

## Educational Therapy: Recognizing the Interplay between Emotions and Learning Issues.

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Ten-year old Avrumie is shlepped to yet another “tutor.” He is dyslexic, has ADHD, and is becoming increasingly oppositional. Despite many sessions with tutors and other skilled reading specialists, and promises of prizes and rewards, his rudimentary reading level has not improved. Yet his parents refuse to give up. They recite *Tehillim* as they wait for their appointment.

Avrumie plops down in the chair and puts his head down, ignoring the tutor’s friendly greeting and questions. The educational therapist quietly sits down, facing him directly. “You really don’t want to be here,” she says. Avrumie nods; the first sign of a slowly budding relationship.

This is an example of educational therapy; the practice of merging counseling techniques and academic remediation to help students develop academic skills, healthy coping skills, and ultimately positive feelings about themselves. Its premise is that all learning takes place within a milieu of skills, emotions, attitudes, and motivations. Dealing with feelings helps learning. Moreover, children with learning difficulties often need assistance in navigating the frustrations that their problems engender.

Utilizing this approach, the educational therapist will understand the importance of developing a positive relationship with the student. Working on the relationship is not merely making the activities enjoyable and telling the child that you are doing it for them. It involves careful listening to the student’s resentments about having these struggles, his skepticism about whether he can be helped, and his reasons for resisting the process. A child coming for academic remediation is asked to expose her greatest area of weakness. Nobody likes doing that, especially a person who already has a fragile sense of worth. With sensitivity, the specialist will help the student work through these feelings. S/he will give the student the opportunity to relate an area of strength or special interest, and might share with the child her own experiences of imperfections and challenges.

Through active listening, the specialist will convey respect for the students’ feelings and encouragement to express them more freely. This will avoid the scenario of a student silently resisting doing the work because it makes her feel “dumb;” yet she cannot share these feeling with the tutor. The specialist will exhibit positive regard for the students. When the tutor shows pleasure in working with the student, expresses appreciation for his ideas, sense of humor, and/or other attributes, s/he creates a corrective emotional experience for the student, who will feel, possibly for the very first time, that a “teacher” really likes him.

At times, issues which impede the learning process have to be dealt with first in order to facilitate motivation and engagement. Frequently, students have negative concepts of themselves as learners and are convinced that they just cannot achieve. The specialist will have to work on generating hope within the student. Demystification of students’ learning issues will help them gain a better understanding of how their mind works and show them how they *can* learn with the new techniques the tutor has to offer. Specialist and student may spend some time together reading stories about people who have achieved success despite learning issues or other

challenges.

Some students present themselves as excellent students although they are failing the majority of their subjects. These students require understanding of their denial, and assistance in moving beyond it. Real acceptance of the reality of one's difficulties brings inner peace. Self-acceptance emerges, as well as the ability to start working on doing the very best with the tools they do have.

Frequently students are helped by bringing to their awareness their negative self-talk and ineffective coping strategies. In one instance, a student who constantly engaged in negative self-talk was asked to draw a picture of a bike and to verbalize what he was thinking. "I can't draw," he said as he started drawing. "I don't know how to draw a bicycle." He drew the wheels and said, "I don't know what I'm doing." When he drew the seat too tall, he started laughing, acted silly, and abandoned his task. This was characteristic of the student's approach to work which was challenging to him. The tutor modeled attempting to draw, while using affirming self-messages, "Well I don't know how to draw a bike, but I know how a bike looks and I can try," etc. By heightening awareness of his customary attitudes and responses, and by teaching him healthier strategies, the student was able to improve. Today, he catches himself when engaging in negative self-talk, and is a much more confident student.

Relaxation skills are taught to students who struggle with anxiety related to school work or reading. Often a dyslexic child's reading performance will deteriorate markedly in the face of anxiety, and a detrimental cycle ensues. Learning relaxation skills can help these students immensely. Students who freeze up when taking a test can also benefit greatly from relaxation techniques.

Students are taught to employ visualization techniques in order to improve performance. Research has demonstrated that performance rises when visualization exercises are combined with practice. Basketball players who spent time visualizing themselves throwing the ball through the hoop performed better than those who did not. Students are taught to visualize themselves doing well, remaining calm, speaking up in class, or succeeding in any area which may be challenging for them. They are assisted in developing frustration tolerance, organizational skills, and appropriate behavior in the classroom.

As this article has described, the distinction between most learning specialists and one utilizing therapeutic techniques, is the focus on feelings and coping skills along with academic remediation. For example, one method of helping students which most learning specialists utilize, is writing a list of skills or steps needed in order to complete a task. For instance, they will write a list of steps to use while writing an essay; this helps the student have a reference sheet and guide. A specialist employing therapeutic techniques will also make a list of behaviors and feelings that will help when writing an essay, or will allow the student to even begin writing one!

With a lot of hard work, parental involvement, and teacher support, students receiving educational therapy will learn how to motivate themselves and manage their emotions. They will acquire excellent academic skills, and most importantly, learn to accept and value themselves. Students will recognize their strengths and all that they have to offer to themselves, their families and their community.

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