ROGERS: SEVEN STAGES OF THERAPEUTIC GROWTH

TOWARDS FULL FUNCTIONING


Rogers thought there were seven stages that he could observe, and they enabled him to see whether his clients were making progress in therapy, or whether they seemed to be stuck, for a time unable to move on. Although the process can be erratic, clients do, in general progress step by step, building on their experiences at one stage before moving on to the next. Only when people feel accepted and understood at one stage, do they feel able to take the next step.

This process scale is quite complex, but here we give a simplified version to show the basic characteristics of each of the seven stages.

Very few people enter therapy at a particular stage and go on through to stage seven. Many leave therapy at an earlier point, and if therapy has been successful for them, content that real and meaningful change has happened.

Remember that this Process Scale represents an idealised view of the therapeutic process, it indicates the flow of events in a very general way. Each person will experience therapy differently, will have different concerns, and will be content to leave therapy at different points. It is useful as a way of thinking about the process that we go through on the journey towards becoming fully functioning, it isn't a prescription of what we must do in order to get there.

**Stage 1**

People in this stage appear to be rigid in personality and rather remote, cut off from their emotions and from other people. Rogers thought it unlikely that such people would see any value in therapy, and therefore unlikely that they would take part in it.

People in stage one are very unwilling to reveal anything about themselves, especially their feelings, with which they are very unfamiliar anyway. They tend to see things in terms of opposites - good or bad, right or wrong, with very little in between. They are governed by rigid rules as to how people should behave, and they are strongly judgmental of others, having a rather pessimistic view of human nature. They tend to cope with life in ways that divert attention away from themselves and their feelings, and they view a display of emotion as a weakness. Typical of this stage are statements like:

"Talking about feelings is a waste of time."

"Students are all the same."

"People ought to do as they are told."
These kinds of generalised statements indicate a very rigid view of the world where everything has its place, and ambiguity and uncertainty are very difficult to tolerate. The world is seen as an unfriendly, even hostile place, and that is how it is and how it will stay.

**Stage 2**

Here, there is a slight loosening of rigid constructs, though people find it very difficult to accept any responsibility for themselves, or what happens in their lives. When things go wrong, they tend to blame others, and feel like victims of a hostile world, rather than participators in it.

"I'm not responsible when things go wrong, am I?"

"I don't do anything wrong, other people keep creating problems for me."

"No-one ever sees my good side, they only ever see the bad."

There is more of an acceptance that things are not right in their lives, but any fault tends to lie in others, or the world in general.

**Stage 3**

The loosening of attitudes continues as people are more willing to talk about themselves though they tend to do so in the third person, particularly when it's about feelings:

"This is how you feel when someone does something like this to you, isn't it. "After all, people do have feelings."

People are less comfortable expressing presently experienced feelings, and more comfortable talking about feelings that happened in the past:

"When I was a kid, I did a lot of things that made me feel bad. I just couldn't tell anyone about them because of what would have happened if I did".

Internal contradictions start to emerge, and the differences between an idealised self and the reality of the situation start to become apparent:

"I try so hard to be the perfect husband, but it just doesn't work out. I fail all the time."

"I feel I'd like to really achieve something in life, but I never get round to doing anything about it."

"I don't know why I never succeed at the things I try. Maybe that's the way I am. I'm just doomed to failure."

In this stage there may be hints that there are different possibilities available, but there is still a tendency to see things in hard and fast terms - if they're not one thing, then they must be the opposite. If not good, then bad; if not a success, then a failure.

Clients who first seek therapy are often at this stage and need to be fully accepted as they present themselves before moving deeper into stage four.
Stage 4

In this stage, clients begin to describe deeper feelings, usually those that happened in the past. "I felt so desperately unhappy when she didn't seem to care. I've never known such deep feelings, it really scared me."

People have difficulty in understanding and accepting these (negative) feelings and would rather they hadn't existed.

"If this is what falling in love means, then I'd rather not have it." Feelings in the present start to emerge, but they are mistrusted and even rejected.

"There's this knot, deep down inside, which stops me from doing things and being myself. I don't know what it is, and that makes me angry. What can I do about it?"

Notice that the client is starting to accept responsibility for what is happening, even though the fearfulness and hopelessness of it are apparent.

There may be some recognition of patterns that occur in the experience of life, sometimes accompanied by a wry humour.

"It's crazy, isn't it, the way I keep setting myself up for the same old let down. Look at me, a man of forty, acting like a kid."

Also at this stage, clients begin to enter into more direct relationships with their therapist, but there is often a fearfulness about this.

"I find it difficult to trust people, I even find myself wondering how much I can trust you."

Explorations of this kind are common in therapy and the loosening up of expression continues into the next stages. These later stages are quite complex, and result in many different ways of expression and viewing of the world.

Stage 5

Clients are never wholly at one stage of the process or another. They may start to move on, then take a step back, rather like dipping a toe into the water and deciding it's too cold (or too hot), to go for a swim.

