

Life Actualization Therapy (LAT)

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Life Actualization Therapy (LAT) is a practical attempt to synthesize the thinking of humanistic counselors and philosophers of actualization such as Rogers (1951) and Maslow (1970) and apply these concepts to contemporary human struggles. Although the LAT emphasis is on humanistic principles, LAT includes the significant contributions of other therapy models (Seligman, 2002) as well as models of moral development (Kohlberg, 1964). LAT does not claim to have discovered unique concepts about the nature of human needs and conflicts. Rather, it is an attempt to combine pre-existing and contemporary models of therapeutic intervention and apply them in an affirmative manner for the life enrichment of each client.

A central theme to Life Actualization Therapy is that opportunities in life are limited. The client learns to maintain awareness that he or she is using this limited time in the best, most fulfilling ways possible. With the LAT model, the client learns to take life-actualizing steps not on the eve of death or because of a

debilitating illness but simply for the therapeutic value they provide. Life actualizing goals and tasks are presented as challenges that emphasize all the possibilities and opportunities of living fully.

The authors of LAT believe that many of today's therapeutic strategies conceptualize the presenting client as either burdened by an abundance of undesirable traits or deficient in many desirable traits or skills.

These interventions apply short-term behavioral changes to meet the demands of third parties.

Consequently, many therapeutic approaches terminate the counseling relationship when the equilibrium is restored. In other words, once the client is back on his or her psychological feet, he or she is sent back into the world. LAT maintains that the therapeutic process is only half complete when the client has achieved a survival level. The LAT therapist addresses the client's growth to include his or her spirituality, relationship needs, the sensual self, self-discovered moral principles, and lifetime goals.

Applying LAT Techniques

At the beginning of LAT, the client completes a Life Actualization Inventory (see Appendix, the LAT Inventory). This inventory is a diagnostic instrument and a tool for therapeutic exploration rather than a psychometric test. The responses to the inventory allow the client and counselor to work together in clarifying the client's needs and unresolved issues. This process includes reflecting on client's life experiences and the personal coping mechanisms that have shaped his or her personality as well as those experiences that have blinded self-awareness and distorted psychological growth.

Extreme scores on the LAT inventory will generally dictate starting points for the therapeutic process. However, therapeutic dialogue and gaining insight about the nature of psychological issues is only the beginning. It is necessary that the client actively apply him or herself to identified goals and actions that will lead to personal improvements and actualization. The client and therapist contract assignments within each of the significant areas using LAT worksheets. (Note: due to space limitations the worksheets are not included with this article. The complete worksheet package will be available at the ACA Conference in the spring of 2006).

When clients enter Life Actualization Therapy, the therapist presents the hypothesis that the client will live five years from that date. The idea of five years to live typically allows clients to begin contemplating an end to life's gifts and opportunities without the inclination to panic and respond out of pure emotion. Five years generally seems distant enough to allow a reflective opportunity to compare the past with a

time-limited future. The LAT model encourages clients to begin to prioritize life changes, beginning with those that require immediate action versus those that require more planning. Eventually, these priorities will be the basis for identifying long-term, mid-term, and even short-term goals.

Although a consideration of life's end may be distressing, the LAT therapist works to promote the client's quality of life, not to enhance fears of impending loss. The LAT counselor does not advocate a purely hedonistic lifestyle. The LAT philosophy is not consistent with selling all of one's worldly possessions or spending life's savings without the awareness that life may last many years. Rather, the LAT clinician attempts to focus on the quality of life on a day-to-day basis. LAT is not the initial therapy of choice for the client who presents with acute Axis I symptoms or for clients having suicidal ideation or a recent history of suicidal gestures.

The second therapeutic emphasis with the LAT model is the personality of the client. The counselor and client work together to identify the client's undesirable traits, such as impatience or impulsiveness, and work to develop more desirable and effective personality traits. The critical question to be answered at this point in therapy is "What does one's current lifestyle says about what is important." The client and counselor explore how lifestyle changes could lead to a greater appreciation of life. They identify the client's fears, barriers, and resistance to change and then contract a systematic approach to overcoming them.

The third emphasis of the LAT model is a balance between personal and interpersonal fulfillment. This model maintains the philosophy that the actualizing individual loves life and wants to share the joy of living with others. While disturbed and frustrated people generally have unhealthy relationships, actualizing people have healthy relationships. LAT promotes the importance of interpersonal actualization as a role in overall self-actualization (Hanley & Abell, 2002). The counselor assists the client in reflecting on the lessons from past relationships, both satisfying and disappointing. They explore the client's missteps as well as errors of omission. The LAT counselor tends to de-emphasize a victim position in life while emphasizing an enabling, self-help attitude.

