

## Chapter Three

---

# *The essence of psychological problems*

There are two kinds of stories in psychotherapy. The first kind attempts to explain what psychological problems are. Psychiatric diagnoses are perhaps the best known of these stories. The second kind of stories are explanations for *why* psychological problems exist. These are the stories that talk about things like ids, needs, dysfunctional thoughts, and maladaptive behaviors. From this point on I will deal with the two kinds of stories in different ways. First I'll offer a new story about what psychological problems actually are. Then I'll outline a story that explains why this problem exists.

When I discuss psychological problems, I mean troubles as they are experienced within an individual. I don't mean troubles as viewed by others, from the outside. Specifically, I won't be talking about people who are deemed to have psychological problems on the say-so of others. Sometimes, for example, spouses or parents or medical authorities consider their partners or children or patients to have problems of a psychological nature. Unless the partners or children or patients, however, also think they have problems, then they won't be part of this discussion. For all sorts of reasons some people from time to time are deemed to have psychological disorders that explain some of the ways they behave when people in authority find their behavior objectionable. What to do with people who don't think they have problems even though others think they do is beyond the scope of this book. In this book I have in mind only those people who present willingly to a psychotherapist for problems they are experiencing. I'm also assuming that the problem is not due to an underlying physical deterioration or malfunction such as dementia or epilepsy.

So, when people come to us with psychological problems, what is it that they are experiencing? Psychological problems exist when people experience perceptions that they don't want to experience and are unable to alter them. By perceptions I simply mean ideas, sensations, and experiences—in fact, anything that is going on inside someone's head (which is the only place that problems are experienced).

In psychological difficulties, a person's behaviors, thoughts, or feelings are *never* the problem. The only psychological problem is the degree to which a person experiences distress *about* particular behaviors, thoughts, or feelings. Not leaving the house is a problem only for those people who find themselves staying at home

## *What's been said*

A psychological problem is experienced whenever *unwanted* perceptual activity *endures*. I'm calling this the Law of Psychological Distress.

A problem can be defined only by the person experiencing it.

## *The big deal*

The behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that we often think are the problem in fact are not the problem.

## *Coming up*

The nature of living.

When living is in conflict.