It is when people feel fully accepted and understood that they feel free to explore deeper feelings. The therapist's role is not to lead them from one stage to the next, but to provide them with opportunities to experience fully each stage in their own process, and in their own unique ways.

By stage five, clients feel more confident about expressing presently experienced feelings:

"I experience a lot of rejection in my life, and I wonder - is that how it's going to be with you too, will you end up rejecting me? At the moment I feel quite afraid of this."
The developing freedom and ability to express current feelings means that they are less likely to be denied. They can start to bubble up inside, and even though they are not fully understood or wholly accepted, clients can find ways of expressing them, however tentatively.

"I’ve just realised something. When I start feeling unsure of myself, I get this strange feeling inside which sort of strangles me, and stops me from being all of myself. It is happening now, but it's gradually fading."

There can be a feeling of getting close to something important, but not being able to get into direct contact with it. There is still a reluctance to trust feelings in themselves, they can be talked about but not fully experienced.

New insights about life and relationships also start to emerge.
" I thought I was bad because I felt angry at my father. Now I realise that I was angry because I was hurt. It's obvious to me now that if I get hurt, it's natural to get angry. It all makes sense now. It doesn't mean that I have to feel love for him all the time, he's not perfect, and neither am I."

Here, the client is acknowledging and accepting ambivalent feelings towards another person, and that it is OK to have these contradictory feelings alongside each other.

**Stage 6**

Rogers described this stage as being very distinctive and often dramatic. It is characterised by feelings, previously suppressed, becoming fully experienced in the present moment. This awareness is acute, clear and full of meaning. The self which hitherto has been experienced as somewhat fragmented is now experienced as an integrated whole - mind, body, emotion and intellect, and clients experience moments of full congruence.

Previously felt ambiguities and uncertainties now start to click into place and become crystal clear. These experiences are irreversible and produce changes in attitude and perception that are quite remarkable. The way the world is viewed is never the same again.

Feelings start to flow freely and reach their full conclusion. Previous fears about the potential destructiveness of negative feelings evaporate, and feelings are seen as enriching experiences, not ones to be avoided.

One of the most striking discoveries made by many people at this stage is the realisation of care, concern and tenderness for oneself.

"You know, when I look back and see myself as a three year old, and looking at what I had to put up with, I really do feel sorry for myself. And now, when I look at myself, I feel tender and loving towards myself. I know that I need to take care of me, and treat myself kindly and well....I never knew it was possible to feel this way...it feels really good... really warm".
Carl Rogers uses the following example in his book, On Becoming a Person:

The client, a young man, has expressed the wish that his parents would die or disappear.

Client: It's kind of like wanting to wish them away, and wishing they had never been... And I'm so ashamed of myself because then they call me, and off I go swish! They're somehow still so strong. I can almost feel it inside me - swish (and he gestures, plucking himself away by grasping at his navel.)

Therapist: They really do have a hold on your umbilical cord.

Client: It's funny how real it feels... like a burning sensation, kind of and when they say something which makes me anxious I can feel it right here (pointing). I never thought of it quite that way.

Therapist: As though if there's a disturbance in the relationship between you, then you do feel it as though it was a strain on your umbilicus.

Client: Yeah, kind of like in my gut here. It's so hard to define the feeling that I feel there.

Rogers says, of this example: "Here he is living subjectively in the feeling of dependence on his parents. Yet it would be most inaccurate to say that he is perceiving it. He is in it, experiencing it as a strain on his umbilical cord. In this stage, internal communication is free and relatively unblocked."

Rogers also comments: "And, it might be remarked in passing, once an experience is fully in awareness, fully accepted, then it can be coped with effectively, like any other clear reality."

**Stage 7**

Rogers thought that changes made by clients in stage six tended to be irreversible, and further change was as likely to occur outside of the therapeutic relationship as within it. By this stage people are effecting change for themselves, and the need for therapy is more or less over.

In the therapeutic situation itself, client and therapist are actively collaborating to explore ways in which new-found confidence can be used and expressed in the world outside. Clients are open to experience, are able to trust their own feelings, and have developed a strong internal locus of evaluation.

There is a fluid, changing quality to life, as people are able to experience each new event without being bound by interpretations that belong in the past. There is a strong feeling of living fully in the present, an ability to relate freely to others, and an awareness that further change and growth is not only possible, but desirable.
Rogers' seven stages of personality change in psychotherapy

The person-centred approach of Carl Rogers places considerable value on the phenomenological reality of the client, emphasising the irreducible uniqueness of the client as a person, the client’s experience and the meaning a client gives to their experience. Consequently, within this phenomenological framework, it can feel strange to consider aspects of the client in an abstracted and objective fashion. Rogers developed a theoretical structure, based on empirical study, to conceptualise the changes that take place in the behaviour and experiencing of a client through the process of psychotherapy.

