

Aphorisms for psychiatrists and people

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Objective: To present a collection of aphorisms/maxims/epigrams/quotes that may be of interest and/or utility to some psychiatrists and their patients.

Methods: Tens of thousands of aphorisms were examined. Sixty-six were recorded and classified under 11 headings.

Results: Aphorisms with apparent clinical utility could be arranged under the headings cure, expectation of happiness, happiness through attainment, happiness through pleasing others, our limited abilities, problem of being alone, relationships with others, work and responsibility, opportunities, preparation and outcomes, fear and worry, sex education, and miscellaneous aphorisms of interest.

Conclusions: Aphorisms can be brought into clinical discussions, and have the advantage of representing the opinion of a non-psychiatrist. They can render a new insight or conclusion, or lead to a new train of thought.

Key words: aphorisms, cognitive behaviour therapy, psychotherapy.

The purpose of the current paper is to present a collection of aphorisms/maxims/epigrams/quotes that may be of interest and/or utility to some psychiatrists and their patients.

No useful distinction can be drawn between aphorisms, maxims, epigrams and quotes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an aphorism as a 'short pithy statement or maxim'. It describes a maxim as 'a general truth drawn from science or experience'. It describes an epigram as 'a short poem ending in witty turn of thought'. The view that an epigram should be in poetic form is not universally supported. Recently, the distinguished editor M J Cohen completed *The Penguin Dictionary of Epigrams*, which contained not one poetic epigram. He confirmed that an epigram is 'pithy' and added that it is frequently 'witty'. Proverbs are sometimes distinguished from the types of statement mentioned here, as the authors are unknown. This seems an arbitrary distinction unworthy of emulation. In summary, the characteristics of the statements listed here are brevity, appearance of having been drawn from experience, appearance of containing some element of 'truth' or 'wisdom', and with luck, some wit. In any book of quotations, many entries meet this measure. Here, all will be referred to as aphorisms.

Is it conceivable that an aphorism could be helpful to people? I believe the affirmative. It is possible for an aphorism to 'hit the nail on the head', to have immediate resonance with the individual. This is particularly likely when the individual has been trying to think through an issue, and is exposed to an aphorism that extends or helps him/her to an insight or conclusion.

This 'key turning in the lock' experience with aphorisms has happened to me on two occasions, and they have influenced the quality of my life. One occurred with, 'All we need to be truly happy is something to be enthusiastic about' (Charles Kingsley 1819–1875). Suddenly I understood myself better and had a tether, if not a handle, on happiness. This, of

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course, has common elements with, 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive' (R L Stevenson 1850–1894). But it was the Kingsley rather than the Stevenson aphorism that pressed my buttons. Thus, a particular statement will work for a particular individual at a particular time. I will report my second 'key turning in the lock' experience with aphorisms in a subsequent paragraph.

The second way that an aphorism may be helpful to people is when it slightly misses the spot, but hits close enough to lead one to some valuable ideas. At the least a near-miss aphorism will stimulate interest and a potential avenue for subsequent growth. This might follow from, 'An epigram is a half-truth so stated as to irritate the person who believes the other half' (Shailer Mathews 1863–1941).

Thus, not everyone values this type of statement. But fear not, support has been recorded: 'It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations' (Winston Churchill 1874–1965) and 'In the heart of every aphorism, no matter how new or indeed paradoxical its demeanour, there beats an ancient truth' (Arthur Schnitzler 1862–1931).

The common lore of psychiatry is that patients cannot be told the answers; they must find the answers themselves. It is possible, however, to argue the alternative case. Karen Horney (1885–1952) stated, 'Fortunately, analysis is not the only way to resolve inner conflicts. Life itself remains a very effective therapist'. The next question is whether the experience has to be *in vivo*? Not according to Plautus (254–184 BC): 'He gains wisdom in a happy way, who gains it by another's experience', or Vernon Law (b.1930): 'Experience is the worst teacher; it gives the test before presenting the lesson'. We could box about this point indefinitely but there would be no winner.

It is persuasive if the psychiatrist can bolster the ideas s/he is offering by revealing that high-profile non-psychiatrist figures held similar beliefs. Current commonsense statements by celebrities include, 'People try to change the world instead of themselves' (John Cleese 1987) and 'My only enemy is me' (Elliot Gould 1979).

Humour reduces tension and resistance; thus the wit of some statements is an advantage. For example: 'Sex is the most fun I ever had without laughing' (Woody Allen 1989), 'No-one is completely unhappy at the failure of his best friend' (Groucho Marx 1895–1977) and 'I can resist everything except temptation' (Oscar Wilde 1854–1900).

