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SOME CONCEPTUAL IDEAS IN HORTICULTURAL THERAPY DRAWN FROM PRACTICE

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By approaching horticulture as ergo- or work therapy, patients can benefit from nature and plant related activities by using these experiences to become more familiar with their own nature. Horticultural therapists bring patients in contact with their own ability towards growth and change through a lively interaction with plants.

Introduction

Working with plants has accompanied mankind throughout history. Agriculture has become so ingrained in our being that even our language is full of phrases taken from nature and the proceedings happening there (i.e. harvest the fruits of your labor, strong like a tree, have a green thumb, a blooming fantasy, to be rooted, ill weeds grow apace, to run to leaf, etc.).

Many psychiatric patients have trouble with relationships; horticultural therapists assume that a person who is mentally ill and has a broken relationship with their environment can recover through nature. Patients who are particularly disturbed and uprooted can find their way back to normality and health by orienting themselves to nature and reflecting on their own nature. Anyone who works a piece of land will admit that gardening provides feelings of peace and reassurance from tilling the soil and nurturing plants.

Gardening helps the patient intensify an interest by developing personal potential. Gardening activities reduce preoccupation with deficiencies and revitalize interest.

Similar to other activities, gardening provides people with the opportunity to concentrate on something other than themselves. Anteile is a term used by Döerner (1978) referring to those parts of the personality and abilities that are still healthy and those which are deficient. They can be scrutinized along with the different gardening activities that are employed.

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Gardening as therapy provides an instrument of diagnosis, which provides an opportunity to learn more about the patient's psychomotor and psychosocial abilities, as well as indicators of skills the patient has learned in regards to practical living. The therapeutic process strives to promote and preserve these abilities.

Once these abilities are assessed the patient can learn new skills and improve deficient areas. In this way, patients increase their new experiences through an active engagement with natural materials.

When patients witness the growing process in nature, personal development can also be stimulated. Developmental deficiencies can be compensated, and newly learned behaviors and skills can be integrated into personal competency.

Work experiences offered in horticultural therapy programs provide specific approaches for integrating acquired skills into the client's personal life.

"Due to the inherent laws of agriculture, which are clear, reasonable and interacting, we are provided with a challenge that gives us motivational guidance."

The natural rhythm of agriculture and gardening, experienced through sowing, planting, caring, growing and harvesting, gives every patient a strong insight into the biological cycle. Along with that he learns to realize that work cannot be delayed" (H. Hohm, 1982).

Psychic Relationships with Environment

Interaction with the environment through activities influences a person's inner (personal) experiences and reinforces the patient's positive attitude towards that environment.

A person is healthy if he successfully makes contact with his surroundings in a constructive manner, as a psychophysical being. Kükelhaus (1982) states, "... the less our capabilities are connected with physical experience that affect our consciousness the less lively and sensitive will our relationships towards our social and real surrounding be shaped."

Inner psychic processes influence people's interaction with the environment. Similarly, surroundings and activities stimulate the outer and inner experience. Man makes contact by using the senses which function at the "contact-boundary." "Contact-boundary" is used by Perls et al (1974) to describe the field where contact between the organism and the environment takes place. The senses translate the perception of that contact into experiences and personal meaning.

From this background evolved a process for labeling these apparent and perceptible activities, as well as the process which accompanies them. The following concepts attempt to explain this inner activity, and can be interpreted as a sort of digesting process.

Relationships between Horticultural Activities and the Inner-psychic Experience

Gardening Activity

Preparation of the bed, what do I want it for.....digging, loosening, raking out, preparation for good and healthy growing?

Sowing

Burying the seed in the earth; laying down a seed for new propagation.

Growing

Development of the potential which is inherited in a seed; shaping of the specific plant to its perfect appearance (gestalt), as a carrot, cauliflower, or tree; growing is the activity of all living beings; there is nothing special to do; motto: let it grow and see what develops.

Planting

Giving pre-cultured plants their final location and the space they need to fully develop.

Psychic Process (possible)

Inventory: What lies before me, what do I want? Willingness to arrange parts of my life and personality and preparation for new developments. The goal may be: preparation for a new and positive approach to life. I am not yet aware of what lies ahead.

Propagation, my growth; the feeling of a solid nucleus from which something can develop, I don't yet know what the result will be, but I sense that something positive will happen; something that has a meaning for my life, for my relationships.

Opening myself to development, change, and acceptance; giving room to a natural process which has its own inner laws and can be fostered by positive conditions within the environment; I can accept myself and will be accepted by fellow beings as a valuable personality who can live, develop, and change; it is exciting to see how we change and grow under the influences of our surroundings.

Integrate my newly discovered potential within the rest of my being, conciliating myself for a better agreement with my environment;

Synopsis and Guidance

For the most meaningful approach, the assistance of a therapist is necessary to direct the patient's acceptance and integration of the inner psychic process. One possibility is to work with concrete personal issues when they arise and seek a common goal by using a combination of counseling, plant related activities, and working-out the problem physically. Throughout the therapeutic process the priorities of the patient may change and a new point of view may arise.

It is through this process that the socio-emotional side of work begins: viewing activities as a complex proceeding, a common engagement with a particular task through which the patient can learn to integrate himself as a talented member of a working crew.

In addition to the above mentioned horticultural approach, I use methods of counseling; behavioral and gestalt therapy within group and individual settings. Horticultural activities provide a useful approach for prevention and rehabilitation from psychological and psycho-social dysfunction.

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realizing that my experience is an important and meaningful component for my person and my life; the entire meaning may be recognized later; in order to grow, I need personal space for living, movement, and development as too little space imposes stress.

It is necessary to do something good for the plant as well as for myself; when I am weeding I discriminate between undesired and cultivated plants. This is also true in a figurative sense: realizing the right time and the right situation to express my thoughts and feelings, to behave appropriately. When I pull out the weeds by the roots the field or bed will be clean — my personal problems become clearer and less complex, and I feel more precise about what I work for; the field is cleared of all that is not relevant at the present time: I learn to care for the plant as well as for myself, and I become aware that, for healthy growth, I need physical, intellectual, and emotional nurturing.

Depending on the state I am in, I may also need protection. "I can do something for my physical and emotional well-being."

At the end of all my work there is the harvest of that which I took such pains to grow; I may discover: the result has been successful; I am renewed and prepared to live up to old and new challenges; satisfaction and newly achieved self-esteem give support for a new start.

Maintenance

Watering, fertilizing, and hoeing; supplying plants with water, nutrition and air; maintaining necessary space for each plant and controlling competing plants (weeds); sorting out desired and undesired plants in a particular place (a weed is a plant in the wrong place).

Plant Protection

Plants receive preventive care or protective measures are taken after attack from insects, fungi, etc.

Harvesting

Recognizing to what degree the fruit is ripe; harvesting and preparing for sale; the products of those plants that you cared for so much get to their final destination, are sold, and consumed.