

## The Myth of the Therapeutic Lie

Lying is not Validation

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The Validation theory, developed by Naomi Feil, M.S.W., A.C.S.W., tells us that it is normal or age appropriate for the very old person to return to the past to resolve unfinished business or life struggles before they die. There are 11 principles on which Validation is based. Additionally, there are several theoretical assumptions from behavioral, analytical and humanistic psychologies that are the underpinnings of those principles.

The Validation principle that relates to being truthful to a person with dementia is, "People live on several levels of awareness, often at the same time". The theoretical assumption that supports this is that. "There are several levels of consciousness." (Sigmund Freud) This means that we do not lie to those with dementia because we know that on some level they know the truth.

A second principle: Human beings can see with the mind's eye. (Penfield, 1950) The old person, seeing with the mind's eye, restores someone from their past to wrap up an unfinished relationship or to fulfill an unmet need. In the moment, the old person may see a mother who has died. The old person may need to talk to his mother, perhaps to vent a strong emotion that has lain dormant for some time or perhaps to simply feel nurtured, secure and loved again. Deep down on another level of awareness the old person knows that their loved one is dead.

Consider the following interaction with a Validation worker and 86-year-old gentlemen, which takes place in an assisted living dementia care living center. He is found walking down the hallway, crying and asking various people if they have seen his mother. A Validation worker responds, "You miss your mother and want to see her?" Resident: " I wish I could see her right now, where is she?" V.W: " Tell me about your mother. What does she look like?" (The resident's preferred sense is visual, the Validation worker encourages the person to talk about their loved one using the visual sense.) R. (crying) "She was beautiful and she was good to me. She took good care of me". V.W. " What kinds of things did she do for you?" (asking factual questions: who, what, where, when, how) R. "She did everything, she took care of me and I need to see her now." V.W. " She took good care of you, what kinds of things did she do for you, was she a good cook?" R. (crying becomes much more intense) " You ask me if she was a good cook, she was a great cook but all she ever made was oatmeal. My father, the no good drunk, spent most of his pay every week on booze and many times all she could fix for us was oatmeal. But she made the best oatmeal it was sweet and buttery and she knew how to make it many different ways." VW. (empathetically listening) R. " She took good care of us but he was no good." You must think I'm crazy, an 86 year old man looking for his mother. I know she's gone."

In this particular case the resident not only knew that his mother was dead but, after being validated, verbalized it. Although the goal or intention of

Validation is not to bring a person back to reality, this sometimes occurs. The most important outcome is that the person is helped to express his feelings and these feelings are acknowledged by an empathetic, trusted, caregiver. As the third Validation principle states: "Painful feelings that are expressed, acknowledged and validated by a trusted listener will diminish. The old person feels relieved. His hurt and anxiety lessen. Painful feelings that are ignored or suppressed will gain strength."

Exploring the older person's reality in order to enter their world with empathy is not lying. When a 90-year-old woman demands to see her mother, the Validation worker does not agree that the old woman's mother is alive, and say, "Your mother will be here soon. Have some cookies while you wait." The Validation worker does not divert or re-direct after lying. And the Validation worker does not argue and admonish, "Your mother died long ago." The Validation worker helps the old woman express her need for her mother: "Is something wrong with your mother? Is she sick? What do you want to tell her right now?" The Validation worker supplies the facts. The Validation worker also uses the same tense as the old person, going where the old person is at that moment.

Perhaps the reason that some people think that Validation condones lying is because many times the Validation worker speaks to the person in the present tense since they are entering that person's present reality. If someone is a visual

person and is talking about their mother the Validation worker would ask, "What color eyes does your mother have?" which enters the present reality of the old person, versus "What color eyes did she have?" This is not lying, but accepting that the old person has returned to the past and sees his mother clearly with his mind's eye.

Validation teaches that we never lie to the person who has dementia because we need to establish their trust in order to Validate their feelings. When we lie we lose their trust because on some level they already know the truth. Example: An 80 year old lady with early dementia is admitted to an assisted living dementia care facility. Her family tells her that she is going to stay there for a few days until they return from vacation and they will return to take her back home with them. This resident, although confused and forgetful, holds on to this statement and repeatedly asks the caregivers when her family is going to return to take her home. If the family had been instructed about Validation they would have been honest with their loved one and hence the admission, even though difficult, would go more smoothly because the person would be treated with honesty and respect.

Another example would be the resident who asks for his wife who is dead. Caregivers reply: "She'll be here to see you later." The resident may not remember much but he clings to that statement. Day after day, he asks: "When will my wife come back to me?" Caregivers continue to lie. In time he loses trust in the caregivers. He knows that what they say is not true. If the caregivers

were trained in Validation they would encourage the resident to talk about his wife. They would match his emotion and encourage him to express his needs. They would accept the fact that there is a reason behind his behavior. He has not simply "forgotten his wife died." He needs to grieve for her. He needs a trusted caregiver to help him resolve his unfinished business. A validating caregiver would accompany the resident throughout this process of resolution in an honest and empathetic manner. When the emotion is expressed and someone listens with empathy it is relieved. The old man no longer needs to search for his wife. He feels safe with the caregiver, whom he trusts. He always knew, on a deep level of awareness that his wife had died. He saw her in her grave. He can never forget that.

Don't all people with dementia deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and to be listened to instead of lied to?

### Validation Principles

Clients should be accepted as they are.

All People are valuable, including those who are maloriented or disoriented.

There is a reason behind the behavior of very old disoriented people.

Very old maloriented and disoriented people are in the final life stage, resolution, and are trying to resolve unfinished life tasks, crises, or other business in the final stage of their lives.

When recent memory fails, older adults try to restore balance to their lives by retrieving earlier memories.

When eyesight fails, they use the mind's eye to see; when hearing goes, they listen to sounds from the past.

When present reality becomes painful, some clients survive by retreating and stimulating memories of the past.

Painful feelings that are expressed, acknowledged and validated by a trusted listener will diminish. Painful feelings that are ignored or suppressed will gain in strength.

Listening with empathy builds trust, reduces anxiety and restores dignity.

People live on several levels of awareness, often at the same time.

Feelings experienced in the present can trigger memories of having felt similarly in the past.

## References

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