

## THE VERY BRIEF THERAPY BOOK

**By: Rubin Battino**

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This book led me astray. As a book reviewer you promise yourself that you are going to sit down and read a book through quickly from cover to cover and then return to it at a slower pace, to reflect, consider and judge. While this is an excellent model in theory, I have found that it doesn't always work in practice. This is particularly so when the author, as in this case, is providing an overview or map of a subject or area. The best guidebooks are those that make you want to visit the places talked about, to judge for yourself what is being reviewed, to find the backstreets and forgotten corners of dusty cities; so too with other books. An interesting book leads you into another book and then to another and so on, until either the well runs dry or you become so hopelessly lost that you accept that partially read books signify something quite meaningful. I say this because if I did not have the duty of reviewing Battino's book I would, I am sure, still be near the beginning because I couldn't help but follow up a number of his leads and passions, amongst them the work of Moshe Talmon, Lucas Derks and G.W. Burns.

Rubin Battino is a therapist practising in the United States and he works on the principle that the first therapy session could be the last one. Thus, this is not just a book about techniques but also about the relationship between therapist and client expectations regarding what constitutes therapy. This obviously manifests itself not just in the time dimension, but also in the context and content of the therapy undertaken. Readers familiar with some of Erickson's ambiguous function assignments will recognize the possibility of reinvigorating the context in which therapy takes place, so that the therapy room becomes one part of the therapy, the highway another, the distant mountain another and so forth. Such context specific work is taken up in an interesting way in the discussion of G.W. Burns' nature-guided therapy built upon the premise that 'simple exposure to natural stimuli can result in rapid change'.

Battino starts the book with what he calls 'three startling revelations' that Moshe Talmon discovered in the course of his single therapy session work. The first revelation was that the 'most common number of sessions for the large number of clients the psychotherapy staff saw was *one*.' The second was that there was no connection between therapist orientation and number of sessions: 'that is the modal length of therapy for every one of the therapists was a single session'. The third revelation was that when patients were followed up there was zero correlation between what clients said had helped them and what therapists thought was important. Battino concludes from this that 'it is

the client's expectations and attitude that are the important elements of successful therapy'.

Battino's book is essentially an exploration of what can be done in therapy if one accepts these three principles. Chapter 1 of the book thus sets out the general scope and introduces the work of Wampold, Hubble, Duncan, Miller and Sparks, all of whom provide evidence for what constitutes effectiveness in psychotherapy. While one would expect most people who read a book on very brief therapy to be not entirely dismissive of the notion, this chapter does provide the evidence for this type of approach, evidence which can be used when working in a system where such an approach may be treated with scepticism. Battino is not unaware of this difficulty:

Am I being simplistic in promulgating very brief therapy? Perhaps. I do see some clients several times, and some come back to see me at long intervals for a 'tune-up' or with new concerns. Yet *my* expectation is invariably: this is the last session we will need. (p.23)

Battino reminds us of the power of expectation and acting 'as if' so that reality becomes malleable. This idea can be traced back to the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger who wrote the 'Philosophy of As If' and stated that: '... the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality – this would be an utterly impossible task – but rather to provide us with an instrument for finding our way about more easily in the world' (p.15). Therapeutically these ideas were taken up both by Alfred Adler and by George Kelly in his idea of 'constructive alternativism'. Thus, we should act as if our constructions are true, whilst accepting their hypothetical status. While Battino does not mention the work of either Vaihinger or Kelly, he is clear that the notion of 'as if' is central to the book: 'Much of the material described separately in individual chapters later in this book is based on the power of the as-if.' One of the interesting points about the as-if stance is its essentially amoral nature. I can act as-if the world really is out to get me, or I can act as-if it is just my faulty thoughts that make me believe this. Thus, the as-if may need to be tied down to particular problematic presentations – i.e. the difficulties that brought a client into therapy – rather than used as a more general approach to the world.

Battino, in touching on the subject of rapport, reminds the reader of pacing, both verbal and postural. He follows this by a longer and more complex chapter on hypnotic and expectational language, something which is taken up later in the book when discussing the NLP meta-model of language. I found this portion of the book rather too schematic, although Battino does provide a transcript of one of his sessions to show how it works in practice.

The next ten chapters of the book take the reader through the main approaches to brief therapy, including hypnotic approaches, solution focused approaches, social panorama therapy, nature guided therapy and narrative therapy.

