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“To Hell and Back”
or
A Modified Form of Implosive Therapy
as Found in the Scriptures

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There is at least one scriptural precedent for a modified version of Stampfl’s (1961) imposive therapy method as I understand it. In that method, the client is brought to visualize and, in some deeply sensitive ways, to experience the thing feared most through the implosion of a series of imagined scenes, feelings and experiences. This is done to desensitize the client to anxiety-provoking stimuli.

In a modified version of implosive therapy, the therapist begins by discerning the client’s area of deepest concern and by having a preliminary discussion of this method. He then instructs the client to close his eyes and asks the client to imagine and describe verbally a non-threatening scene of some kind. This is done to determine the client’s ability to use creative imagination and guided imagery in therapy. Then the client is asked to imagine a mild situation which is directly related to the problem being considered. The scenes described to the client by the therapist grow progressively worse. With careful observation of the client’s non-verbal reactions so as not to proceed too fast, the counselor continues until the most anxiety-provoking situation is described in detail by the therapist and experienced in all its distasteful horror by the client.

At a point when it seems the client can take no more, the therapist shifts the imagined scene to something non-threatening and, perhaps, pleasant to the client. The client’s attention can be directed to alternative internal choices in order to help him/her feel differently about the same stimuli; and he/she can be guided to contrast the feelings brought about by thinking either positive or adverse thoughts about self and the problem. The relief experienced by the client’s choice of more positive thoughts and images can be contrasted to the feelings created by focusing on negative ones.

In this way the therapist helps to create in the client a feeling that could be described as a “hellish” condition from which the client is then “saved.” The internally experienced contrast between the over-exaggerated positive and negative directions open to the client’s choice provides unmistakable, positive reinforcement for the client and sharpens the client’s ability to choose between the two. This method can help the client to delineate more clearly between the end results of choices along two divergent paths. It can indicate a turning point for the client away from sins, unwanted fears and self-defeating behavior patterns with their resulting adverse consequences toward good, calmness and self-enhancing behaviors resulting in beneficial blessings and feelings.

However, because the experience is often a traumatic one for the client, great caution must always be used. I have made it a practice to only use this method when several other therapeutic methods or techniques have proven ineffective and when I feel there is no danger of emotional or spiritual damage to the client. I have used it mostly in the cases of deep-seated, habitual behavior patterns such as masturbation, homosexuality, compulsive sexual thought, or compulsive eating, and with certain fears and phobias. This method is to be used with frequent follow-up sessions in order to provide continuing emotional support and to learn of the client’s progress. With some clients, the experience has been repeated in subsequent sessions to further reinforce the contrasting feelings and to further delineate for the client the two directions over which the client has agency to choose.

I have used this method for several years in an LDS setting with individualized adaptations. I have found it to have merit as a therapeutic tool to bring about the beginning of change when other methods were unsuccessful.

This method is somewhat parallel to the experiences recorded in Alma. The scriptural account, of course, is not an imagined experience. It is an authentic experience with reality as revealed to Alma. It produced a condition which Alma referred to as being “born of God.” (Alma 36:5) Alma’s experience changed his thinking and behavior in a way similar to that observed in some of my clients. The experience related by Alma to his son Helaman describes Alma’s miraculous conversion from a life of sin to total commitment to the ways of God.

As you may recall, Alma was dramatically shaken by the visitation of an angel: “I fell to the earth; and it was for the space of three days and three nights that I could not open my mouth, neither had I the use of my limbs.” (Alma 36:10) He then recounted the angel’s warning to cease his wicked behavior or he would be destroyed. He described the deep impact of that message: “I was struck with such fear and amazement lest I perhaps should be destroyed, that I fell to the earth and I did hear no more.” (Alma 36:11) Then he
pre-experienced by way of revelation what would happen to him if he did not change his ways. This agonizing experience was related to the sins he had committed and would be the inescapable consequence of those sins if, at that moment, his life were to end. He stated:

I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins... I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments... I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction; yea, and in fine so great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror... I was racked, even with the pains of a damned soul. (Alma 36:12-16) (Emphasis added.)

He discovered the only possible solution to this mental and physical torment was to call upon the Savior to save him from it:

And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy to the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a son of God, to atone for the sins of the world. Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death. And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light did I behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their god; yea, and my soul did long to be there. (Alma 36:17-22) (Emphasis added.)

Alma was able to pre-experience a taste of heaven in the presence of God and feel the healing peace of His forgiveness and love. He later recounted the changes this experience created in his personal behavior when he wrote:

I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance... that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost... I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and all manner of afflictions... I do put my trust in him, and he will still deliver me. And I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory; yea, and I will praise him forever... (Alma 36:24-26)

We learn more of this experience when Alma wrote to his son Shiblon: ‘... I was three days and three nights in the most bitter pain and anguish of soul: and never, until I did cry out unto the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy, did I receive a remission of my sins.’ (Alma 38:8) (Emphasis added.)

