

Psychology and sanitation: a personal perspective

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Abstract

Promoting ecological sanitation involves confronting potential users on a psychological level. I illustrate this through my personal experience as a user of a dry urine diversion system. However, everyone's experience will be different. George Kelly's concept of 'personal construct' is a useful concept towards describing the multitude of attitudes, preferences and taboos people may have surrounding sanitation.

Asking people to change the sanitation system they're accustomed to, is asking a lot. It amounts to asking potential users to change their particular and ingrained personal construct regarding sanitation. How does one convert potential users to accept ecosan? From my experience I have crystallised four key concepts which played a major role in successfully changing my 'flush-loo' personal construct to incorporate ecosan. These are motivation, choice, supportive environment and experience.

Introduction

At a very early age, we learn our toilet habits from our parents. The way we use and experience our sanitation solutions are almost as old as we are.

Children are ready to be toilet trained, depending on their maturity, from the age of about eighteen months. In time we learn also, for instance, how to use a knife and fork, or how to independently perform many other small but important tasks essential to our daily living. But it's often our ability to use the toilet properly that comes first.

The rituals surrounding relieving ourselves are tied up with our parents views and habits plus our broader cultural and economic context. What we learn from these sources, become a 'personal construct'.

This term 'Personal construct' is a concept I borrowed from George Kelly's Cognitive Personality Theory.

George Kelly's cognitive theory of personality and personal constructs

George Kelly (1905 – 1967) was an engineer turned psychologist. He proposed a personality theory called the 'Cognitive Theory' in which he develops the concept of 'Personal Constructs'.

According to Kelly, a 'personal construct' is an attitude we acquire through experience. It's a bundle of habits, views, attitudes and preferences about issues such as work, retirement, marriage, family life. Anything and everything about our lives. This must then include sanitation.

Should one confront an individual with sanitation systems other than what he/she is accustomed to, one is, broadly speaking, appealing to that person on two levels.

The first is the intellectual level, possibly involving understanding technical or environmental issues. The second very important issue is the psychological one. One would be confronting that individuals personal construct regarding sanitation.

The personal construct threatened

Kelly maintains that changing our core personal constructs create stress. We experience anxiety, even fear. The object of change presents a threat. It may even produce aggression.

This brings me to my personal journey with ecological sanitation. Initially, I experienced urine diversion as a threat to my personal flush-loo, non-involvement construct of sanitation. I wasn't exactly scared of it. And it most certainly didn't make me turn to violence! But I did experience some anxiety.

My story: a personal perspective

I have zero interest in toilets. I have zero interest in promoting ecological sanitation. Despite this, I use a dry urine diversion system on a daily basis, as a matter of course.

I am a middle class woman living in Africa. I explore and intellectualise about religion, socio-economic issues – just about everything. I find new ideas exciting. After all, I'm a South African. We live with change. It's routine for us. In short, I regard myself as being open minded.

So - when my husband suggested putting urine diversion into our home I was all for it. I intellectualised about it much as I would on any other issue. It was quite exciting. I'm always ready to try out something new. Besides, my husband is happy to go with all my mad-cap ideas. I might as well support him in his. Intellectually, I also accepted that urine diversion would work on a technical level. I simply assumed that all the good people promoting ecological sanitation know what they're talking about.

Despite my conscious acceptance of ecological sanitation, it still wasn't part of my long standing, deep seated personal construct of toilet behaviour. I didn't realise this. So when it came to the crunch, and out of the blue, urine diversion presented as something of a threat and cause me some anxiety.

This became clear only once I was confronted with a urine diversion pedestal in my own en suite bathroom.

The psychological journey: that 'uh-oh' feeling

In my journey with ecological sanitation, I had four hurdles to over come.

The first hurdle

That first 'uh-oh' feeling came when I was confronted by the new urine diversion pedestal in my comfortable, familiar bathroom. I felt mild anxiety. I was running scared.

In a subtle way, I tried to postpone using it. I told my husband I'd start using it in a few days, after he'd explained to me at length what the procedure was.

