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CONTACT HUNGER, THE BEGINNING OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STARVATION

Recently a client of mine told me that she feels starved as a human being—not just hungry, she insisted, but starved. She is trying so desperately to reach out to make genuine and significant contact with others. She is a university student who has become frustrated with superficial relationships on campus and at parties and in her home. Though an able student, she no longer finds much satisfaction in high marks. She's just one of several clients lately who have expressed very similar feelings to me, feelings that have often made me feel uncomfortable without knowing why. I suppose it's because I have denied that these very same feelings exist deep inside me. After all I had been thoroughly taught to "stand on my own feet," to be emotionally independent of others. To need others was somehow to be immature and weak.

To some extent I've come to understand and appreciate the nourishment and comfort of contact within my own family from my wife and two small children. Our four year old daughter has been particularly helpful to me—at least during those times that I have been willing and able to learn things from her! She loves to experience contact of all sorts—physical, emotional, and ideational. She doesn't yet have many of the hangups I have about contact. So far she is delightfully free of interpersonal fear. She's so open, so expressive, and so loving and unafraid of contact. Do contact needs expressed so beautifully in children diminish with age, or are they just not accepted as legitimate or mature needs in adults? It is my contention that to be human is to have deep needs for contact, to become aware of these needs, and to seek to have them satisfied in self and in others in appropriate ways. Unfortunately, reaching out for contact is often beset with so many interpersonal fears that it is safer not to reach out at all, or only within a very restricted number of relationships and even then to a limited extent.

We can make contact with each other in ideational, emotional, and physical ways. Ideational contact tends to be highly rewarded in our society, whereas emotional and physical contact are often seen to be somewhat suspect and to be founded on wrong motivations. Suspicion arises if there are no "logical reasons" for emotional or physical contact. I rather enjoy having the barber cut my hair. In the process he touches my head, and I like having my head touched. And the barber has a "logical reason" for touching my head, so all is safe!

I am coming to realize that in the past many of my clients have reached

out to me in hesitation and fear, but I have been too afraid and too "professional" to reach back. Somehow it has been a lot safer for me to be an "expert" than to be a "person." I guess to be a person means to be unafraid of myself and unafraid of the other person as well; to be able to take some risks in relating, and to use careful judgment at the same time. I'm not sure yet what this is all about but believe that I'm learning gradually. The reaching out process probably differs somewhat from person to person, and it may be that it will never be described in detail. The complexity and richness and variability of the process would seem to defy adequate description. But it can be experienced and has tremendous potential for facilitating personal growth.

From this perspective, counselling may be viewed as a process in which a deep and meaningful contact is established between client and counsellor. It involves a deepening experience of trust and closeness—a sort of "model relationship"—in which the concerns of the client are explored deeply and possible solutions evaluated and tried out. The relationship provides a facilitative climate within which the client can grow. It is like sunshine and warmth to a plant in that it provides the necessary climatic conditions for the raw materials to be taken in and properly digested and assimilated.

This view of counselling places the emphasis on "being with" clients rather than "doing things to" them. I have often been thrilled as I've watched the processes of growth take place in clients—growth from distrust in self and others to a healthy and realistic development of trust, resulting in courage to reach out for contact. Obviously the counsellor cannot meet the contact needs of his client on a continuing basis, but he can help to have the experience of having some of his contact needs of the moment met, and help him to have the courage to reach out for greater need fulfillment through relationships that are available to him on a continuing basis. If the counsellor accomplishes this, he may well be helping to prevent the nagging psychological hunger or even starvation so destructive to the person.

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EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE AND ITS TREATMENT IN A NUTSHELL

I have long been convinced that people become and remain "emotionally disturbed" largely because they (and we, their counselors) do not clearly and operationally define exactly what their "disturbance" is and precisely what they can do to minimize or eliminate it. I have done my best, in expositions of my own system of Rational-Emotive Therapy, to put its theories and practices into simple and easily understood English, so that they can be more readily applied and tested (Ellis, 1962, 1971; Ellis and Harper, 1970). But I keep looking for even more elegant methods of quickly explaining to in-