A somewhat similar pattern was experienced by those who believed the message of King Benjamin as recorded in these words:

And now, it came to pass that when King Benjamin had made an end of speaking the words which had been delivered unto him by the angel of the Lord, that he cast his eyes roundabout on the multitude, and beheld they had fallen to the earth; for the fear of the Lord had come upon them. And they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth. And they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: ‘O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who created heaven and earth, and all things; who shall come down among the children of men. And it came to pass that after they had spoken these words the Spirit of the Lord came upon them and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ who should come, according to the words which King Benjamin had spoken unto them. (Mosiah 4:1-3) (Emphasis added.)

We read of a similar account of the sons of Mosiah. Speaking of his sons, he said:

Now they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature; for they could not bear that any soul should perish; yea, even the very thought that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble. And thus did the Spirit of the Lord work upon them, for they were the very vilest of sinners. And the Lord saw fit in His infinite mercy to spare them; nevertheless they suffered much anguish of soul because of their iniquities, suffering much and fearing that they should be cast off forever. (Mosiah 28:3-4) (Emphasis added.)

The following common elements found in these scriptural experiences can also be duplicated to some extent in therapy by following a procedure similar to that described in the beginning of this article:

1. The client can be faced with the seriousness of his behavior pattern, and especially its possible and logical, disastrous, and eventual conclusion.
2. The client can be taught the deceitful designs of Satan to use the clients’ particular behavior to bring about his own eventual destruction and keep him from attaining to his spiritual and physical potential.
3. The client can be brought to experience spiritual, physical and mental distress—’anguish of soul’—to a point of feeling helpless. This condition can be made so clear that the client can recognize that only the mercy of a loving God is sufficient to save him from destruction.
4. The client can be guided to feel an overpowering need to call upon the mercy of God for help. He can be helped to view himself in his ‘own carnal state’ and feel the need for God’s mercy and plead for forgiveness.
5. The client can experience a measure of peace and inner cleansing by imagining having rid himself of all sins sufficient to be able to stand in the presence of the Savior and to feel his love and acceptance as a person of worth.
6. The client can experience a Christ-like transformation taking place within, from evil to good.
7. The client can feel himself turning from the road to destruction to the road of life and be instructed in how to remain on that road by laboring without ceasing to bring other souls to repentance, and by putting trust in God and not in flesh.

8. The client’s faith in the reality of the Savior and in his atonement can be increased.

9. The client can be helped to recognize the necessity of keeping God’s commandments in order for the atonement of Christ to be of effect in his life.

A similar kind of experience can be created with clients to help them experience a measure of the pain and anguish of soul they may experience in the future if they continue on the course they have been taking. They can be brought to a similar moment of despair and feeling of destruction and at that moment call upon the mercy and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for deliverance and receive not a remission of sins necessarily but a deeply felt and recognized certainty of the eternal principle of repentance and forgiveness and experience the relief of the pain of sin and a greater, deeper desire to choose to follow the teachings of the Savior and come under His atonement.

A variation of this method might be to bring the client to a point wherein anguish of soul is felt and then to have the client kneel in prayer with the therapist to supplicate and to plead vocally or mentally with God for deliverance and forgiveness in the hope that peace may be granted in soul and mind from God. Much is gained when the client actively participates in the very acts needed to supplicate God for spiritual blessings.

A somewhat similar but less dramatic and a more emotionally safe experience might be described in the following procedure which has produced significant beneficial results in selected clients: I have had the client, with eyes closed, imagine gathering up all the sins, hurts, feelings of anger, bitterness and all such feelings by searching throughout the entire body and mind, putting all these negative feelings in an imaginary basket, then getting rid of the basket in some way that is total and permanent. When this is done he or she is instructed to take an imaginary walk to a place that is sacred to the client. The client is then asked to see and feel himself/herself free and cleansed of all negative feelings and sins in that sacred place, and to walk forward toward a personage of light who is recognized as the Savior, to see his radiating light, warmth, and love; and to see him holding outstretched arms to receive the client close to His bosom. The client is encouraged to approach closer and closer until he/she seems to melt into the arms of the Savior, feeling totally accepted, totally warmed and loved and allowed to enjoy that experience for a few moments, then to recognize the depth of feelings and discern the worth of the soul in the sight of the Savior. The counselor then skillfully guides the client’s imagination back into the normal stream of life with the deeply felt knowledge that he/she is accepted and loved by the Savior.

Still another variation of this has been found to be helpful. That is to have the client ask the Savior a few important questions while in this scene and to listen for specific answers. The client can learn that this or a similar experience can be created whenever the client desires answers to problems and will set aside a few moments to seek them. Some clients have received insights they did not know were possible. More especially, they have gained in self-esteem and in strength to resist the temptation to make wrong choices.

In summary, by taking clients “to hell and back” in contrived experiences similar to the real experience reported by Alma, counselors can often help clients gain the insights and the strength needed to overcome self-defeating behaviors and lead more productive, fulfilling lives.

REFERENCES