



Using Affirmation Therapy in Your Practice

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About Suzanne M. Baars, Ph.D.



Sue Baars is a licensed professional counselor and marriage and family therapist in Irving, Texas, where she operates her private practice, In His Image Christian Counseling. Sue has worked extensively in the field of counseling since 1986 in both hospital and outpatient settings, and focuses her work on the integration of the

Christian anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas with the treatment of a variety of emotional & spiritual problems, among them Emotional Deprivation Disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and scrupulosity. She is also a popular presenter at Catholic conferences around the country and has been a frequent guest on EWTN's *Women of Grace*. She often presents the work of her late father, psychiatrist and author Conrad Baars, a pioneer in the field of Catholic psychology. Sue cites the cultural erosion of the family as the root of the lack of affirmation from which many people in our time suffer.

Some of Sue's lecture series include: *Made in His Image: Healing and Wholeness for Living the Affirming Life* (4 CDs), and *The Abode of Love: Developing the Heart* (10 CDs). She and a colleague edited a collection of Dr. Baars' articles and monographs related to the priesthood entitled, "I Will Give Them a New Heart: Reflections on the Priesthood and the Renewal of the Church."

Sue has been on the faculty of the Institute for Priestly Formation every summer since 2008, where she teaches diocesan seminarians. She is the President-Elect of the Catholic Psychotherapy Association and is finishing a doctorate in Family Therapy from Texas Woman's University.

How Can Affirmation Therapy/The Baars-Terruwe Method/Model Benefit Therapists?

Learning about Affirmation Therapy can benefit any therapist who has an interest in understanding human nature in a simple but profound way that improves his or her ability to help clients better integrate their intellect, will and emotions. In addition, Affirmation therapists learn principles of affectivity which enables stunted emotional growth to resume and to develop in its natural course. This in turn facilitates the person's natural capacities for happiness, making decisions, and establishing a natural emotional rapport with others.

Through Affirmation Therapy one learns to use a Thomistic lens to understand the workings of the entire human psyche rather than only cognition, willpower, or the emotions alone. In addition, by applying the discoveries of Baars and Terruwe, therapists are better able to distinguish whether repressive processes are at work which may manifest themselves as a variety of anxiety, somatic, obsessive-compulsive, or depressive disorders. Moreover, clinicians improve their ability to diagnose stunted emotional growth due to early lack of adequate affirmation and are thereby better able to treat moderate to severe emotional deprivation appropriately.

Therapists who are interested in the effects of poor early attachment (lack of affirmation) in their adult clients will benefit from an understanding of both Emotional Deprivation Disorder and authentic affirmation. The deprivation of unconditional love in one's early years accounts for the syndrome of Emotional Deprivation Disorder (EDD) - or, when such deprivation is not as severe, the *unaffirmed state*. Clients with EDD often report that they internally feel like infants, children, or adolescents – which adversely affects their capacity for emotional rapport with other adults. Being able to identify this syndrome of emotional deprivation and the unaffirmed state is crucial for the treatment of such persons. Even therapists familiar with Attachment theory will find that studying the symptomatology of EDD will increase their understanding of clients whose presentation may be puzzling.

Primary Symptoms of Emotional Deprivation Disorder

Baars and Terruwe identified the primary symptoms of Emotional Deprivation Disorder to include difficulty in establishing emotional rapport with other adults, deep feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, and deep feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Other symptoms may or may not be comorbid, including sense impairments (i.e., in taste, touch, vision, and smell) related to early sensory deprivation of love

(e.g., not being held or cuddled as a baby, etc.), inability to bring order into one's environment, fatigue, feelings of helplessness, hoarding behavior, and even in rare cases, kleptomania. Naturally, when one has been deprived of such a primary need as unconditional love, the central focus of one's interior life is on the fulfillment of this need.

Basic Tenets of Affirmation Therapy

Affirmation Therapy addresses fundamental emotional deficits through the affective presence of the Affirmation therapist herself as the primary "tool" employed to make the therapeutic relationship a safe place. The affective presence of the therapist aids clients to grow slowly through developing a sense of their own thoughts, desires, and opinions. This development of the stunted emotional life is an integral part of Affirmation Therapy. Through affectivity, clients slowly begin to feel safer, stronger, and more secure in themselves.

While Affirmation therapists do not solely focus on cognitive change, reflection on thoughts and beliefs is used to assist clients to identify and overcome blocks to accepting the concern of others and grow in self-acceptance, and to correct distortions that affect relationships and self-image. At the same time that Affirmation therapists readily allow themselves to feel authentic care, concern, and empathy for their clients, they maintain appropriate professional boundaries. These two

factors allow clients to enter into the therapeutic relationship in a way in which they may experience the therapist's affirming presence on an emotional and not merely cognitive level. This moves the client towards fulfillment of their basic need to feel accepted and worthwhile; as this occurs and clients are opened more and more to their own goodness, they may explore new experiences which further deepen their capacity to feel love, desire and joy (affectivity) in the knowledge of the world around them. As their capacity to know and reflect on their own feelings about things, people and God grows, their certainty in themselves deepens and they become more at peace. Hence, as Terruwe said, "affectivity simultaneously brings peace and resolves difficulties."

