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ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THEORY IN PSYCHOLOGY

Ancient and Medieval Sources of Therapy

This entry discusses the precursors to contemporary therapies. It is very helpful for therapists to have knowledge of the roots of their profession. Since the earliest times humans, being social creatures, have been sitting together, discussing matters of suffering along the continuum of birth, life, and death. Such dialogic practices, later dubbed, ‘talking cures,’ and what is now called ‘therapy,’ had the intent of alleviating human suffering.

Healing practices in ancient times are chronicled in records of ancient history (circa 3200 BCE. to 476 CE) and medieval history (circa 476 CE to 1482 CE). Some brief descriptions of the ancient and medieval sources therapy in the geographic east, west, north, and south follow. Our limited selections emphasize the continuity between contemporary therapies based in humanistic and naturalistic worldviews and these early sources in religion, spirituality, and philosophy.

The ancient Greeks (8th century BCE to circa 600 CE) established many Asclepian temples for the sick. Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine and healing. Journeys to partake in Asclepian healing were often arduous and dangerous. The English word *heal* comes from Old English *haelan* with the etymological meaning of “to make whole.” Asclepian treatment emphasized the whole person: a recognition that human beings are composed of mind, body, heart, and spirit, and that treatment of physical illness required work, within the inner world of the sufferer, for the integration of these dimensions. Treatment included dream discussions, commitment making, oath taking, and praying to Asclepius.

The idea that the human psyche is complex and is a site of distress is evident in the Greek philosopher Plato (428/427 BCE to 348/347 BCE) who along with his mentor Socrates and his student Aristotle laid the foundations of Western philosophy and science. He developed the Tripartite theory of the soul: 1. the rational or intellectual (*logistikon*) that reasoned and reflected; 2. the appetitive (*epithumetikon*) that drives base desires such as sex and survival; and 3. the emotional (*thumoiides*) that dictated feelings. Plato saw the healthy mind as having these dimensions in a perfect balance, based on the rational and the emotional governing the appetitive.

In the Hellenistic period (323 BCE to 30 BCE) that followed the Classical Greek period, sources of therapy again emanated from philosophy. The word ‘therapy’ comes from the Greek *therapeia*, meaning ‘healing.’ The guiding idea behind therapy in ancient Greece is that strong passions and desires, such as hatred, anger, aggression, fear, anxiety, worries, lust, and greed all buffeted human beings. Hence, freedom from being controlled by these desires was considered central to human wholeness and wellbeing. Different philosophical schools proposed different conceptions of, and practices for, wellbeing. The Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics were philosophers who taught people how to work with their passions and desires. They recommended spiritual exercises such as meditation, contemplation, visualization, study, physical exercise, and the cultivation of meaningful relationships. However, most schools, particularly, the Epicureans and Stoics, saw tranquility (*ataraxia*) as essential to human happiness and wellbeing.

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The Galilean Jew, Jesus of Nazareth (circa 7-2 BCE to 30–33 CE), commonly known as Jesus Christ, was a renowned healer, and taught these practices to his disciples, which included prayer and “laying on of hands.” Unconditional love, faith, humility, and other virtues were understood and promulgated as powerful healing agents. The psycho-spiritual role of healing is evident in this tradition.

In ancient India, the historical Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, circa 563 BCE to 483 BCE) offered, through discourses and meditation instructions, a way to gain a clear and expansive consciousness that facilitated transcendence beyond life’s challenging experiences. To that end, his followers cultivated positive human capacities, known as *Brahmavihara*, or the four immeasurables: lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekka*). The guiding idea here is that while one cannot control life and the universe, one can control their responses to what life presents. Through practices aimed at establishing a calm, lucid, positive inner environment, and learning how to inhabit this inner space, the suffering person can come to accept human life as it is, without unrealistic views and expectations of what life *should* be.

In Ancient China, there was a similar emphasis on mental cultivation as a source of therapy that enabled practitioners to gain a deep and abiding sense of balance, harmony, and calmness in the midst of life’s vicissitudes. The classical Chinese worldview saw mental, physical, and social dimensions as part of a whole. Humans and all other beings were imbued with vital energy, known as *qi* (or *chi*). Healing modalities, as revealed in *Huangdi Neijing, The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*, (a core source for Chinese medicine for over two millennia) were naturalistic, holistic and integrative.

Lao-Tzu (a legendary figure and reputed author of the *Dao De Jing*, dated circa the 6th century BCE) and Confucius (551-479 BCE) were exemplary teachers of morals and virtues. Their teachings aimed to help human beings attune to the cosmic order as contiguously manifest in nature and the social world. Attunement was viewed as essential to engendering peace and harmony in human life and the universe. Both Daoism and Confucianism were based in the classical Chinese worldview that viewed the cosmos as governed by the dynamic and ceaseless interplay of polar opposite, yet complimentary, forces, known as *yin* and *yang*. Knowing the particular patterns of yin-yang interplay that govern a person constitutionally or environmentally is key to manifesting health and wellbeing. Within this context, Chinese sages carefully observed everything, including human beings, and sought to work with the dynamic forces of yin and yang to achieve balance and harmony. Various self-cultivation practices were developed to aid this balancing and harmonizing work, including study and practice of ethics, rituals, reading of classics, divinatory arts, poetry, martial arts, and meditation.

The Mayan civilization (established circa 1800 BCE) in South America had a holistic philosophy of health and wellbeing in some ways similar to that of the ancient Chinese with a focus on mind, body, emotions, spirit, and earth as interconnected and needing to be in harmony. The

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healer's job was to restore, through rituals and remedies, balanced life energy (*ch'ulel*) to a suffering person.

Similarly, the oral teachings of indigenous people throughout the North American continent understood healing as a process of restoring balance to the individual's ruptured relationships to community as well as to natural and spirit worlds. Their healing practices may have originated in the Paleolithic period with Siberian shamanic traditions. The shamans and medicine men and women were considered healers of the soul. Mental and physical illness in an individual is seen as a symptom of rupture and imbalance within the community of all beings.

Sweat Lodge type activity was part of these indigenous cultures and is apparently older than recorded history. It continues to be used for healing to this this day by North American indigenous peoples. The aim of these practices is realignment with the natural order and to facilitate healing connections within the relational field.

In contrast to the significant visibility of naturalistic, spiritual, and humanistic paradigms of mental wellbeing that were described above from diverse ancient cultural contexts, the medieval culture of Europe was largely dominated by the belief that mental disorders were the devil's work. The treatment for this was exorcism and torture. (Note: demonology was not confined to medieval Europe: for example, the Ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, and Chinese also believed in demon possession.) During the Dark Ages of Europe (5th to 15th centuries CE), exorcism by burning and other tortures became wide spread. The death of the person was viewed as the successful liberation of the person's soul from possession by these dark forces.

During the Dark Ages in Europe, the Muslim world was carrying on the humanistic worldviews of the ancient and Hellenistic Greeks. For example, Ibn Sina (980 CE to 1037 CE), greatly influenced by the Greek philosophers developed a systematic account of human psychology and healing. Other Muslim scholars, such as Al Ghazali (1058 CE to 1111 CE) as well as Ibn-Khaldun (1332 CE to 1406 CE), further developed views of human personality that are precursors for modern psychology.

This entry has given a select overview of early sources of therapy. The healing efforts took the form of spiritual exercises, religious ceremonies, study, ethical practices, and discipline. Healing practices were based on naturalistic and holistic worldviews about the nature of being human and the cosmos. The intent was to alleviate human suffering and existential despair, and to find some peace and connection within one's self and with that which was greater than the individual self.

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Further Readings

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