

Schema Therapy for Personality Disorders

Review of a two day workshop by Dr Jeffrey Young, October 25-26, 2006

AACBT was delighted to host a two day workshop on Schema Therapy for Personality Disorders by acclaimed cognitive therapist and author Dr Jeffrey Young, visiting Australia from the United States. Dr Young is the founder and director of the Cognitive Therapy Center of New York, and the Schema Therapy Institute. Dr Young's Schema Therapy expands on traditional cognitive theory and practice to treat a variety of long term emotional problems in both individuals and couples. Schema therapy provides an integrated approach to treatment, combining cognitive-behavioural, attachment, psychodynamic and emotion-focussed therapeutic models.

The two day workshop proved very popular with approximately 90 people in attendance, some travelling from as far away as Western Australia and far north Queensland. Dr Young introduced participants to schema theory and techniques for treating treatment-resistant patients and those with personality disorders, for whom traditional cognitive therapy shows limited benefit. Compared to traditional cognitive therapy, schema therapy places greater emphasis on exploration of unmet childhood needs and resultant maladaptive long-term coping styles and entrenched cognitive styles (schemas).

Dr Young stressed the importance of the therapeutic relationship and long-term therapy with challenging patients, and talked participants through concepts such as limited reparenting and the use of emotion-focused therapy techniques. Strategies such as role-play and imagery play pivotal roles in Young's schema therapy, and were demonstrated during the workshop via segments of videotaped sessions and also a group imagery exercise. Dr Young discussed the need for empathic confrontation of patients – in other words, balancing empathy and understanding with a push for change. This is similar to Linehan's balance of acceptance and change in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy.

Schema Mode Therapy, introduced on Day Two of the workshop, is being developed to treat the most challenging patients such as those with Borderline, Narcissistic and Avoidant Personality Disorders. Mode Therapy condenses Young's 18 schemas into groups of "modes". Mode Therapy places emphasis on addressing "here and now" mood states in session, and provides mechanisms for overcoming patients' avoidance and overcompensating coping strategies. Videotaped segments were again used to good effect to demonstrate the use of mode therapy with a patient who had made limited progress with Young's schema therapy.

In addition, Dr Young discussed preliminary results of a three-year trial of Schema Therapy vs Transference-Focused Psychotherapy for Borderline Personality Disorder conducted in the Netherlands. Patients receiving Schema Therapy showed both a lower drop-out rate and a higher degree of symptom improvement than those receiving Transference-Focused Psychotherapy.

Overall, participants rated the workshop very highly. Open Leaves Bookshop were present at the workshop with a range of relevant publications including Dr Young's popular books. Dr Young proved to be an engaging and informative teacher, and there was a great deal of interest from participants in inviting Dr Young back to Australia to run a workshop teaching advanced Schema Therapy concepts and techniques.

Well, no workshop runs without a few hiccups! We certainly experienced some small difficulties with the set-up this time around, however our participants were very understanding, and we hope to iron out any such problems in future workshops. Overall it was an excellent two days, ending with participants looking forward to implementing schema therapy techniques in their own practice.

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