

Psychotherapy Guidebook

DRAMA THERAPY

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Drama Therapy

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DEFINITION

Drama Therapy can be defined as the intentional use of creative drama toward the psychotherapeutic goals of symptom relief, emotional and physical integration, and personal growth. Drama Therapy, like the other creative arts therapies (art, music, and dance therapies), is the application of a creative medium to psychotherapy. Specifically, Drama Therapy refers to those activities in which there is an established, therapeutic understanding or contract between client and therapist, and where the therapeutic goals are primary, not incidental, to the ongoing activity. Thus, creative drama in a strictly educational setting, for example, though probably helpful to the participants, should be differentiated from Drama Therapy.

Broadly defined, Drama Therapy includes any psychotherapeutic use of role playing, such as J. L. Moreno's psychodrama. In its more narrow usage, however, the term Drama Therapy refers to those approaches that stress the appreciation of creative drama as a medium for self-expression and playful group interaction, and which base their techniques on improvisation and theater games.

HISTORY

For centuries, creative drama and role-playing have been used in both primitive and advanced cultures as a cathartic and psychotherapeutic tool. In this century, role-playing techniques have been developed by J. L. Moreno (psychodrama), Fritz Perls (Gestalt), Albert Pesso (psychomotor), encounter group leaders, and several behavior therapists.

Drama Therapy, as the specific use of creative drama in psychotherapy, has more recently been developed by practitioners initially trained in the dramatic arts who have applied improvisational techniques to clinical populations in hospital settings. Foremost among these are John Hudson (England), Gertrud Schattner (New York), Susan Jennings (England), and Eleanor Irwin (Pittsburgh). Many of these were greatly influenced by the work of Peter Slade and Brian Way in child drama, and Viola Spolin in improvisational techniques.

At the present time, a national association is in the formative stage, which will lead to the establishment of standards for the training and practice of drama therapists, a critical step in the development of Drama Therapy as an independent profession.

TECHNIQUE

At the heart of the drama therapist's technique is the use of improvisation and spontaneous role playing as a means of encouraging self-expression in the individual. The therapist aims to create a supportive "free play" environment in which the individual's feelings and thoughts become reflected in the improvised roles. The therapist usually participates with the group members in the activities, and serves as a relatively nondirective facilitator of the group "play." His interventions (either verbal or nonverbal) are always focused on the processes within the group or individual that are inhibiting free expression, and not on the quality of the individual's performance in the role playing. Drama therapists strive for a flexible and multifaceted use of their medium, devising specific structures appropriate to the situation as it emerges in the therapeutic process. Depending upon the type of population involved and the specific goals of the therapy, a wide variety of techniques are used to encourage the individual's growth and insight.

One set of techniques in Drama Therapy is oriented toward the goal of developing interpersonal relationships and group values. For most people, and especially for severely disturbed patients, forming a group is an exceptionally difficult and threatening task. The utilization of creative drama and movement has been found both to engage people who are hesitant to join groups and to encourage group formation in general. The focus of Drama Therapy is not usually on the relationships that members have had in the past

or with people outside of the group, but rather on the development of interpersonal relationships within the group itself. The group's activities, being relatively unstructured, encourage each individual's interpersonal style to emerge and his problems with others or the group to be expressed. The therapist's goal is to help the group develop methods of examining these problems as they arise. While this may take the form of group discussion, problems usually are explored further in the role playing itself.

A second major focus is on stimulating the individual's creativity and spontaneity. Here, the therapist's interventions are directed at the disruptions in the spontaneous play of the group. Anxieties within individuals and conflicts between members inevitably arise and interfere with the ongoing flow of the session and with the spontaneity of the members. For example, the play may become blocked and repetitive (known as an "impasse"), may break down entirely, or may actually become confused with reality. These inhibitions in the role-playing are quite vivid to both patient and therapist, and can serve as diagnostic indicators of the individual's specific difficulties.

Another basic technique in Drama Therapy might be described as "role analysis." In improvisational role-playing, one's role is intimately connected to one's real self, as there is no script to give it any other content. Over the course of a Drama Therapy experience, recurring patterns of behavior

emerge in the role-playing of each individual, which are, as it were, crystallized versions of his basic interpersonal stances. The person often feels powerless to change them, even though they dissatisfy him. The therapist can help the individual become aware of these patterns, and then to examine the reasons why he continues to choose them. Drama Therapy attempts to increase the individual's self-control by providing him with the opportunity and group support to experiment with other, more satisfying roles.

Drama therapists may use a variety of props or costumes, and may emphasize movement, mime, or artwork. Many also use scripts and even produce plays with their clients, though in these cases, too, their goal is to examine the process that develops between the individual and his assigned roles.

APPLICATIONS

Drama Therapy is currently used in the treatment of both groups and individuals, children and adults, in hospitals, mental-health clinics, prisons, and schools. It has been found to be effective with psychiatric patients of all diagnoses, alcohol and drug abusers, the handicapped, and the elderly. Drama Therapy shares the advantages of art and dance therapies in being able to reach more severely disturbed or handicapped populations, which are less available to insight-oriented verbal psychotherapy. Creative drama is a

symbolic medium that allows people who have difficulty with verbalization to express themselves. Yet the verbal and complex role-playing aspects of Drama Therapy have also been utilized to engage highly intellectual and verbal patients who are more fearful of nonverbal means of self-expression.

Drama Therapy is also being increasingly appreciated for its diagnostic applications, both as a powerful projective device and as an indicator of the individual's cognitive style and personality organization.