A distinction should be drawn between discussing aphorisms with people and conducting cognitive behaviour therapy. Albert Ellis developed a cognitive behaviour therapy called 'rational emotive therapy' (RET) in the 1950s.¹ Rational emotive therapy main-

tains that the way the individual feels is a consequence of the way that the individual thinks. Ellis maintained that lives could be improved by the use of logical thought processes. Of interest here is that he developed this therapy from the philosophies of Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicurus and Epictetus, and others. While some aphorisms are produced by philosophers (e.g. Epicurus), others are produced by individuals with no philosophical training who are simply making observations, usually about life and human nature.

But even Albert Ellis had been upstaged: 'Your mind will be like its distant thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the colour of its thoughts' (Marcus Aurelius AD 121–180) and 'The mind grows by what it feeds on' (J G Holland 1819–1881).

A distinction should also be drawn between discussing aphorisms with people and conducting logotherapy (therapy through meaning) as described by Victor Frankl.² Aphorisms, in general, do not offer meaning as much as insights into human nature, which can be applied to the self and others. Aphorisms do, however, tend to share with logotherapy the proposals that individuals have freedom of will, must make choices, and are responsible for their choices.

Aphorisms are sometimes summarily rejected because they smack of the paternalism and the preaching of the past. There is a risk of throwing out the wisdom with the bath water. I have attempted to protect such sensitivities by steering clear of all religious treaties and references and keeping 'work is good for you' statements to a minimum.

METHOD

Tens of thousands of aphorisms of potential interest were examined.^{3–16} Sixty-six aphorisms of interest were recorded and grouped using a subjective version of the graphical notion of 'best fit'.

RESULTS

Cure

People presenting to psychiatrists are usually in great distress. Most are looking for a 'cure' but psychiatric disorders, by and large, are chronic disorders. The statement that what cannot be cured must be endured can be useful. Some people presenting to psychiatrists are the casualties not of psychiatric illness but of ignorance and the vicissitudes of life, in which case 'cure' is an inappropriate concept.

1. 'What can't be cured must be endured' (English proverb).
2. 'It is with diseases of the mind as with those of the body; we are half dead before we understand our

disorder, and half cured when we do' (Charles Caleb Colton 1780–1832).

3. 'It is no good casting out devils. They belong to us, we must accept them and be at peace with them' (D H Lawrence 1885–1930).
4. 'You can keep going on much less attention than you crave' (Idries Shah 1924–1996).
5. 'One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done' (Marie Curie 1867–1934).
6. 'Any man worth his salt has by the time he is 45 accumulated a crown of thorns, and the problem is to learn to wear it over one ear' (Christopher Morley 1890–1957).
7. 'Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot' (Charlie Chaplin 1889–1977).

Expectation of happiness

A rarefied version of this is the occasional person who presents to a psychiatrist stating no particular distress, but complaining simply of the absence of happiness. Of course, masked depression, negative symptoms of schizophrenia and other disorders must be excluded. In the absence of these, such a patient may have an unrealistic expectation of happiness.

1. 'Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so' (John Stuart Mill 1806–1873).
2. 'A great obstacle to happiness is expecting too much happiness' (Bernard Le Bovier de Fontanelle 1657–1757).
3. 'Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed' (Lyndon B Johnson 1908–1973).
4. 'Life is like playing the violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on' (Samuel Butler 1835–1902).

Happiness through attainment

Throughout time, people have sought happiness through the attainment of things, both physical and non-physical (e.g. high office). The problem is that, most usually, the acquired object of desire does not provide the anticipated reward, and so another is sought (at emotional and financial cost). We all know this, at least at some level. I mentioned earlier that I had twice gained by studying aphorisms. The second episode of benefit was on reading, 'Nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little' Epicurus (341–270 BC). At that moment I saw the issue with unprecedented clarity. A natural progression is encapsulated in the Thomas A Kempis and John Stuart Mill aphorisms listed in the following section. Of course, while these were of interest to me, they may be of interest to many others.

1. 'Nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little' Epicurus (341–270 BC).
2. 'Constantly choose rather to want less, than to have more' (Thomas A Kempis 1380–1471).
3. 'I have learned to seek my happiness by limiting my desires, rather than in attempting to satisfy them' (John Stuart Mill 1806–1873).
4. 'Blessed is the man who expects nothing' (Alexander Pope 1688–1744).
5. 'A wise man cares not for what he cannot have' (George Herbert 1593–1633).
6. 'Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted' (Aldous Huxley 1894–1934).
7. 'There must be more to life than having everything' (Maurice Sendak b.1928).
8. 'How few our real wants, and how vast our imaginary ones!' (Johann Lavater 1741–1801).
9. 'To be clever enough to get all that money, one must be stupid enough to want it' (G K Chesterton 1874–1936).

