

**Topical Panel #: Anxiety from a Communication Theory point of view**  
**By Wendel A. Ray, PhD<sup>1</sup>**

- According to psychiatrist Don Jackson can be usefully understood through the frame of reference of the Communication / Interactional theory created in Palo Alto by the Bateson group (Gregory Bateson, Don Jackson, John Weakland, Jay Haley, & William Fry). Here are a few fundamentals that pertain when thinking about anxiety from that view:
- Every behavior is a comment on the nature of the relationships of which it is a part.
- Anxiety in whatever form is called forth and reinforced by how the behavior fits within the other behaviors by the IP and others that surround it
- It makes sense. Understand the context & relationship of which the behavior is a part allows for development of intervention

Assessment quires are:

1. In what context does behaving this way balance the nature of relationships with others? (IE: how (not whether) does the behavior make sense)
2. What is the effect of the behavior on others involved?
3. How does behavior experienced or observed by others organize others to respond to the person?
4. How is the behavior, like any "symptom" a way of commenting on untenable aspects of the relationship with important others that cannot be explicitly stated without threatening the relationship.
5. What disadvantages exist or adjustment has to be made if the problem improved or went away? The advantages of symptom relief are obvious, but usually with intransigent problems the symptom bearer is very tuned in to and responding to the potential dangers of improvement. At times this relates to how improvement would challenge or require the nature of the relationship between others involved (say two parents at war with one another but who deny it, as a possible example).

An Intervention:

Often a way to help is to positively connote the symptom bearer and others involved and then to prescribe non-change, saying something like, "the situation is very complex, there are profoundly good reasons for the difficulties existence, rushing in to push for change usually leads to worse difficulties and is disrespectful. Let us take our time and think this complicated situation through."

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