

Maxims of the Therapeutic Community: Act As If

'Act as if' is a basic concept for those who travel through the Therapeutic Community. This concept at first glance seems to run counter to the perceived wisdom of changing the way we think before we can change the way we act. But it requires at least an element of thinking that we can change the way we act before we embark on this course. 'Act as if' requires us to behave in a way that we would rather be, than the way we have been. We have all at some time put on an act of confidence when we feel like hiding in a hole. We may have attended a job interview where we feel inside that we may be out of our depth, or had to stand up in public and speak to a group of people when the butterflies start. But we take a deep breath and enter in to the part of acting confidently and we begin to adapt to the part. Despite feelings to the contrary, we often 'act as if' in our families and communities. It means keeping a right attitude and adopting shared values. It avoids stereotyping and discrimination and includes being self motivated and adopting an optimistic outlook about our future. George de Leon, whose work founded the Therapeutic Community model, suggests, 'In the Therapeutic Community view, acting as if is not just an exercise in conformity but a powerful mechanism for making a more complete psychological change. Feelings, insights, and altered self-perceptions often follow rather than precede behaviour change'. So, this means that trying a new role often leads us to embrace a new way of thinking. As we act on our desire to become, we reinforce the behaviours necessary for the new role. Act as if you already are, and you will become. The new role will start to fit and the need for acting as if will no longer be necessary. You become the person you want to be. If you want to become a writer, start writing. If you want to be an actor, start acting (isn't that what we are doing when we act as if?). If you want to change your self centred lifestyle, start helping others, become a volunteer. Want to be addiction free? Start acting as if you are already there. Acting as if does not have room for the negative. There is no 'I Can't', or 'I am not good enough'. What do you want to become? You already know it. That still small voice inside will guide you. You will pick up the skills as you go along. This is 'on the job' training. Positive feelings lead to positive actions. 'Acting as if' is focusing on what is beneficial to us as well as others. So the order is 'act as if, think as if, feel as if, believe as if'. A variant of acting as if is the phrase, 'do it right, then you will understand why you have been doing it wrong'. This helps to overcome scepticism. In particular, it speaks to those individuals who resist acting as if, often seeking intellectual understanding before they try to change. This instruction directs us to go ahead and change the behaviour even before we understand why the change is good for us. It helps to bypass the question 'What if?' and goes straight to the heart of the matter. More generally, by living right, we come to understand why we have been living wrong.

About the Author

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