

Satir Transformational Systemic Therapy (in Brief)

What happens when a human being appears on the professional radar and, without directly challenging the prevailing system, provides new possibilities and opportunities for growth and human wholeness? Virginia Satir (1916 – 1988) was one such person when she became one of the founders of the family therapy movement. She saw her first family in 1951 which was, at that time, against the therapeutic “rules” of the day. She taught her first family therapy courses at the Mental Research Institute in California, U.S.A., in 1959. By 1964, her ground breaking book, *Conjoint Family Therapy*, was published, establishing her as a pioneer in new ways of helping people in need.

Satir was an ardent learner. As she learned, she continuously added to her approach, trying new things, discarding old things and developing her system of becoming more fully human. Yet, her basic underlying philosophy and the essence of her change process remained intact. Some of her basic beliefs that are the pre-supposition to her therapeutic model are listed here in point form. These beliefs provided her with an unshakable confidence that human growth is natural and are moving in a positive direction. Some of what she believed and practiced is:

1. Human beings are all unique manifestations of the same Universal Life Force. Through this universal Life Energy, we can connect in a positive, accepting, loving way.
2. Human processes are universal; all human beings experience themselves through doing, thinking, feeling, expecting, yearning and spiritual connection. Therefore, these human processes can be accessed and changed regardless of different environments, cultures, and circumstances.
3. People are basically good. At their core, essential level of Life Energy, people are naturally positive. They need to find this internal treasure to connect with and validate their own self-worth.
4. People all have the internal resources they need in order to cope successfully with whatever situations life provides and to grow through them. All necessary internal resources reside within, even those that people may have learned to judge in a negative way or those that are as yet undiscovered.
5. The “problem” is not the problem; how people cope with their problem is the problem. How seriously the person experiences the problem through the meanings they make, their worries and their copings, impacts on how great a problem it becomes for them.
6. The symptom is the subconscious solution to the problem, even if it creates dysfunctional patterns. It is the result of the person’s attempt to survive the pain of their

problem. Although the person's perceived problem needs to be heard and validated, therapeutic change needs to work on wholesome solutions from the person's Life Energy and yearnings.

7. Therapy needs to focus on health and possibilities instead of problems and pathology. Life Energy is naturally positively directional and therapy needs to tap into the natural process of human growth in a positive direction.
8. Change is always possible. Even if external change is limited, internal change is still possible. We can learn to be consciously responsible for and decide how we will live on our insides, even when the outside cannot change.
9. We cannot change past events; we can only change the impact that the past events have had on us. It is possible to resolve impacts from the past in order to live with more positive energy and be free of old hurts, angers, fears and negative messages in the present.
10. People do the best they can at any moment in time. Even when they have done very negative or destructive things, it is the best coping that they were capable of at that moment in time and is a reflection of their level of self-worth. Therefore, there is no reason to blame them for their past failures. Helping them experience their positively directional Life Energy will help them make new choices for the present and future.
11. Feelings belong to us. We all have them and can learn to be in charge of them. We can be responsible for them and make choices about them. We can listen to the positive life message from our feelings and give ourselves the validation we need. We can choose to let go of feelings that create negative energies and events and replace them with acceptance, appreciation, forgiveness, love and peace.
12. Wholeness, growth and evolution are natural human processes and, therefore, need to be the focus of any therapeutic change. Transformational change comes from the level of Life Energy and is a part of natural human growth and evolution. It means that people are becoming more of their true, spiritual Selves rather than their reactive, survival systems.
13. The therapist's use of Self is the greatest therapeutic tool that the therapist has to create the conditions to facilitate positively directional, transformational change. Therapists who experience their own positively directional Life Energy are able to provide clients with therapeutic relationships based on care, acceptance and new possibilities. The therapist often experiences the positive nature of the client's Life Energy even before the client does and connects with the client at that level.
14. Hope is a significant component or ingredient for change to take place. When the therapist experiences the positive nature of the client's true Self, hope becomes a tangible aspect of the therapeutic process and guides the way towards change.

These beliefs, and others, are the foundation of the Satir Growth Model, called Satir Transformational Systemic Therapy (STST) in the world of professional therapy.

The Satir Growth Model has, as its base, this deeply spiritual core, a belief that all people can access, experience and live from this spiritual Life Energy. The pain people experience often comes from how they experience their behaviors, their emotions, their cognition and their expectations. When invited to learn about these aspects of their internal experience as well as their spirituality and the yearnings it produces that give positive possibilities, people can often change through their whole intrapsychic system to live more in the present through their positive life energy. This intrapsychic system is often discussed in terms of the metaphor of an iceberg. Satir invited therapists to learn to be "deep sea divers" to journey with people into their depths and help them discover and own the internal experiences they had that were out of their awareness so that they could make new decisions about them.

