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The Importance of the Therapy Discourse

You just got home from your first therapy appointment and you're confused that the therapist hasn't given you the secret key to make all your bad emotions go away. You didn't dig into your childhood to find your hidden internalized trauma, you weren't shown different ink splotches and asked to make out pictures in them, you didn't even get to cry on an uncomfortable high couch while hugging a pillow. Instead, you began learning a different language to describe all the problems that you were supposed to be fixing. This isn't just your first session either, you're probably going to be learning a new vocabulary (and way of thinking) about emotions and behaviors.

So why is so much time spent on the seemingly inconsequential words we use to describe the problems that therapy aims to alleviate? The main reason is that if you can name a feeling then you can identify it and then are better prepared to react to it. It's like having a manual to fix a broken water heater, but all the sections have labels like "Blown gasket" or "Loose turn gauge," and all you know is that your shower is cold. If you can't name the problem then solving it becomes much more difficult. "Feeling bad" is a starting point, but being able to distinguish between feeling sad, angry, hopeless, or bummed out gives you a clearer direction to take to counter these emotions.

In reference to a discrimination case, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about the

idea that the proper language is necessary to create change within a system. Crenshaw gives the example of a black woman's case against a business who did not hire her because she was a black woman. The case was dismissed because the company hired both black people and women, but the judge couldn't see that all the black people the company hired were men, and all the women the company hired were white. Crenshaw makes the claim that it was because there was not the proper language to describe the idea of discrimination having a different effect when one person represents two different marginalized groups. For Crenshaw's example, the woman was not just a victim of racism or sexism, but a unique bias that stems from the combination of both. For this, Crenshaw used the word "intersectionality," because once the problem has a name, there are more clear steps to find a solution.

People who are struggling with mental health issues are often facing a similar problem to the judge in the example, being they do not have the language to describe the issues they are experiencing, so they can't clearly see the cause. Crenshaw's example also shows that it is typically when issues compound (like racism and sexism) that our language fails to be able to describe the issues more clearly. Mental health is complicated and confusing, and there is almost always more than one cause of an illness, so it is important to learn a new vocabulary for identifying when there are multiple issues at play.

Although there is a preconceived notion that therapy aims to eliminate so called "negative emotions," (a phrase that will quickly leave your vocabulary if you stick with therapy) it is really about feeling them fully, and understanding why you are feeling them. You may find it

easy to describe a feeling when you are excited or happy about something, and you can

probably easily identify the cause of that emotion. When you're sad or angry however, it can sometimes feel like your language fails you and you're unable to clearly identify the cause of the issue.

Let's say you are mad at a friend for something they said that was meant to be taken as a joke. It can be hard to describe exactly what you are feeling because it's really a combination of many emotions, not just anger; you might be embarrassed because of who else heard the joke, sad because you feel like someone you trusted let you down, and irrational because you know that nobody was trying to hurt you. And that's just the surface, there could be shame from not being able to take a joke, or another layer of something else that has been bothering you that you're projecting onto this situation. The point is that what may seem like just anger can be so much more complicated than that, but our instinct is to just put a one word label on it. Crenshaw's example shows a similar failure of our language where a complex issue gets boiled down to just be about "sexism" or "racism" and the nuance gets lost along the way.

Peer review and collaboration are at the forefront of medicine, politics, and other applied academic worlds because the process of talking about problems tends to generate new ideas for solutions. All of these worlds also have an evolved and specific discourse used to talk about their issues because of how important it is to be accurate and succinct when describing important issues. Although it seems like therapy language is just recently making its way into the public's vocabulary with words like "gaslighting" or the concept of "setting boundaries" becoming abundant in social media and real world conversations, a lot of this language has been used for decades, and has been proven to help people struggling with mental health disorders, or just people going through a rough patch.

James Baldwin explains that language is a powerful tool that is created for the purpose of having more control over their circumstances. As he explains, “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate.” Baldwin’s take on the purpose of language reflects how language is used in therapy, to describe and therefore control. The early stages of therapy aim to evolve your language to better understand your reality. Humans have an inherent need to talk about their problems in order to better understand them and find solutions.Baldwin's use of the word “submerged” does a great job painting a picture of what it feels like struggling with mental health issues that you can’t describe. It can feel like you’re drowning in your own head, but the discourse of therapy can serve as a lifeline to pull you to shore.

Works Cited

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Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “The urgency of intersectionality.” TED, December 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o.