

## **Humanistic Approach**

Humanistic, humanism and humanist are terms in psychology relating to an approach which studies the whole person and the uniqueness of each individual. Essentially, these terms refer to the same approach in psychology. Humanistic psychology is a perspective that emphasizes looking at the whole person, and the uniqueness of each individual. Humanistic psychology begins with the existential assumptions that people have free will and are motivated to achieve their potential and self-actualizes. The humanistic approach in psychology developed as a rebellion against what some psychologists saw as the limitations of the behaviourist and psychodynamic psychology. The humanistic approach is thus often called the third force in psychology after psychoanalysis and behaviourism (Maslow, 1968). Humanism rejected the assumptions of the behaviourist perspective which is characterized as deterministic, focused on reinforcement of stimulus-response behaviour and heavily dependent on animal research. Humanistic psychology also rejected the psychodynamic approach because it is also deterministic, with unconscious irrational and instinctive forces determining human thought and behaviour. Both behaviourism and psychoanalysis are regarded as dehumanizing by humanistic psychologists.

### **Defining the Humanistic Approach**

As a psychotherapeutic treatment approach, humanistic therapy typically holds that people are inherently good. It adopts a holistic approach to human existence and pays special attention to such phenomena as creativity, free will, and human potential. It encourages viewing ourselves as a “whole person” greater than the sum of our parts and encourages self-exploration rather than the study of behaviour in other people. Humanistic psychology acknowledges spiritual aspiration as an integral part of the human psyche and is linked to the emerging field of transpersonal psychology.

### **Goals of Humanistic Therapy**

The aim of humanistic therapy is to help the client develop a stronger, healthier sense of self, as well as access and understand their feelings to help gain a sense of meaning in life. Humanistic theory aims to help the client reach what Rogers and Maslow referred to as self-actualization —the final level of psychological development that can be achieved when all basic and mental needs are essentially fulfilled and the “actualization” of the full personal potential take place. Humanistic therapy focuses on the individual’s strengths and offers non-judgmental counselling sessions.

### **Approaches to Humanistic Therapy**

Empathy is one of the most important aspects of humanistic therapy. This idea focuses on the therapist’s ability to see the world through the eyes of the client. Without empathy, the therapist does no longer understand the actions and thoughts of the client from the client’s perspective, but is understanding strictly as a therapist, which defeats the purpose of humanistic therapy. Another key element is unconditional positive regard, which refers to the care that the therapist needs to have for the client. Unconditional positive regard is

characterized by warmth, acceptance, and non-judgment. This ensures that the therapist does not become the authority figure in the relationship, and allows for a more open flow of information, as well as a kinder relationship between the two. A therapist practicing humanistic therapy needs to show a willingness to listen and ensure the comfort of the client by creating an environment where genuine feelings may be shared but are not forced upon someone.

Humanistic psychology (humanism) is grounded in the belief that people are innately good. This type of psychology holds that morality, ethical values, and good intentions are the driving forces of behaviour, while adverse social or psychological experiences can be attributed to deviations from natural tendencies. Humanism incorporates a variety of therapeutic techniques, including Rogerian (person-centered) therapy, and often emphasizes a goal of self-actualization.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY**

Humanism arose in the late 1950s as a “third force” in psychology, primarily in response to what some psychologists viewed as significant limitations in the behaviourist and psychoanalytic schools of thought. Behaviourism was often criticized for lacking focus on human consciousness and personality and for being deterministic, mechanistic, and over-reliant on animal studies. Psychoanalysis was rejected for its strong emphasis on unconscious and instinctive forces and for being deterministic, as well. After receiving sponsorship from Brandeis University, The American Association for Humanistic Psychology was founded in 1961. Other major contributors to the development of humanistic psychology were Carl Rogers, Gordon Allport, James Bugental, Charlotte Buhler, Rollo May, Gardner Murphy, Henry Murray, Fritz Perls, Kirk Schneider, Louis Hoffman, and Paul Wong.

Some fundamental assumptions of humanistic psychology include:

- Experiencing (thinking, sensing, perceiving, feeling, remembering, and so on) is central.
- The subjective experience of the individual is the primary indicator of behaviour.
- An accurate understanding of human behaviour cannot be achieved by studying animals.
- Free will exists, and individuals should take personal responsibility for self-growth and fulfilment. Not all behaviour is determined.
- Self-actualization (the need for a person to reach maximum potential) is natural.
- People are inherently good and will experience growth if provided with suitable conditions, especially during childhood.
- Each person and each experience is unique, so psychologists should treat each case individually, rather than rely on averages from group studies.

## **Types of Humanistic Therapies**

In humanistic therapy, there are two widely practiced techniques: gestalt therapy and client-centered therapy.

Gestalt therapy focuses on the skills and techniques that permit an individual to be more aware of their feelings. According to this approach, it is much more important to understand what and how clients are feeling, rather than to identify what is causing their feelings. Previous theories are thought to spend an unnecessary amount of time making assumptions about what causes behaviour. Instead, Gestalt therapy focuses on the here and now.

Client-centered therapy provides a supportive environment in which clients can re-establish their true identity. This approach is based on the idea that fear of judgment prevents people from sharing their true selves with the world around them, causing them to instead establish a public identity to navigate a judgmental world. The ability to re-establish their true identity will help the individual understand themselves as they truly are. The task of re-establishing one's true identity is not an easy one, and the therapist must rely on the techniques of unconditional positive regard and empathy.