'It's simple', he said, and, to my dismay, outlined what I should do there and then. 'Just use it as normal,' he added.

I crossed my first hurdle, sat down and used the system. This was a big step.

It worked. I was beginning to break down my existing personal construct through experience.

The second hurdle

The next anxiety-inspired 'uh-oh' feeling surfaced. Much as I was assured that I could use the toilet 'as normal', I still didn't trust the system. I made a point of urinating and defecating separately. That way I was guaranteed that everything went where it should go.

In time, and through experience I came to fully accept that I could really simply sit on the toilet, and let go. But it took a while, all of about eighteen months.

The third hurdle

I felt another vague, 'uh-oh' anxiety about having a bucket of yucky pooh only a few meters away from the bed where I sleep. Right in the inner sanctum of my home.

Through experience I learnt that it didn't make any difference, because it was, in a sense, invisible. It didn't smell. So that became okay as well.

The fourth hurdle

My final problem related to cleaning the toilet. An important part of my personal flush-loo kind of sanitation construct is that I will have nothing what so ever to do with faeces. That is non-negotiable.

My husband was the one who took the bucket from under the toilet and emptied it into the compost heap. That was *his* job.

By him doing it, I saw with my own eyes that it wasn't the revolting job I expected it to be. It was no different to tipping a bucket of sand into our kitchen waste.

I am pleased to report that I can do it too! Through experience, I modified my attitude.

In each case, experience changed my personal construct regarding sanitation. What struck me was that even in an extremely supportive environment, I still had to confront anxieties. It showed me what a complex issue sanitation is.

Conclusion: summary and suggestions

One may say that people don't jump at the chance of using ecological sanitation because 'human beings resist change', that 'they're stuck in a comfort zone'. Or they don't care about saving the planet. There are all kinds of cliché's one could drag up.

Statements such as these have negative overtones.

For me, Kelly's theory explains in a more positive way what people go through when confronted with new or different ideas. People have deep seated core personal constructs about all aspects of their lives. Also about sanitation.

Don't be fooled. Even a person like myself who is ecologically aware and overtly open-minded may have misgivings and anxieties.

George Kelly says that constructs aren't finite. They can be modified. People can opt to choose alternative constructs.

Well - we don't need Kelly to tell us that people can change their ideas about their world. We know it is the case.

The question is, how does one go about introducing new ideas to people successfully? How does one go about changing people's sanitation constructs?

There is no definitive answer to this question. Instead, I've crystallised four key issues that may be useful since, in my case, it ensured my successful and sustained conversion to ecosan.

1. Motivation

I was motivated to use ecosan because I could see the ecological advantage (saving water) and I'm excited by new ideas.

Inspire potential users. Talk their language. Show them why ecosan is a good idea.

2. Choice

I was given a choice. If ecosan had been forced on me, I would probably have resisted using it. Potential users need to voluntarily buy into ecosan.

3. Supportive environment

We've made some changes to our urine diversion system since it's installation. For instance, I insisted my husband remove the vent pipe since it caused an icy draft during winter. I couldn't make this modification myself. I needed someone I could rely on to listen to my complaints and act on it. That way I could make changes to suit my needs. If this wasn't the case, I would have removed the entire system and reverted to a flush toilet system.

After installation of ecosan, listen to complaints and support users in any way possible.

4. Experience

I learnt through experience that my misgivings about ecosan were unfounded. Where possible, give potential users the experience of using and cleaning a new sanitation system so they can see for themselves what it's like. At the very least, have an existing user tell his/her story to potential users.

In principle, all the above amount to on-going communication and support. Discuss psychological issues. Workshop psychological issues with potential users. Even where potential users have inferior technical solutions, one would still be challenging existing personal constructs. There would be existing comfort zones and ingrained habits and attitudes. Talk about it. And give support.

In essence, my point is this. Sanitation isn't a purely technical issue. Psychology kicks in – big time! Awareness and sensitivity to this are important when promoting any form of sanitation. Open dialogue between sanitation expert and potential users, as well as on-going support are essential.