How Affirmation Therapy Differs From Other Therapies

Unique to the Baars-Terruwe Model is the application of Thomistic insights to present-day psychological illness.

Although at first blush the theory of affirmation may seem similar to Carl Rogers' 'unconditional positive regard,' there are profound differences between the two theories. Contrary to Rogers' person-centered therapy, Affirmation Therapy (A.T.) is deeply rooted in Aquinas' assertion that it is the *nature of the passions to be guided by reason*. That is, Aquinas asserts that there is a natural order to the psyche of the human

person that, when known and respected, can lend direction to therapists in their desire to address psychic illness and to restore their clients to psychological wholeness.

In addition, Baars and Terruwe advance their theory that, as Aquinas says, the irascible (assertive) passions serve the concupiscible (pleasure) emotions. The reversal of this psychic order through repression causes many symptoms, including scrupulosity, anxiety, depression, constriction, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms. Knowing this, therapists can better aid clients to reduce the disproportionate focus on *activity* and lessen the repression (mortification of the repressing emotion), thus alleviating symptoms.

Affirmation therapy further differs from other therapies inasmuch as it considers the need of every human being for unconditional love and recognizes the consequences when this innate need remains unmet. Other therapies, while helpful and important, focus on helping clients with affective regulation as well as cognitive and behavior change. Affirmation therapy recognizes that while these are important goals of therapy, they may occur more naturally when the primary need for unconditional love and acceptance is being met.

Affirmation Therapy provides an affective milieu which fosters emotional maturity. Authentic affirmation as a three-step *process*: first, one is emotionally *present* and *open* to the

client. Secondly, therapists allow themselves to be *moved* with liking, delight, etc., by the client's innate goodness. This occurs in the process of coming to know a person as they are, over time. Lastly, the therapist *reveals* his or her own interior *affective* experience of *being moved* through his or her countenance, tone of voice, gentle touch, etc. In this manner the therapist acknowledges that the client herself, and her experiences, thoughts, and feelings, are important. This is authentic affirmation, which the unaffirmed person has lacked to a lesser or greater degree.

Affirmation therapy thus facilitates the healing of profound emotional wounds. In our narcissistic culture, many people have not experienced another person being *present* to and caring about them in such a basic, important manner. They long for this experience, to know and *feel* that they are important and worthwhile. Therefore, while therapists may be focusing on reducing symptoms of anxiety or depression, or employing some technique in order to *help* the client, unaffirmed clients will likely experience their efforts to *help* as intrusive, or even as a sign of disregard for them as *persons* – and so the therapeutic relationship becomes yet another rejection. It is for just this reason that Affirmation Therapy emphasizes that through affectivity the therapeutic relationship facilitates healing of the client's heart. Only then does the therapist become a source of healing for those

persons who have suffered so much from rejection, abandonment, and lack of unconditional love.

Therapists Who Are Good Candidates to Become Affirmation Therapists

Therapists who would be good candidates for becoming Affirmation therapists include:

- ✓ Those who find much to be desired in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, and wish to address the *entire* person in treatment in a more holistic manner;
- ✓ therapists who encounter clients who do not respond to CBT or other treatment modalities, and who report symptoms that are unfamiliar;
- ✓ therapists who find something missing in their therapeutic work;
- ✓ therapists who are interested in attachment theory but need more specific information on how to treat adults with moderate to severe insecure attachment;
- ✓ therapists who find that some clients who might be diagnosed as having a personality disorder respond well

to a warm, caring therapeutic manner within a gentle but firm structure.

Therapists who are interested in learning a Christian anthropology of the human person, and who see the difficulty inherent in reductionist therapies and philosophies that affect how clients are treated, will benefit from learning about Emotional Deprivation Disorder and Affirmation Therapy. The Baars-Terruwe Model of Affirmation Therapy is comprehensive, giving therapists a firm foundation about how intellect, will and emotions function together, the affective integration of which enables the person to grow slowly to maturity.

How to Get Started – Resources & Training

Resources offered through the Baars-Terruwe Institute include books and CDs by Conrad Baars, M.D. and Anna Terruwe, M.D., along with CDs by psychotherapist Suzanne Baars, Ph.D. It is recommended that therapists read *Born Only Once* and *Healing the Unaffirmed* for more in-depth description of Emotional Deprivation Disorder and authentic affirmation in therapy. Those who are interested in application of the thought behind Affirmation therapy as well as ideas about its application will benefit from reading *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions*. Those who would like to understand more

thoroughly the application of Aquinas' teaching on the emotions to therapy will find *Psychic Wholeness and Healing* fascinating.

In The Future

Articles will be available in future through this website, and **research** will be conducted in order to provide more evidence for this therapeutic approach. Therapists interested in taking part in these studies are encouraged and welcomed to do so, and may contact Sue Baars, Ph.D., at smbaars2@gmail.com.

Training and certification will be offered in the near future, in order to equip therapists to become excellent in their field. For more information visit [The Baars Institute for Affirmation Therapy](#) website.