### **History of Humanistic Therapy**

Humanistic psychology rose to prominence in the mid-20th century in response to the limitations of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and B. F. Skinner's behaviourism. With its roots running from Socrates through the Renaissance, this approach emphasizes individuals' inherent drive towards self-actualization, the process of realizing and expressing one's own capabilities, and creativity.

Among the earliest approaches are the developmental theory of Abraham Maslow, which emphasizes a hierarchy of needs and motivations, and the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, which is centered on the client's capacity for self-direction and understanding of his or her own development. The term "actualizing tendency" was also coined by Rogers and was a concept that eventually led Maslow to study self-actualization as one of the needs of humans. Rogers and Maslow introduced this positive, humanistic psychology in response to what they viewed as the overly pessimistic view of psychoanalysis; during the 20th century, humanistic psychology became known as the "third force" in psychology.

### **Efficacy of Humanistic Therapy**

Humanistic therapy is used to treat a broad range of people and mental health challenges. It has been used in the treatment of schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, relationship issues, personality disorders, and various addictions, such as alcoholism. Many proponents advocate the idea that it can be useful and effective with any population; however, others have argued that it has limited effectiveness with individuals who have limited access to education. Certain studies suggest that humanistic therapy is at least as effective as other forms of psychotherapy at producing stable, positive changes over time for clients that engage in this form of treatment. While personal transformation may be the primary focus of most humanistic psychologists, humanistic approaches have also been applied to theories of social transformation related to pressing social, cultural, and gender issues. In addition, humanistic psychology's emphasis on creativity and wholeness created a foundation for new approaches towards human capital in the workplace, stressing creativity and the relevance of emotional interactions.

Rogerian therapy, created by Carl Rogers, is a therapeutic technique in which the client takes an active, autonomous role in therapy sessions. It is based on the idea that the client knows what is best, and that the therapist's role is to facilitate an environment in which the client can bring about positive change.

Rogerian therapy is sometimes called nondirective therapy because of the autonomy given to the client. The client, not the therapist, decides what is discussed. As Rogers explained, "It is the client who knows what hurts, what directions to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried."

### **Overview of Rogerian Therapy**

Carl Rogers believed that all people have the capability to bring about positive change in their lives. He developed person-centered (or Rogerian) therapy as a technique for giving clients greater autonomy in therapy sessions. Rogers' approach to psychotherapy is considered humanistic because it focuses on individuals' positive potential.

In Rogerian therapy, the therapist typically refrains from offering advice or making a formal diagnosis. Instead, the primary role of the therapist is to listen and restate what the client says. Rogerian therapists try to refrain from offering their own interpretation of events or from making explicit suggestions about dealing with a situation.

For example, if a client reported feeling stressed about the fact that a co-worker was receiving credit for a project the client worked on, the Rogerian therapist might say, "So, it sounds like you're upset because your boss isn't recognizing your contributions." In this way, the Rogerian therapist attempts to give the client an environment to explore their own thoughts and feelings and decide for themselves how to bring about positive change.

### **Key Components of Rogerian Therapy**

According to Rogers, successful psychotherapy always has three key components:

**Empathy:** Rogerian therapists attempt to develop an empathic understanding of their clients' thoughts and feelings. When the therapist has an accurate understanding of the client's thoughts and restates what the client says, the client is able to figure out the meaning of his or her own experiences.

**Congruence:** Rogerian therapists strive for congruence; that is, being self-aware, genuine, and authentic in their interactions with clients.

**Unconditional positive regard:** Rogerian therapists show compassion and acceptance towards the client. The therapist should strive to be non-judgmental and accept the client non-contingently (in other words, their acceptance of the client doesn't depend on what the client says or does).

### **Rogers' Later Work**

In 1963, Rogers began working at the Western Behavioural Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California. Later, he co-founded the Center for Studies of the Person, an organization that is still active today. In California, Rogers worked on applying his ideas outside of traditional therapy settings. For example, he wrote about education in *Freedom to Learn: A View of What Education Might Become*, published in 1969. Rogers supported student-centered learning: an educational atmosphere in which students are able to pursue their interests, rather than passively absorbing a teacher's lecture.

Rogers also applied his ideas about empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard to political conflicts. He led "encounter groups" between groups in conflict, in the hope that his therapy techniques could improve political relationships. He led encounter groups in South Africa during apartheid, and between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Rogers' work earned him praise from Jimmy Carter and a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

### **Influence of Rogerian Therapy Today**

Carl Rogers died in 1987, but his work continues to have an enormous influence on psychotherapists. Many therapists incorporate elements of client-centered therapy in their practices today, particularly through the eclectic approach, in which they may combine several types of therapy into one session.

Importantly, the essential components of therapy that Rogers put forward (empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard) can be employed by any therapist, regardless of their specific approach to therapy. Today, therapists recognize that an effective relationship between client and therapist (called the therapeutic alliance or therapeutic rapport) is key for successful therapy.

### **Criticisms of Humanistic Therapy**

Critics have taken issue with many of the early tenets of humanistic psychology. As with all early psychological approaches, questions have been raised about the lack of empirical evidence used in research. Because of the subjective nature of the framework, psychologists worry about the fallibility of the humanistic approach. The holistic approach allows for much variation but does not identify enough constant variables to be researched with true accuracy. Psychologists also worry that such an extreme focus on the subjective experience of the individual does little to explain or appreciate the impact of society on personality development. The presence of such a dynamic view of personality also does not seem to account for apparent continuity in an individual's persona over time.