In Client Centred Therapy, Rogers considered at length the process of psychotherapy (1951, pp.131-196). “In every therapeutic orientation people are helped. They feel more comfortable within themselves. Their behaviour changes, often in the direction of better adjustment. Their personalities seem different, both to themselves and to others who know them. … What are the psychological processes by which change comes about?” (Rogers, 1951, p.131). The purpose of psychotherapy is to help a client in their journey towards fuller functioning. Personality change towards fuller functioning does not, however, require psychotherapy, and may take place in response to all manner of significant or banal life experiences. A conceptual structure for personality change in psychotherapy can, therefore, also be considered more broadly as a model for psychological development.

Through empirical research, Rogers was able to recognise identifiable features that characterise positions on a continuum of personality change effected by the process of psychotherapy. In On Becoming a Person (Chapter 7: A Process Conception of Psychotherapy, pp.125-159), Rogers describes the poles of this continuum, and whilst acknowledging that it may be possible to discriminate any number of stages between these two poles, describes seven stages. Importantly, “… a given client … usually exhibits behaviours which cluster about a relatively narrow range on this continuum.” (Rogers, 1961, p.131). The significance of this is two-fold: a) just as it is not possible simultaneously to be in London and Edinburgh, a client is unlikely to exhibit behaviours and conceptualise experiences that are typical of different points on the continuum [this differs from work regarding personality dissociation, e.g. the work by John Rowan on sub-personalities]; b) Rogers’ instrument is sufficiently precise to gauge personality change.

Progress through Rogers' seven stages of psychological development is characterised by:

- movement from internal rigidity (fixity) towards increased internal fluidity (flowingness);
- a deepening sense of self and one’s internal life, and internal fluency;
- a progressive awareness of, acknowledgement of, and acceptance of one’s own feelings;
- a widening realisation that far from being simple and clear cut, the world, other people, and oneself involve complexity and ambiguity.
The questions that follow attempt to address issues that are characteristic of the stage to which the questions apply.

**Stage One**

1. To what extent are you able to talk about yourself, versus having a preference for communicating about externals?
2. To what extent do you spend time considering what is going on inside yourself?
3. a) To what extent are you comfortable with ambiguity?
   b) In what ways do you manage and cope with ambiguity?

**Stage Two**

4. To what extent do you consider how you feel about people, things, events and circumstances? (Be careful to consider feelings (emotions) rather than thoughts / prejudices / beliefs.)
5. To what extent do you prefer circumstances to be one thing or the other?
6. To what extent do you comfortably own personal responsibility, versus perceiving problems as external to yourself? (Be careful to avoid equating personal responsibility with blame.)

**Stage Three**

7. To what extent do you talk (about yourself) in the first person ("I"), versus speaking in the second person ("You"; e.g. "If your career is important to you then you make the personal sacrifices required."), or speaking in the third person ("One", "People", "Everyone"; e.g. "One does what one can."; "People love a bit of gossip.")?
8. a) To what extent are you aware of what you are feeling now (in real time), rather than focusing on only feelings you have felt in the past?
   b) How comfortable are you talking about what you are feeling now (in real time), rather than talking only about feelings you have felt in the past?

**Stage Four**

9. To what extent are you typically willing to bring into your awareness what you are feeling right now?
10. When you are aware of what you are feeling right now, how willing are you to:
    a. Acknowledge to yourself your own mild / convenient feelings?
    b. Acknowledge to yourself your own intense / inconvenient feelings?
    c. Talk about a) and/or b) with a trusted person?
    d. Put your feelings into action (e.g. to cry if you feel very sad; to rage if you feel anger; to embrace if you feel love)?
11. To what extent are you typically aware of inconsistencies and contradictions within yourself?
    How willing are you to talk about such inconsistencies and contradictions within yourself?
    How enthusiastic are you about addressing inconsistencies and contradictions within yourself?
12. How much of a risk is it for you to share something of yourself in a new close relationship?
Stage Five

Many of the questions relating to Stage Four also apply to Stage Five. Many of the features of Stage Five, particularly regarding feelings, represent a loosening of, and willingness to experience, what was held more rigidly, and experienced more reluctantly, in Stage Four.

13. How eager are you to embrace an awareness that what you feel, however unacceptable, is, at least in part, who you really are?
14. How enthusiastic are you to approach in yourself what you do not know about yourself, with the attendant risk that you might like / dislike what you discover?
15. How eager are you to achieve precision in your understanding and description regarding how you feel / are feeling?
16. To what extent do you engage in an internal dialogue (words and/or images) when faced with internal contradictions and inconsistencies?

Stage Six

Stage Six represents a further and significant loosening of feelings, awareness and experience. In addition to the fullness and richness of each of these, there is a sense of complete immersion in them while addressing them (e.g. in the counselling room).

17. To what extent can you allow yourself fully to be yourself, to feel and experience without reservation, while at the same time recognising what is taking place?
18. To what extent are you aware of the processes that underlie your surface responses – your own deeply-held values and motivations?
19. How eager are you to suppress your own tears, sighs and chuckles, unless convenient?

It is not easy to formulate questions that relate to Stage Seven. This final stage simultaneously represents both a culmination of the processes that have been taking place from Stage One, and also the final and complete loosening of rigidities.

Bibliography
