

Some Basic Principles of Adlerian Psychology

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There have been many discussions about the differences between the various schools of thought in psychology, and anyone with an analytical mind can easily discover differences, controversies, or similarities. We might define a school of thought as an entity whose principles should be thoroughly studied and understood, the most important part of which is the synthetic unity of understanding the related balance of the principles. Thus mentioning the basic principles of Adlerian psychology should evoke from the reader a synthetic quality of thinking, where he relates one thought with another and thinks in movements rather than in dimensions.

The name "Individual Psychology," given by Adler to his concept of psychology, has been a source of misunderstanding. The meaning is: *Psychology of the unique, undivided personality*. Herewith Adler expressed the view that man's uniqueness exists only once and that he must be understood as a unity. *We can understand the parts only through the total.*

As there is no end to the refinement in our method of analyzing parts, there is no end to the concept of totality. Adler sees man as a totality, belonging to a larger whole. He goes as far as seeing him as part of the cosmos, which is an infinite thought.

Another basic concept is that *man is seen in motion*, constantly on his way. Consequently the question arises: "Where is he going?" If we know where a person is going, we can understand why he is moving the way he is moving. In other words: we understand his behavior. Thus Adlerian psychology adheres to the *principle of affinity*, expressed in the concept of *goal*.

This goal has a starting point in a combination of factors found in early childhood. With his inheritance and the thousandfold impressions given by his physique, his environment (people and surroundings), as well as the influences of climate, culture, and society, the child creates

his very own way of survival and development. The chances are that he not merely is "on his way," but that he protects or defends himself in his very own way—according to Adler, with his "*life style*."

Essential in Adlerian psychology is the concept of *creative ability*. It is with his creative ability that the child tries to find his way in an unknown world, in which he has to find his place and has to achieve significance. Out of what is innate and what is outside of him, the individual at an early age creates his personal goal, which from there on dictates his actions, thinking, and feeling. Only if this personal goal is included in his concept of his significance can he become an integrated personality. This could be called the concept of *overall-goal*.

Instead he may individualize more and more instead of developing in the direction of belonging to a larger unit—the development of functioning outside of the total, against a personal "complement," where *personal prestige* counts more than progress of mankind. Functioning in the sense of individual significance can only exist on condition of belonging to the total. Individualization becomes isolation, which is the beginning of the neurotic attitude.

In Adlerian psychology *man is seen as a social being*. Therefore emphasis is stressed on his way of *living with and cooperating with his fellow men in relationships, work, and love*.

Every action serves a purpose. Both action and lack of action characterize the individual. If the individual has capacities which he does not develop or use, his lack of action is typical for his life style. The basic thought is: *Use is more important than possession*.

According to Adler, there is not merely one way in which the individual can use what he has got; his creative ability is not limited to finding one certain combination out of what is innate and outside. He has *choice*, because as a human being he is capable of reasoning. If there were no choice, the individual would be inexorably submitted to his inheritance, environment, and the thousands of factors that influence his life; he would be entirely determined and therefore never could use any creative ability. Whatever he might do, he would be determined by his fate. However, when we study life as it presents itself, we observe that man is capable of turning negative into positive. He may be found either on the negative or on the positive side of life as a result of the choice he makes out of all the possibilities. In order to justify his position on the negative side it is important that he should not understand what he is doing so that "unconsciously" he can continue to follow his personal goal. For what may seem a storage

place of obscure drives for which one cannot be responsible, the unconscious and subconscious, Adler coined the term "the Ununderstood."

It follows logically that Adlerian psychology uses a technique of tolerance, patience, and encouragement. The adult's insecurity and feelings of inadequacy are not very different from the child's. Both are facing difficulties for which they are not prepared. Nothing can objectively be a difficulty; we call a thing difficult as long as we don't know what to do about it. If we don't do anything at all, we turn the difficulty into a problem. This responsibility generally seems too big to accept and for many people this is the crucial point at which nervous symptoms crop out.

Since man is a social being, who would not be able to survive by himself or to reach the present level of civilization all alone, but borrows and receives values from others constantly, he also is co-responsible for his fellow men. According to Adlerian principles, *mankind strives toward perfection*. The individual, as part of mankind, has this inclination and at the same time has to *accept his imperfection*. Striving toward perfection with the acceptance of being imperfect leads toward improvement: man is "on his way."