

# AN INTERVIEW WITH EDITH PACKER ON PSYCHOTHERAPY

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*Edith Packer is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Laguna Hills, California, and co-founder (along with her husband, economist George Reisman) of The Jefferson School of Philosophy, Economics, and Psychology. She has practiced psychotherapy for twenty-five years, the first ten in New York City. Since 1983, Dr. Packer has delivered nine lectures at TJS conferences on various aspects of psychology and psychotherapy. (Her lectures are available in both taped and written form from The Jefferson School, P. O. Box 2934, Laguna Hills, CA 92653.) TIA's interviewer was Jerry Kirkpatrick, marketing professor at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and author of the recently published book In Defense of Advertising: Arguments from Reason, Ethical Egoism, and Laissez-Faire Capitalism (Quorum Books, Westport, CT); in addition, Dr. Kirkpatrick is a former therapy patient of Dr. Packer's. The purpose of the interview was to explore the nature, techniques, and benefits of psychotherapy.*

**TIA:** Dr. Packer, what is psychotherapy and can everyone benefit from it?

**EP:** You have to define what psychology is before you can define psychotherapy. Today, the usual definition of psychology is that it studies either mental processes or behavior, or both. I don't have a final definition, but psychology is the science that studies how the mind works, both cognitively and emotionally. Equally important, I would include what is always left out today, namely, that it studies how the subconscious and conscious mind interact and how that interaction manifests itself in the total method of an individual's mental functioning.

**TIA:** Why is it necessary to include "interaction between the subconscious and conscious mind" in the definition of psychology?

**EP:** Because so much of an individual's mental functioning and resulting behavior is based on his personal experiences, particularly from childhood, and the conclusions he has drawn from those experiences. The conclusions, as I have written before, are integrated by the subconscious and stored there as core evaluations.<sup>1</sup> Over time, the core evaluations develop into a basic system analogous to the programming of a computer. This system then governs how a person relates to reality—how he interprets the data of reality that he perceives.

**TIA:** And that programming is one person's unique psycho-epistemology?

**EP:** Yes. Everyone's psycho-epistemology is strongly influenced by his subconscious core evaluations, and it's important to realize that an individual's core evaluations can be consistent with the nature of reality, or they can contradict it. If they are consistent, and his conscious premises and

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1. Edith Packer, "Understanding the Subconscious," *The Objectivist Forum*, February and April, 1985. Reprint available from The Jefferson School.

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behavior are consistent as well, his method of dealing with reality will result in self-esteem; if they are not consistent, he will suffer self-doubt, in the form of anxiety. To deal with the anxiety, he will develop subconscious defense mechanisms and other defensive maneuvers, but these will worsen his cognitive functioning and cause further self-doubt and anxiety.

**TIA:** Does this mean that the subconscious becomes the driver or controller of our conscious choices and actions?

**EP:** No, you can say the subconscious is like a back-seat driver, but the conscious mind is the front-seat driver—the subconscious influences the conscious mind, but does not control our choices and actions unless we let it. What I'm saying is this: the more rational the content of both the subconscious and conscious mind, the more they will work in harmony with one another in promoting a person's life, and the more mentally healthy the person will be. Actually, the most urgent need in psychology is to work out a standard of mental health, which can only be done on the basis of a correct philosophy.

**TIA:** So what is psychotherapy?

**EP:** It's really a combination of applied philosophy and applied psychology. Psychotherapy begins with a standard of mental health based on a rational philosophy of life and a knowledge of rational methods of relating to reality. From that perspective, it then identifies the patient's psycho-epistemology, that is, the correct and incorrect content of his subconscious and the effects of that content on the operations of his conscious mind. Finally, it helps the patient to change his mistaken core evaluations and to take specific actions that will begin to replace his unhealthy psycho-epistemology with a healthy one.

**TIA:** Where does abnormal psychology fit in?

**EP:** Abnormal psychology studies the problems resulting from inappropriate interactions between the subconscious and conscious mind, such as various neurotic and psychotic syndromes. So, in addition, psychotherapy applies principles derived from abnormal psychology.

**TIA:** Can everyone benefit from psychotherapy? In our culture today there's still such a stigma about therapy that many people think it's only for the seriously ill, but I don't think it's difficult at all to prove that everyone can benefit from psychotherapy. Do you agree?

**EP:** Well, everyone has core evaluations in his subconscious that he is not aware of and, given our culture and upbringing, it's virtually impossible to avoid acquiring inappropriate subconscious premises. Yes, I'd say that everyone who wants to can benefit from psychotherapy, but there are different ways of benefiting. For example, you can take a TJS mini-course on defense values,<sup>2</sup> which are one of the major defensive maneuvers used to counteract self-doubt, but I don't think that such a class is enough to really help you. It

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can help you identify your own defenses, but I think you need to see the total picture of your own psychology. A person not trained in psychotherapy can look at one aspect of his psychology, but he will not understand how that aspect of his problems—such as defense values—relates to the rest of his distinctive mode of functioning. He will not know what the place of his defense values is in the total picture of his psychology.

To me, psychotherapy is problem-solving. I look at a patient and try to figure out how he is failing to achieve full mental health. I try to identify why he lacks self-esteem. This is the key—every person who walks into my office has low self-esteem to some extent. Anyone who exhibits defensive maneuvers lacks self-esteem. So I identify what's wrong with the patient—which part of his psychology needs to be changed—then try to show him how to change it. The therapist is like a mechanic who repairs a malfunctioning car. I don't want to be taken literally—because a human being is not a machine—but what I do is analogous to the mechanic who looks at how an automobile is functioning, identifies what's wrong with it—which part of the engine, for example, is not working properly with the rest of its parts—then proceeds to fix it.

**TIA:** What is the goal of psychotherapy?

**EP:** To understand your psychological functioning, both conscious and subconscious, especially the reasons for your state of low self-esteem. Also, to learn how you are failing, through defensive maneuvers, to promote your life and to change that method of living. When a patient walks into my office, I view him as a puzzle and I'm looking for the pieces. I look at his assets, his liabilities, everything about the person—his conscious philosophy, level of self-esteem, defense mechanisms, and to what extent his subconscious plays an inappropriate role in his functioning.

For those of my patients who understand Objectivism, of course, their conscious philosophy is not the problem. Their low self-esteem is due to subconscious, automated defensive maneuvers and to behavior that's inconsistent with their conscious premises. This behavior is due especially to their not being fully committed to their conscious minds—for example, the person who is dishonest in his romantic relationship or who, in spite of his belief in productiveness, is unable, because of paralyzing self-doubt, to produce.

I look at the extent to which the patient acts on his emotions, specifically the emotion of anxiety. If the patient says he is consciously committed to reason, I ask myself, "What are the circumstances in which he throws reason

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2. Edith Packer, mini-course on "Self-Esteem, Defense Values, and Defense Mechanisms," given at the sixth conference on The Intellectual Foundations of a Free Society, The Jefferson School of Philosophy, Economics, and Psychology, San Francisco, August 1-15, 1993.