The Satir Growth Model embraces four universal meta-goals as the focus of therapy. These are:

1. **Raising self-esteem.** Self-esteem is how the person experiences and judges him/herself in the present. It goes beyond how one feels about or perceives himself; it is at the level of one's essence and, therefore, is at the level of Being and consciousness. When one has high self-esteem, he/she is experiencing him/herself through his/her spiritual Life Energy, or Self.
2. **Becoming a choice maker.** When one is living from the level of Self, one's choices are towards freedom. One's choices are in the direction of health, happiness, peace and love. One feels empowered to choose wisely.
3. **Becoming responsible.** When one is living from the level of Self, one is conscious of his/her internal experiences and is responsible for all feelings, perceptions, expectations and yearnings as well as one's behaviour. Satir reminded us that all of our internal experiences belong to us. The Self is greater than all feelings, greater than all thoughts, greater than all unmet expectations. When we become responsible for our internal world, we experience the vastness of our Being. We then become responsible for our own growth towards becoming more fully human, as well.
4. **Becoming congruent.** Congruence is a deeply imbedded concept and goal of the Satir Growth Model. In her early communication model, Satir encouraged people to be "straight" – to say what they meant and do what they said. However, congruence as a meta-goal implies that people can grow to be in harmony with their own Life Energy and to experience the peace, joy, love and connection that exists there. When one is more congruent, one is free from negative experiences of the past as one is now living in the present at the level of Being. Other ways of describing congruence might include being integrated, real, genuine, or authentic. There is an expectation in the Satir Growth Model that therapists have attained a fairly high level of congruence in their lives and can be congruent while working with their clients.

As well, it is part of the therapeutic process in STST that the therapist help the client to set intrapsychic and interactive goals for change. The therapist is in charge of the process, but the client is in charge of his or her therapeutic goals. The therapist brings painful patterns and positive possibilities into the client's awareness experientially and allows their positive Life Energy to guide them into what they want to have different. The client's goals become the focus for the change process.

From observing Satir's therapeutic work and analyzing her words, five therapeutic process elements have been identified that are essential for the therapy to create transformational change, a significant energetic shift. These therapeutic elements are necessarily present throughout the entire therapy session from the initial contact and rapport building, through assessment and exploration, goal setting, the transformational change process, anchoring the changes, reviewing the session and assigning therapeutic homework for practicing and integrating the changes. The five essential elements for transformational change are:

1. **Experiential.** The therapy must be experiential, which means that the client is experiencing the impact of a past event in the present. As well, and at the same time, the client is experiencing his/her own positive Life Energy in the present. Often, body memory is accessed as one of the ways to help clients experience their impacts. It is only when clients are experiencing both the negative energy of the impact and the positive energy of their Life Force in the now that an energetic shift can take place.
2. **Systemic.** Therapy must work within the intrapsychic and interactive systems in which the client experiences his/her life. The intrapsychic system includes the emotions, perceptions, expectations, yearnings and spiritual energy of the individual, all of which interact with each other in a systemic manner. The interactive systems include the relationships, both past and present, that the person has experienced in his/her life. The two systems interact with each other. A change in one impacts the other. However, transformational change is an energetic shift in the intrapsychic system which then changes the interactive systems.
3. **Positively directional.** In the Satir Growth Model, the therapist actively engages with the client to help reframe perceptions, generate possibilities, hear the positive message of universal yearnings, and connect the client to his/her positive Life Energy. The focus is on health and possibilities, appreciating resources and anticipating growth rather than on pathologizing or problem solving.
4. **Change focused.** As the focus of Satir therapy is on transformational change, the process questions asked throughout the entire therapy session are change related. Questions such as "What would have to change for you to forgive yourself?" give the client an opportunity to explore uncharted waters inside of their own intrapsychic system.
5. **Self of the therapist.** As previously mentioned, the congruence of the therapist is essential for clients to access their own spiritual Life Energy. When therapists are

congruent, clients experience them as caring, accepting, hopeful, interested, genuine, authentic and actively engaged. Therapists' use of their own creative Life Energy in the form of metaphor, humor, self-disclosure, sculpting, and many other creative interventions also comes from the connection that therapists have to their own spiritual Self when in a congruent state.

Virginia Satir often was told by those who did not understand her work that what she did in therapy and the success with which she helped people grow and change was so much a result of what she brought to therapy in her own, specific personality that nobody else could ever do her particular form of brief, effective, transformational interventions and therapeutic process. She was always hoping and believing that others could, and would, be able to use and teach her model effectively. She also wanted the world to hear from others about how they were using her model in their personal and professional lives. We now have very competent and effective therapists around the world using and teaching her model who might never have met Virginia Satir, yet who use her model with great success. It is possible for people to learn to work from a paradigm in which the spiritual essence of the therapist and of the client join together to find new possibilities and where transformational change is a result of a positively directional, systemic, experiential process.

by

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