

# Orders of Change

In therapy, change can occur at different levels, and can be classified as either first-order or second-order change.

First-order change refers to changes that occur at the surface level, such as changes in behavior, thoughts, or emotions. These changes are often short-term and specific to a particular problem or issue. For example, a person might seek therapy to address their difficulty with anger management, and through therapy, they may learn techniques to better manage their anger and have fewer outbursts. This would be considered first-order change, as it is a specific and immediate change in behavior.

## First-Order Change

Here are some examples of first-order change that might occur in therapy:

- **Changing a specific behavior:** A person might seek therapy to address a specific problem behavior, such as procrastination or substance abuse, and through therapy, they may learn techniques or strategies to help them change that behavior.
- **Changing negative thought patterns:** A person might seek therapy to address negative thought patterns, such as negative self-talk or automatic negative thoughts, and through therapy, they may learn techniques to challenge and change those thoughts.
- **Managing emotions:** A person might seek therapy to address difficulties with managing their emotions, such as anger or anxiety, and through therapy, they may learn techniques to better regulate their emotions.
- **Improving communication skills:** A person might seek therapy to improve their communication skills, such as assertiveness or active listening, and through therapy, they may learn techniques to communicate more effectively.
- **Increasing self-care:** A person might seek therapy to improve their self-care practices, such as exercise or nutrition, and through therapy, they may learn strategies to prioritize and implement self-care behaviors.

First-order change can be important and valuable in helping a person to address specific problems or issues, and can often be achieved relatively quickly. However, it is important to recognize that first-order change may not address deeper issues or patterns that contribute to the problem and therefore may not lead to more enduring or transformative change.

## Second-Order Change

Second-order change, on the other hand, refers to deeper and more fundamental changes that occur at the level of the person's identity or worldview. These changes are often longer-term and more generalizable to other areas of the person's life. For example, a person might seek therapy to address feelings of low self-worth, and through therapy, they may come to understand and challenge the

underlying beliefs and patterns of thinking that contribute to their low self-worth. This would be considered second-order change, as it involves a more profound shift in the person's sense of self and how they relate to the world.

Here are some examples of second-order change that might occur in therapy:

- **Changing core beliefs:** A person might seek therapy to address deep-seated beliefs about themselves or the world that are causing them suffering, such as beliefs about their worth or lovability, and through therapy, they may come to understand and challenge those beliefs, leading to a shift in their identity and worldview.
- **Developing a new sense of self:** A person might seek therapy to address a sense of disconnection or lack of purpose in their life, and through therapy, they may develop a deeper understanding of their values and goals, leading to a greater sense of meaning and connection to the world.
- **Changing patterns of relating to others:** A person might seek therapy to address patterns of relating to others that are causing them difficulty, such as codependency or avoidance, and through therapy, they may learn new ways of relating that are more authentic and fulfilling.
- **Overcoming traumatic experiences:** A person might seek therapy to address the effects of a traumatic experience, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and through therapy, they may gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the trauma and develop new ways of coping and living with the aftermath.
- **Transcending limiting beliefs:** A person might seek therapy to address limiting beliefs that are holding them back in life, such as the belief that they are not capable or deserving of success, and through therapy, they may come to understand and transcend those beliefs, leading to greater personal growth and fulfillment.

Second-order change can be more challenging and may require a longer-term commitment to therapy, but it can also be more enduring and transformative, as it involves a deeper understanding of oneself and the patterns that shape one's experiences.

First-order change can be important and necessary, especially in the short term, but second-order change is often more enduring and transformative. This is because second-order change involves a deeper understanding of oneself and the patterns of behavior and thinking that shape one's experiences, which can then be applied to other areas of one's life.

Therapies that aim for second-order change often focus on helping the person to gain insight into their unconscious motivations and patterns of thinking, and to develop new ways of being and relating to the world. These therapies may include approaches such as psychoanalytic therapy, depth psychology, or experiential therapies.

In summary, first-order change refers to specific and immediate changes at the surface level, while second-order change refers to more fundamental and enduring changes at the level of the person's identity or worldview. Both types of change can be important and valuable in therapy, and the appropriate focus will depend on the individual's specific needs and goals.

## Third-Order Change

Third-order change refers to changes that occur at the level of the person's fundamental sense of

being and purpose in life. These changes are often described as spiritual or transcendent, and involve a deep sense of inner transformation and connection to something greater than oneself.

Third-order change is often seen as the ultimate goal of therapy, as it involves a complete shift in the person's sense of self and their place in the world. It may involve the realization of one's true potential, a sense of integration and wholeness, and a feeling of connection to something beyond the ego or personal self.

Third-order change is often associated with spiritual or religious traditions and may involve experiences such as enlightenment, self-realization, or mysticism. It may also be seen as the ultimate goal of certain therapies, such as humanistic or transpersonal therapies, which focus on helping the person to achieve a deeper sense of self-actualization and connection to a higher purpose.

It is important to note that third-order change is often seen as a rare and transformative experience, and may not be the goal of all forms of therapy. However, it is also important to recognize that each person's journey toward self-discovery and growth is unique, and what may be considered third-order change for one person may not be the same for another.

Here are some examples of third-order change that might occur in therapy:

- **Realization of one's true potential:** A person might seek therapy to address feelings of inadequacy or a lack of purpose in life, and through therapy, they may come to understand and realize their full potential and unique gifts.
- **A deep sense of inner transformation:** A person might seek therapy to address feelings of disconnection or suffering, and through therapy, they may experience a deep sense of inner transformation and healing.
- **A feeling of connection to something beyond the ego:** A person might seek therapy to address feelings of isolation or meaninglessness, and through therapy, they may come to feel a sense of connection to something greater than the ego or personal self.
- **A sense of integration and wholeness:** A person might seek therapy to address feelings of fragmentation or disharmony, and through therapy, they may experience a sense of integration and wholeness within themselves and with the world.
- **Enlightenment or self-realization:** A person might seek therapy to address a sense of spiritual longing or seeking, and through therapy, they may experience enlightenment or self-realization, which is often described as a profound and transformative experience of understanding and realization of one's true nature.

It is important to note that third-order change is often seen as a rare and transformative experience, and may not be the goal of all forms of therapy. However, it is also important to recognize that each person's journey towards self-discovery and growth is unique, and what may be considered third-order change for one person may not be the same for another.

## Gregory Bateson Lecture on Orders of Change

Lecture by Gregory Bateson at Naropa Institute in 1975.

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