what psychoanalytic treatments are like, *The King's Speech* provides an unusually good cinematic representation of a psychoanalytic therapy. There's no magic to the iconic couch; the key is what goes on between the two people.

We live in a quick-fix society. We focus on what people do but don't look inside at why they do it. This is the kind of approach—just try to change the behavior—that did not work for Prince Albert and that left

him discouraged about himself and about any prospect for help. But no matter the behavior, it is still wise to remember the mind, with all the complex feelings, thoughts, and emotional conflicts to which humans are subject. Treatments such as the one that helped Bertie require intense emotional involvement and much time. They aren't for everyone, and they don't follow a script. While most therapists are not trained to do them, psychoanalysts are. The royal treatment is still available to those who seek it out.

It is not a coincidence that such an affecting movie as *The King's Speech* depicts a treatment that is so psychoanalytic. No one goes to the movies to watch a formulaic treatment—or a prescription for Prozac. We go to be involved in the full play of human emotions—love, hate, fear, lust, envy, joy, greed, the hidden and forbidden yearnings. Even a stiff-upper-lip royal needs a home for the heart. The final joy of *The King's Speech* is seeing the king's hard-won ability to speak from his heart.

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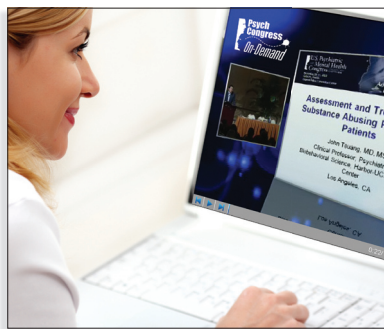
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