Happiness through pleasing others

The analysts understood our attempts to achieve happiness through having others think well of us; RET and other cognitive therapies have insisted that this is the wrong route. It is interesting that during the 19th century, when duty and honour were strongly advocated, the economist Bagehot was advising not to try 'to be more agreeable than you can be'.

1. 'The greatest mistake is trying to be more agreeable than you can be' (Walter Bagehot 1826–1877).
2. 'I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure, which is – try to please everybody' (Herbert Bayard Swope 1882–1958).
3. 'The reward for conformity is that everyone likes you except yourself' (Rita Mae Brown b.1944).
4. 'To escape criticism – do nothing, say nothing, be nothing' (Elbert Hubbard 1859–1915).
5. 'What after all is a halo? It's only one more thing to keep clean' (Christopher Fry b. 1907).
6. 'No one can make you feel inferior without your consent' (Eleanor Roosevelt 1884–1962).

Our limited abilities

People often have unrealistic expectations of themselves, and may be distressed by their inability to achieve certain goals. None who read this could ever have beaten Cathy Freeman at the 400 m. But relax, you are not total failures. It is worth educating people that we all have limitations. The aphorism by Will

Rogers makes the related point that we have different sets or knowledge (or abilities) and De Bono is reassuring, stating that even with limited natural ability, application will lead to an enhanced functional capacity.

1. 'Despair is the price we pay for setting oneself an impossible aim' (Graham Greene 1904–1991).
2. 'We are not all capable of everything' (Virgil 70–19 BC).
3. 'In the natural, as in the social order, we ought not to wish to be more than we can be' (Nicholas-Sebastien Chamfort 1741–1794).
4. 'As we advance in life, we learn the limits of our abilities' (James Froude 1818–1894).
5. 'Everyone is ignorant, only on different subjects' (Will Rogers 1879–1935).
6. 'Many people of average intelligence are skilled thinkers. The power of a car is separate from the way it is driven' (Edward De Bono b.1933)

Problem of being alone

Many people with serious psychiatric disorder are alone. Their loneliness may result in great pain, and no attempt is made to trivialize their situation. However, people may be embarrassed by being alone, and this complication might be avoided. Three examples are given of prominent people who preferred to be alone. Too much should not be made of these statements because each person and situation is different, but they do make clear that, for some people with options, being alone is neither avoided nor a source of embarrassment. Hendrik Ibsen makes a connection between being alone and strength, but caution is required not to compound the situation by making people feel 'weak' because they find loneliness intolerable.

1. 'To be alone is the fate of all great minds – a fate deplored at times, but still always preferable as the less grievous of the two evils' (Arthur Schopenhauer 1788–1860).
2. 'I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude' (Henry Thoreau 1817–1862).
3. 'The love of solitude increases by indulgence' (Sir Walter Scott 1771–1832).
4. 'The strongest man is one who stands alone' (Hendrik Ibsen 1828–1906).

Relationships with others

Our relationships with others are central to our sense of well-being. Others have needs and desires, as do we. The winning of the approval of others is considered under another heading. Listed here are aphorisms that have a more assertive edge. More

are concerned with competition than with cooperation but this may reflect a paranoid selection bias.

1. 'The world must judge you by what you seem, not by what you are' (Earl of Chesterfield 1694–1773).
2. 'We judge other people by what they say and do, ourselves by what we think and intend' (Comtesse Diane 1829–1899).
3. 'We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done' (Henry Longfellow 1807–1882).
4. 'The usual fortune of complaint is to excite contempt more than pity' (Jonathan Swift 1677–1745).
5. 'There are people who can never forgive a beggar for their not having given him anything' (Karl Kraus 1874–1936).
6. 'Everything is funny as long as it's happening to someone else' (Will Rogers 1879–1935).
7. 'We grow tired of everything but turning others into ridicule, and congratulating ourselves on their defects' (William Hazlitt 1778–1830).
8. 'The absent are always in the wrong' (Philippe Destouches 1680–1754).
9. 'I know what I have given you. I do not know what you have received' (Antonio Porchia 1886–1968).
10. 'It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail' (Gore Vidal b.1925).
11. 'Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies' (Gore Vidal b.1925).
12. 'Failure is not our only punishment for laziness: there is also the success of others' (Jules Renard 1864–1910).