Chapter 5, entitled 'Hypnosis and Very Brief Therapy' provides a four-page overview of the subject, although Battino does make the point that 'any procedure that asks a client to go "inside" involves some level of trance'. In addition to this chapter there are chapters on Erickson, ambiguous function assignments, metaphoric and NLP approaches and Rossi's very brief therapy. Readers of *Contemporary Hypnosis* will, I suspect, find this material a useful overview of what they already know.

The additional chapters cover solution-focused work, Bill O'Hanlon's brief respectful therapy, Lucas Derk's social panorama therapy, Jay Haley's ordeal therapy and Burn's nature guided therapy. There is also a short chapter on rituals and ceremonies, what

to do 'when all else fails' and a description of the 'Universal Very Brief Therapy Intervention'.

Bill O'Hanlon's approach is interesting as it explicitly targets those clients with some of the greatest difficulties, namely those with complex dissociative and post-traumatic stress problems as well as people with borderline personality disorders. This is because 'it recognizes the complex and contradictory feelings they experience and the equally mixed messages they communicate to others (O'Hanlon & Rowan, p.15)'.

Lucas Derk's social panorama therapy is clearly something of a revelation to Battino 'given my fixation on reframing, it is always exciting to come across a new and different way to reframe' (p.75). Unfortunately, this chapter has the same difficulties that I encountered with that on hypnotic language, namely a tendency to focus on too much detail in too limited a space. Thus, while the general principle of incorporating the client's image of the social environment into therapy is clear, the techniques for doing this are far from transparent.

The social panorama model is a tool for analysing and solving problems in social life. The model has the images of people, called personifications, as its elements. Change in a personification will be brought about on the level of its components, the 'personification factors.' Location is defined as the primary personification factor; a change in location will necessarily change the relationship involved. Quite often the therapist needs to change one of the other personification factors first in order to make a personification move in someone's social panorama. (p.26)

Battino quotes this and some of Derks's techniques as if they were clear to the reader. I think this highlights a general difficulty with summaries, namely that they only really work well where the reader has some familiarity with the work. This is of course impossible for authors to predict. Jay Haley's ordeal therapy is widely known, thanks to Erickson, and Battino's chapter is a useful reminder that finding new things out about ourselves can lead to new and healthier ways of acting.

Battino talks about two common responses that he has witnessed to the news of a life threatening illness. The first is the recognition of the importance of close and loving human relationships. The second is an increased desire for contact with nature. Burns's nature- or ecotherapy takes this desire for contact as the basis for therapy: 'The basic premise of ecotherapy is simple: contact with the natural environment can and does bring about changes at cognitive, behavioural, affective and physical levels. Simple exposure to natural stimuli can result in rapid change' (p.135).

Burns lists ten characteristics of ecotherapy: (1) effective; (2) brief; (3) solution oriented; (4) client focused; (5) pragmatic; (6) wellness based; (7) motivation enhancing; (8) encouraging of choice; (9) empowering and (10) enjoyable. Burns provides a simple Sensory Awareness Inventory for clients to use in order to discover and/or remind themselves of the pleasures that can be derived from the senses. The chapter on rituals and ceremonies has relevance to this, although at just five pages, it doesn't really have enough space to consider this important but neglected topic in sufficient depth.

'When all else fails?' – this is the penultimate chapter and I can do no better than simply quote Battino's sub-headings: ask the client; listen; minimalism; crystal ball; metaphors; ambiguous function assignments; look at yourself from . . . ; provocative therapy; refer/consult.

This is by no means a perfect book. There is no mention of other single-session types of treatments, e.g. for phobia or panic disorder, and a couple of chapters were far too brief and difficult to follow. Yet such criticisms are not that important. The book reminds

us that it is all too easy to overcomplicate therapy, to intervene at the wrong level and to expect too little! If some of the chapters don't work, then read the ones that do. This is really a book of leads and trails; if we don't like the direction then we can turn back and follow another. Indeed the very brevity of the chapters ensures that the minimal amount of time is wasted.

Of course there is one final chapter that I haven't mentioned yet and that is the Universal Very Brief Therapy Intervention. Now of course I could tell you what this one paragraph intervention is, but then, following the principles set down in this book, I believe that this would be a disservice to you. You may find it useful or you may not. Either way, if you want to have a look you can – you know where to find it.

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## References

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