Goal fulfillment is a crucial step toward actualization, and LAT therapists address goal fulfillment in stages (Freedman & Phillips, 1989). Re-examining childhood dreams can reconnect the client to wishes and goals that have become forgotten or have fallen by the wayside to make room for more practical

achievements. For example, a child's dream to become President of the United States may now translate into an interest in politics or in a leadership position. LAT therapists assist clients in exploring why some of these goals have changed due to past or current life experiences and assess the possibility to re-explore them.

The fourth emphasis of the LAT model is an emphasis on the client's spiritual growth. This examination often begins with an assessment of client's evolution of beliefs from childhood through present day. The client and counselor work together to determine how much influence moral and spiritual ideals (or their absence) have had on past life decisions and present behaviors. This examination is followed by an exploration of spiritual needs that have been neglected or even abandoned but still linger in the client's basic sense of self. LAT therapists assist clients explore how life could be more complete if spirituality and moral principles were to become a critical part of their current lifestyle and decision-making process.

Sensual and sexual awareness is the fifth emphasis of the LAT model. Early childhood lessons about sensual and sexual behaviors are often unspoken and incorporated into the sense of self without question. However, LAT clients profit from a re-examination of childhood teachings and beliefs or otherwise fail to develop beyond childhood beliefs. This process is often very sensitive because most clients with unfulfilled sensual needs have developed defenses to either minimize or distort the effect they have on current behaviors and relationships. Sensual and sexual expression should not be confused with love.

Many interpretations of love often confuse this life-enriching quality with self-centered and short-lived motives such as enchantment, lust, or possessiveness. The ideal of actualizing love is a sharing of one's self in both physical and spiritual ways (Branden, 1989). The LAT philosophy asserts that it is impossible to touch the body of another person without affecting the mind and spirit of our selves and another. The LAT clinician advocates the appreciation of sensual pleasure but not at the expense of spiritual and interpersonal principles. The actualizing individual maintains a joy of living combined with a respect for the body and spirit of others.

Summary

Life Actualization Therapy (LAT) is an individualized therapy approach that employs a synthesis of many theoretical and philosophical models of human actualizing to the challenges of living a fulfilling life. The LAT counselor works to heighten the client's awareness that opportunities for life enhancement occur

every day and it is the mistake of denial to live as though there is unlimited time to fulfill unmet goals and dreams. The Life Actualization therapist emphasizes the client's interpersonal, spiritual, sensual, moral, and personal development. The LAT therapist encourages the client to maintain an awareness that life enriching opportunities are available every day, and acting on them with clarity of purpose can lead to a more joyful and actualized life.

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Appendix

Life Actualization Therapy

Personal Inventory

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Mostly Agree

3 = Not Sure

2 = Mostly Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

Score

1. I feel happy most of the time.

2. I believe my work makes a significant contribution to others

3. I take time to enjoy my family and/or friends

4. I think about making the most out of my time on earth.

5. There are major aspects of my personality that I would like to change

6. I find it easy to tell people I love them

7. The child that I once was would be happy with the adult that I have become

8. Most people are good

9. I enjoy music, theater or the arts

10. There are a lot of things that I've always wanted to do but I've never gotten around to doing them

11. I believe the rest of my life will be filled with wonderful things

12. God would be proud of the way I am living

13. Life is a beautiful thing

14. There is someone in my life with whom I can share sensual pleasure and joy

15. I would do almost anything for a million dollars

16. I make an effort to balance my life with work and play

17. I live by ethical principles

18. I have moments in life when I am nearly overwhelmed with joy.

19. I enjoy being creative and spontaneous

20. I am haunted by the mistakes I have made in life

21. I appreciate a good idea no matter where it comes from

22. I am a very fortunate person

23. I love to dance, even though I may not be great at it

24. I often find myself smiling for no specific reason

25. I am afraid that I might die before I have done all the things I want to do

26. I love to laugh

27. I can forgive those that have hurt me

28. I enjoy teaching and sharing with others

29. I can be comfortable in quiet solitude.

30. I have absolutely no regrets.

What do you believe are the obstacles to being more fulfilled in life?
