

Unconditional Positive Regard

By Dudley Tower, Ph.D.

I was first exposed to the concept of “Unconditional Positive Regard” while studying to become a psychotherapist in the mid-1990’s. Carl Rogers in his book “On Becoming a Person” outlined three conditions – embodied in the psychotherapist - that are necessary in order to facilitate the psychological growth and development of the Patient/Client. Two of these conditions are actual qualities in the therapist that are themselves developmental in nature – personal congruence and empathy – but the third is a condition I have tried to practice in every single one of my classes over the past eight years at OLLI at Furman University: Unconditional Positive Regard.

In Rogers’ own words:

“When the therapist is experiencing a warm, positive and acceptant attitude toward what is the client, this facilitates change. It involves the therapist’s genuine willingness for the client to be whatever feeling is going on in him at that moment, - fear, confusion, pain, pride, anger, hatred, love, courage, or awe. It means that the therapist cares for the client, in a non-possessive way. It means that he prizes the client in a total rather than a conditional way. By this I mean that he does not simply accept his client when he is behaving in certain ways, and disapprove of him when he behaves in other ways. It means an outgoing positive feeling without reservations, without evaluations. The term we have come to use for this is unconditional positive regard. Again research studies show that the more this attitude is experienced by the therapist, the more likelihood there is that therapy will be successful.” (p. 62)

Unconditional positive regard is not something only left to the practice of psychotherapists with their clients. It can help create better relationships with your spouse, friends, relatives, and even total strangers. And, as in the classes I teach, it can also create a group environment conducive to learning and growth. Everyone has an ego protected by defense mechanisms. If the ego feels under attack – no matter how mildly – it defends itself. Any perceived criticism or judgment will trigger negative emotions, activate our defense mechanisms, and shut down any growth or learning we might squeeze out of the situation. Instead of opening ourselves up to change and growth, we automatically shift to a mode of “personality maintenance” – which is closed and defended.

On the other hand, if we can create an environment of unconditional positive regard, there is no need for a person to defend their sense of self. The person’s identity can

remain open to new interpretations, expressions, and potentialities. This state of personal expansion creates an adaptive/growth pattern of development necessary to the achievement of our potential as human beings.

I have personally used this condition not only in a therapeutic environment, but also with my wife and family members. Sometimes this can be more difficult than with total strangers or people we work with. We get into patterns of judgment around those closest to us, and sometimes even the littlest things a family member does causes sirens to go off in our heads. Before we know it, we have said something or our face contorts in a nasty way – signaling our disapproval. Think back, when did showing your disapproval to a loved one ever produce a satisfying result? And yet, we keep doing it over and over again.

Making unconditional positive regard a rule in my classes does not always work 100%. I remember one student who made a point of not saying anything when he disagreed with someone, but he would ever so subtly lower his head and shake it side to side. Yes, even body language counts. It seems ridiculous that a grown 70 year old man could not help but show his judgment in some little way, but all you have to do is look at our politicians to see the low levels of personal development displayed by even our highest elected officials.

The problem with unconditional regard is that it is absolutely essential for the creation of a learning environment where a person can grow to achieve their potential. However, most people have egos that are constantly trying to one up, or assert themselves over other persons' egos. With everyone in the world judging and criticizing everyone else, it is no wonder our society as a whole displays such low levels of personal development. Everyone is constantly defending themselves from everyone else. And around and around we go.

I encourage all of my students to just try it - at home or where they work. Try being completely accepting of whomever you are with, and then see if you notice a different reaction in them than you are used to seeing. They might be suspicious at first, especially if you have a long history. But, my guess is that it won't take long before you start getting the results you want: better relationships, less bickering and arguing, less stress, more fun – and if you are lucky they will catch on and begin treating you nicer. Everybody wins.