

# **Agno-therapy for the golden age**

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### Abstract

Agno-therapy is a mental help therapy through literature/Agnon stories. The aim of this activity is to bring relief and self-understanding to elderly people. The elderly will learn to talk about their feelings and to show that there are positive ways of coping with difficulties and old age. The assumption is that old people who are afraid of looking inside into their soul would find interest and help in Agno-therapy. The activity therapy was conducted at the Day Care for the Elderly in Israel, and was very effective. .

Key words: old age, therapy, literature, Agnon.

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"Agno-therapy for the Golden Age" is a work plan, aimed at teaching the old to see themselves in a positive light, as well to present themselves in this light to society, so that they will be perceived most positively.

One of the ways to achieve this purpose was to teach them to talk about their feelings and to show them that there are positive ways of coping with difficulties and old age; that there is no shame in talking about these things; to speak about pain, about things that are bother or hurt; to accept their existence despite the difficulties and to try to learn new coping skills; to identify and feel empathy for figures, events and situations appearing in literary pieces; to fill their spare time with reading or listening to tapes, and to read and discuss subjects related to the pieces or the author. Our assumption was that old people who are coping with mental distress, who wonder about the meaning of their life, who are afraid of looking inside into their soul, and who are seeking sharing and insight would find relief and interest in Agno-therapy.

Agno-therapy means mental help and assistance through literature, aimed at bringing relief, self-understanding, and strengthening and coping strategies. The activity therapy was conducted at the Day Care for the elderly in Israel. The group consisted of 30 elderly people, residents of Kiriath-Tivon and its periphery. The group comprised of 20 women and 10 men. The people belonging to this group come to the Day Care center five days a week, where they enjoy a variety of services activities. The Day Care center provides quality of life, helping the elderly individuals and their families, so that the elderly can continue their normal way of life in their homes and natural environment as far as possible (Korazim, 1994).

We administered an hour-long weekly activity call "Agno-therapy", during in which We told the stories of Agnon, and the elders commended and shared their views. Before administering the yearlong activity, We read a poem written by an unknown old woman and has no title.

"Don't come to escort me

On my last journey

Come to visit me at home, as you used to do

Don't mourn for me after my death

Come and nurse me while I'm still alive.

Don't cry for me after I'm dead

Come and see me while my eyes are still good.

Don't speak well after my death

Please enter my home and make me forget my pain.

Don't escort me to the cemetery on the day of Doom

You'd better visit me in my home every once in a while

It is known, everybody has troubles in his home

But upon his death, he'll take nothing with him

But for the good deeds he earned.

And if you come to visit me when my season is over

Don't ask:

When was the last time you saw her alive?

Behind the door".

After reading the poem aloud, the audience, which consisted of 30 elders aged 80 and up was asked: "How do you see yourself?"

The answers given were expected and congruent with the contents of the poem. All the group members, without exception, talked about problems of loneliness, boredom, lack of company and their longing for a listening ear and a companion. One woman said: "You should know that this is exactly how I feel and perhaps people will understand what we need".

To relieve the emotional-social distress, even partially, and in an effort to teach the old to speak and open their hearts, We decided to develop the "Agno-therapy" model and present stories dealing with everyday reality as we experience it.

The literary works we chose for this program were those written by an Israeli writer named Shmuel Yosef Agnon – A 1966 Nobel Laureate in literature. We found them relevant in terms of content and background to the Day Care members. Most of the visitors at the Day Care Center came to Israel from Eastern Europe and grew up in the small towns described in Agnon's stories. They are familiar with the atmosphere and mentality. We thought that they would be able to identify with these stories, and that this identification would make it easier for them to open up. Our starting point was that every person is a unique individual who absorbs experiences differently and responds differently: One may laugh cheerfully, while the other reacts with anger, resentment and insolence. A third, on the other hand, may suppress everything, eating him or herself up from within, and will not be overly responsive. We identify with the stories, with the events, with the reactions and with the figures in the stories to varying degrees.

Sometimes, when we hear a story, we absorb it and do not react, while at other times we listen and then say: "I would have done so and so, or this thing reminds me that in my birth town in Poland the clock also stood at the center of town. The clock symbolized the beginning of a new relation and my late husband was given a watch by my parents as a present at our engagement". Many events told in the stories, both happy and sad, bring up memories from the past, of the distant childhood town, of the parents' home, of the dog that used to go to school with the children, and of the gifts the children received on various occasions. Some people wanted to sit and share their thoughts and feelings with me, while others told their story in public. This reminds me of the story of Bertha, a woman of 82 years, who was in tears when she told how her mother had not wanted her and always preferred her brother to her. When we discussed the story of Tehila by Agnon (1995), we talked about two coping strategies that a person can use: to bow and retreat or to cope and continue despite the difficulties. We talked about Tehila, who reached old age, about her wonderful personality and about her decision to continue to show a happy face. We contrasted Tehila with the Rabbi's wife who was always grumpy and complained to everyone, including her grandchildren.