Work and responsibility

In general, those who have provided aphorisms have been high achievers, and have probably worked hard for their success. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, there is a crop of aphorisms that extol the virtue of work and responsibility. As promised, space will not be squandered on gratuitous paternalism. It is interesting that Voltaire considered that work was the solution to a range of problems.

1. 'Each man is the architect of his own fate' (Appius Caecus, 4th century BC).
2. 'A failure establishes only this, that our determination to succeed was not strong enough' (Christian Bovee 1820–1904).
3. 'God gives every bird its food, but he doesn't throw it into the nest' (J B Holland 1819–1881).
4. 'Work banishes those three great evils, boredom, vice, and poverty' (Voltaire 1694–1778).

Opportunities, preparation and outcomes

I said I would not write a lot about work. I did not say I would not give space to preparatory work and opportunity. We all know the line that chance favours the prepared (i.e. hardworking) individual. Napoleon stands pretty much alone in emphasizing the importance of chance/opportunity.

1. 'Chance never helps those who do not help themselves' (Sophocles 495–06 BC).
2. 'A wise man will make more opportunities than he needs' (Francis Bacon 1561–1626).
3. 'Where observation is concerned, chance favours only the prepared mind' (Louis Pasteur 1822–1895).
4. 'Ability is of little account without opportunity' (Napoleon Bonaparte 1769–1821).

Fear and worry

Eduction/information has a place in the management of anxiety and related problems.

1. 'Gratitude looks at the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust and ambition look ahead' (C S Lewis 1898–1963).
2. 'No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear' (Edmund Burke 1729–1797).
3. 'Worrying is the most natural and spontaneous of all human functions' (Thomas Lewis b.1913).
4. 'A man who fears suffering is already suffering from what he fears' (C E Montague 1867–1928).
5. 'Worry is the interest paid on trouble before it falls due' (W R Ingle 1860–1954).

Sex education

After reading Woody Allen's aphorism suggesting that sex could be fun, I went in search of others, thinking they might be useful clinically, perhaps as an antidote to performance anxiety. Surprisingly, among 5000 quotes published before 1945 there was not a single reference to sex, the index referring the reader to 'love', and this entry directed to 5 pages of poetry.³ In 12 000 entries published in 1998 there were 53 entries, mostly crude and or derisive.¹⁵ Thus, the offering is small and of limited utility.

1. 'Sex is the most fun I ever had without laughing' (Woody Allen 1989).
2. 'The essence of sex is communication. All the rest is just plumbing' (Charles Spezzano 1991).
3. 'Show business is like sex. When it's wonderful it's wonderful. But when it isn't very good, it's still all right' (Max Wall 1908–1990).

4. 'I am at the age where food has taken the place of sex in my life. In fact, I've just had a mirror put over my kitchen table' (Rodney Dangerfield b.1921).

Miscellaneous aphorisms of interest

I believe the following aphorisms are of value. They are a disparate group. The first two may suggest narcissism. I particularly enjoy the image of the individual on the wrong train running along the corridor in the other direction. It suggests, but clearly antedates, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edn; DSM-IV).

1. 'Those who never change their mind, love themselves better than the truth' (Joseph Joubert 1754–1824).
2. 'Sensitive people wish to be loved; vain people wish only to be preferred' (Duc de Levis 1764–1830).

I find this to be an extraordinarily clever observation.

3. '“Be yourself!” is about the worst advice you can give some people' (Tom Masson b.1965).

The encouragement here to 'be oneself' prevails in popular culture and some cognitive therapy. However, this should be interpreted cautiously. This is not the message for the person with impulse control problems who needs to work on self-control.

4. 'If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction' (Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945).
5. 'The golden rule is that there are no golden rules' (George Bernard Shaw 1856–1950).

As mentioned, no aphorism should be taken as the complete answer.

DISCUSSION

Aphorisms are created by clever people. They can be brought into clinical discussions and have the advantage of being the opinion of a non-psychiatrist. Sometimes they can render a new insight or conclusion; at other times they may have less immediate effect but lead to a new train of thought.

Selected aphorisms have been arranged here under headings, for ease of handling of disparate information. Others may well choose a different and superior system of classification.

We do not have access to the future, and because it takes time to process information, we have limited access to aphorisms of the present era. Thus, inevitably, the present paper is weighted (biased) to the past. So what? Some of these aphorisms reveal that some of the questions people are addressing today have been addressed, often with some success, for millennia.

No claim was made that solutions would be provided. The objective was to provide aphorisms that may be

interesting and useful. The last was chosen deliberately: 'The golden rule is that there are no golden rules' (George Bernard Shaw 1856–1950).

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