



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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FREE ASSOCIATION

Leon HOFFMAN, 167 East 67th Street New York, NY 10065, USA; ph + 1 212 249 1163

Definition: A therapist encourages the patient to say whatever comes to mind - thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, wishes, fantasies.

Elements: The therapist suggests that the patient should try to express openly all that comes to mind even if the associations seem unimportant, irrelevant, embarrassing or shameful. Both observe how and when the patient hesitates, indicating resistance to reporting that association freely. When such resistance appears the therapist suggests (interprets) that there is discomfort in being open. This line of inquiry may reveal issues in that patient's current or past interactions, worries, fears, defenses, wishes and fantasies which are unique; even though "the casts in a person's life may change, the situations may differ, but the plots endure." These plots in the patient's life are repeated in feelings and fantasies about the analyst (*transference*) which can be difficult to speak about frankly. In free associations the patient may allude to interactions reminiscent of those with the analyst. The analyst may interpret the patient's reluctance to speak directly about the analyst (*analysis of the transference*).

A free-association-equivalent in young children is the expression of central wishes and worries in play and activities. The analyst can observe how *play interruptions* may resemble adults' *resistance* to talking about certain things.

Related procedures: interpretation against painful emotions, analysis of conflicts and defenses; compromise formation (understanding that many activities are a compromise between forbidden wishes and defenses masking those); method of levels; close process monitoring (detecting shifts of material in sessions and querying if those reflect avoidance of certain thoughts and feelings); reducing affect phobia.

Application: In intensive dynamic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis

1st use? Freud S (1893)

References:

1. Freud S (1893) Frau Emmy von N - Case histories from Studies on Hysteria. In: The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume II (1893-1895): Studies on Hysteria, Standard Edition 2: 48-105. London: Hogarth Press
2. Busch F (1997). Understanding the patient's use of the method of free association: an ego psychological approach. *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.*, 45: 407-423
3. Kris AO (1992). Interpretation and the method of free association. *Psychoanal. Inq.*, 12: 208-224
4. Loewenstein RM (1963). Some considerations on free association. *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.*, 11: 451-473

Case illustration: (Busch, 1997)

Al sought treatment after he'd had several unsatisfying affairs when he'd felt discontented with his wife and realized this told him about himself. He began a session early in his four-time-a-week analysis by mentioning disturbedly that it was really quiet at home since his wife and children had gone to visit her parents in another city for two

weeks. Al talked extensively about having worked feverishly all evening on references for his new 500-page book. He'd felt frustrated by the enormous task he'd tried to accomplish in one fell swoop using a new computer program but glitches had led to his making minimal progress. However, he'd felt really good about having left his work all over the living room without his wife having a fit about it. He moved onto a camping trip he planned with his brother but wasn't crazy about being alone the first few days before his brother joined him. Therapist: *'You seem bothered but yet happy by your wife's being away and the house so quiet'*. Al spoke again about feeling left alone, this time in future, saying this was important and probably related to his difficulty in feeling close to his wife. He recounted irritably that she'd phoned the previous evening to ensure he had the instructions straight for taking care of the dog, and went on a diatribe about her treating him like a child. Therapist: *'You've become aware of difficulties in being close to your wife but since this might be frightening you spoke instead of a rift between the two of you, which you think she caused'*. Al then said his wife had cried a lot at her father's funeral, as had his sister when his mother died. Therapist: *'Maybe you have difficulty knowing how you feel about your wife, especially about loss because you see this as something women feel and this feels dangerous to you'*. Al replied he'd forgotten to say that the night before his wife left they'd had a wonderful evening together – he'd never felt so close to a woman before.