The starting point, as Agnon put it, is: "The person holds the key to his or her life". That is, each person has the right to choose his or her actions and his or her coping strategy. Hence, both Tehila and the rabbi's wife chose how they would behave and what their coping strategy would be according to their character and wishes. Tehila decided to continue to exert her willpower. This is the place to mention what Schopenhauer, the German philosopher of the 19th century said: 'The will exhibits itself as an organized body,' (Sontag, 1977).

Later on, we touched on personal spheres. People took the initiative to open up, and to tell their life experiences. Yocheved, a bereaved mother said: "My son was killed in the October 1973 War. I was in the middle of reading a thick novel when they knocked on the door and told me that Moti was dead. My life stopped when I stopped reading the book. It has remained open on the same table since 1973 and I will never be able to finish it. From that day I also stopped smiling. Everyday I wake up and dress up like a robot; I eat, take my bag and come to the Day Care Center. Here I move around all day, unable to do anything. Nobody understands me, and many people think that I'm not normal. My life has stopped. This is not living anymore". Every week, after the meeting, Yocheved came to us and opened up her heart. She talked about her late husband, about her dead son and her loneliness. Of course, she never forgot to say how she loved Thursdays, the days of our meeting and how she looked forward to them.

In another meeting, we discussed *Shira* by Agnon (1984), with its implications on relations between husband and wife in the past and present. Things like "love at first sight" and "love is as fierce as death" were mentioned by Yehoshua, an old man of 90. *Shira* is about a family, living in Jerusalem. Manfred, the father, is a history professor and his wife is a homemaker. The family has two grown up daughters, Zohara and Ya'ela. Later on, two other children are born, Sara and a son. Over the years, Manfred had an affair with Shira, the nurse treating his wife. The wife, unconsciously, encouraged the affair by telling her husband to take Shira out for dinner while she was lying in hospital. He did indeed take her out for dinner and their relations grew closer. Manfred did try to put Shira out of his mind but this was in vain. One day Shira has disappeared. Manfred looked for her and, after many efforts, found that she had contracted leprosy and was in the "lepers' village". Manfred left his family and stayed with Shira. When the story was told, the elderly persons participating in the group voiced their opinion of the story. Yosef Zavitzky, aged 92 from Germany, a man of values and honesty, called Manfred a villain and an abject sinner for leaving his family (wife and children) and going with Shira. He could not stop mumbling: "I can't understand how he did it".

Bertha, an old lady of 88 years, said that a similar thing had happened to her friend from the kibbutz of Beit-Ha'emek. The woman had been nursing her husband who fell sick. After a while, she could not continue to nurse him and received help, a young nurse. The nurse began treating her husband, who recovered, divorced his wife and married the nurse. Another lady talked about cases of married men getting divorces and marrying their Thai caretaker. Moshe, aged 93 years had a different story to tell about his relationship with his wife, to whom he has been happily married for the past 70 years. Each morning he kisses her forehead and says "Good morning to you, the joy of my life". One of the members who had suffered a stroke and was hemiplegic sat in a withdrawn position most of the time. Week after week he arrived at the meeting late, apologizing by saying that he was in physiotherapy. He was usually silent and talked very little. Surprisingly, when we finished our discussion on *Shira* (Agnon, 1984) he turned to me and asked what the term we discussed in our last meeting was. "Torso", I replied, "a body without head and limbs" noting that the novel is not finished, it is only a "torso". "You know", he said, "this is exactly how I feel".

We were silent.

Maimonides wrote: "If taken by melancholy, he should remove it by listening to songs and all kinds of melodies, by taking a stroll on the roofs and in glorious buildings and by

sitting in nice places and so on, doing things that are pleasant to the soul and remove the boredom of melancholy" (Introduction to the Order of Aboth, The Fifth Chapter). That is, when a person is struck by depression or melancholy, he is permitted to stop his or her studies and listen to music, take a walk in the park or go to a museum and look at artworks. Maimonides, as a doctor, knew that the beauty of nature and art have a relaxing influence on the human soul and therefore recommended them, although not as having value in their own right, but as aids for healing. He has also permitted talks, stories and poems, on condition that they taught good merits and were included within the five types of speech called "speech that is distant and serious", aimed "to encourage the soul with speeches and songs."

At the end of the activity year, We read the same poem aloud, and this time, after posing the question "How do you see yourself?" the responses were much more positive than before. They opened up, talked about their feelings, their family, about painful things, their experiences and they even noted that they did not feel so lonely anymore. They were happy to talk, and to find a listening ear and a friend to talk to.

As a conclusion we can say that the goal of this therapy is to help people open up their heart, to free them from pressure, and try to look for new angles and perspectives. People learn to express themselves in creative ways such as music, art, movement, drama and Agno-therapy, which is therapy through listening to Agnon stories.