

An Adlerian Approach to Anxiety

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Adlerians have typically associated anxiety as being in the service of a goal which has an aim of avoiding a defeat. Therefore, anxiety fulfills a purpose of blocking further activity which may eventually lead to that defeat. Thus, "the ordeal is evaded without disclosing, even to the owner, the hated feeling of inferiority. All neurotic patients exclude every part of life in which they do not feel strong enough to be the conqueror" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1967, p. 304). Most symptoms are thus viewed as behavioral attempts to rescue an individual from potentially ego-tainting realizations and confrontations. For example, compulsive ideas may serve as a means of putting at a distance the test of one's greatness. Seen in this light, most of Adler's interpretations of anxiety are ringed by a perimeter of manipulative and often pathological self-serving responses designed unconsciously to protect through concealment.

Adlerian thinking can allow for a broader interpretation of anxiety due to its flexible holistic underpinnings. I would like to extend Adlerian thinking about anxiety so as to define it as a primitive organismic response which may well serve as a protective signal system directing the person to rethink or re-integrate the experience which, at first glance, is viewed as unpleasant. A clear example of how anxiety may be a facilitator of healthier awareness and therefore adjustment comes from the training of the analysts themselves.

Emotions as Tools

No doubt most psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic institutes encourage, if not insist, that the analyst in training utilize any feeling which the patient elicits within him (analyst) to better understand the coping style of that patient. If you feel guilt, hostility, anxiety, or defeat, for example, at any particular time while working with a patient, it must not be dismissed as a mere countertransference or pathologic responsiveness on the analyst's behalf. Your anxiety, no less hostility, may serve to reveal a provocative coping strategy woven within the tapestry of the patient's life style. The feelings elicited within you by this patient most likely recapitulates the very feelings and dynamics going on outside of therapy with others in the patient's life. In advising analysts to respect and utilize their intuition Kelman (1963) says that

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intuitive feelings should be nurtured and certainly not discarded. "They may come from the deepest wells of your being. You have much to learn in and while holding on to them. . . I regard it as a prime requirement of a good analyst, ultimately, to be able to allow his intuitive feelings free rein, to respect them and to learn how to evaluate and utilize them effectively in therapy. Your intuitive feeling may be one of compassion or revulsion, chaos, or terror. You may see a picture of a little girl you want to cuddle or of a quiet soft-padded panther to whom you respond with a chill" (p. 19). Kelman typically uses a cornucopia of adjectives which not only beautifully illustrate the myriad ways an experienced clinical eye takes in the panorama of a patient, but it is also in keeping with his spirit of educating a therapist to be with each component of a patient. In essence, Kelman urges the therapist to use his feelings as a tool by which he could best comprehend himself and the world. I also encourage Adlerians to infuse this interpretation of anxiety as a directional force within their own orientation with patients. If we, as analysts, use our own anxieties as springboards to rethink our positions or reexamine our worlds, we must not dichotomize the patient's use of anxiety as different or less functional than our own. A patient's anxiety, hostility, etc. are to be respected and understood as a guiding force yet to be deciphered.

Case Vignette

Perhaps a case vignette juxtapositioning an orthodox Adlerian interpretation of anxiety with my extended extrapolation of Adler would help clarify this point.

John M: John is a forty-year old self-made industrialist of Italian descent who was raised in a somewhat "old world" environment where gender distinction between men and women was rather clearly delineated. John's financial prosperity was matched only by his social popularity. Women eagerly sought after him and John reveled in the successful sexual experiences he shared with them. Things progressed relatively well in his life until he met a beautiful and educated woman in Belgium on a business trip. She was sophisticated and desirable. When John went to have sex with her, he was unable to sustain an erection, an event quite unlike anything that has ever happened to him before. He was befuddled and concerned. Each time he attempted sex the scenario of erectile dysfunction transpired. It was for this problem that he consulted me.

Despite its brevity, we could make some assumptions about this case from an orthodox Adlerian perspective such as, his fear of failure with such a desirable woman created a performance anxiety which militated against a successful encounter. We could talk about John's approaching this woman in an unequal, competitive way whereby his social interest level is maladaptive and hovering in the egocentric protective zone. We may even infer his erectile dysfunction as reflecting a pulse beat of hostility purposely depriving the woman of pleasure.

Looking at anxiety organismically, however, we might suspect John's anxiety as being a friendly warning signal which is compelling him to rethink his perception of this woman and their relationship. Perhaps at an intuitive or "subceiving" level John is picking up an aggressive, controlling, subversive anger within this woman which is skillfully disguised and barely apparent. If John attempts to interpret the message of his anxiety, he may better know the parameters of the person with whom he is interacting. On the other hand, if a more pathologic interpretation of his anxiety is attempted, this may be engaging him in the side show while missing the main arena. A holistic interpretation of anxiety must allow for anxiety and its various intensities as being a directional radar system guiding a person to the path of greater awareness than always being his escape route.

Reference

- Ansbacher, H. L., & Ansbacher, R. R. *The individual psychology of Alfred Adler*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Kelman, H. *The process in psychoanalysis*. New York: The American Institute for Psychoanalysts, 1963.