

# Strategies for Directing Psychodrama With the Adolescent

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article, the author describes specific strategies that have been successful when psychodramatic techniques have been used with adolescent groups. The typical group member has had a history of alcohol and drug abuse. Conclusions presented come from more than 16 years of weekly group-counseling sessions. Psychodrama has been found to be uniquely suited to the adolescent who is dealing with the problems mentioned here and other issues.

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ADOLESCENCE, THAT TIME OF TESTING, is a period of disengaging from the family of origin and discovering an identity. The adolescent spends an unusual amount of energy trying to anticipate the reactions of others in social situations. Elkind wrote "the adolescent is continually constructing, or reacting to, an imaginary audience. It is an audience because the adolescent believes that he will be the focus of attention, and it is imaginary because, in actual social situations, this is not usually the case" (Elkind, 1974, p. 91). Adolescents wonder how they will look to others. Because of their particular egocentrism, "adolescents are likely to believe that others are aware of how they feel, but that others can't possibly understand their unique personal experience" (Hayes, 1984, p. 9).

Late in the adolescent period, the young people become aware that parents and other adults are not as they have seemed. As the adolescent begins the transition to being an adult, he or she redefines what it is to be an adult. The adolescent differentiates the self from the mother and father. An outcome of disengaging from parents is a rediscovery of who the parents are. Ultimately, the person moves from the child's position of being nurtured and protected to the adolescent stage when parents guide and provide. With patience, the parents may even enjoy a relationship in which the adult child meets and confers with the adult parent.

When family life is inconsistent, the adolescent frequently develops a negative self-concept and a low self-esteem. With these negative thoughts

come confusion about one's identity and role within the family and peer culture. Adolescent behavior is in response to the family system. For example, in an alcoholic family, the adolescent, according to Black (1981), may take on one or more of the following roles:

1. **The Responsible One.** This adolescent is self-reliant, achievement-oriented, and strives to create structure in an otherwise unstructured world. This self-reliance often reduces freedom to share intimately.
2. **The Adjustor.** This adolescent is super flexible. The Adjuster plays a detached reactive role and tends to be a follower who is very uncomfortable when confronted with a decision.
3. **The Placater.** This adolescent is sensitive to others, helpful, and eager to please. Out of guilt, the placater tries to keep harmony and save others from discomfort.
4. **The Acting-out Adolescent.** Although this is a minority group among children of alcoholics, they become the squeaky wheels and are most likely to receive professional help.

Group therapy with the adolescent alcoholic must take into account the young person's developmental stage as well as the family system of which the young person is a part.

#### **Psychodrama With the Adolescent—Rules and Exceptions to the Rules**

Strategies for directing a psychodrama for adolescents differ from those followed with adults. For example, working with the adolescent requires more structure. With an adult group, it is not uncommon for a member to express a need with a statement like this: I have something I'm warmed up to that I need to work on. In the years that I have worked with adolescent groups, I seldom recall hearing that comment from that age group. Yet, we have done psychodramatic investigations in very productive ways.

1. *Give directions clearly and exactly.* Keep in mind that these are young people whose functional vocabulary is limited. When you want a member of the group to put a story into action, be very specific concerning what you want that person to do. As an example, let us assume that one of the group needs to deal with some unfinished business with a significant other. To an adolescent group, it probably would not be clear or precise to say simply: It sounds as if you have unfinished business with your mother. Would you like to put that into action? My experience is that there is usually one of two reactions to a statement or a question like that. The group member responds with either a Huh? or a No! A better way is to

move to a selected place in the room (the stage) and say to the person, "Come and stand beside me. We are going to perform magic by bringing your mother here. We are going to do that so that you can say some important things to her." If someone else in the group has done psychodrama before, the person probably will accept what you say and not question your direction. If this is the first time you try this, there is a good chance that you will get some nonverbal signals that the young person thinks you are crazy. Do not worry about this. Remember you are the boss and are in charge! The group will acknowledge this and accept it. While you are kind, fair, and sensitive, you must also be firm.

2. *Take charge.* It is very important that the group knows you are in charge and that you know exactly what you are doing. Do not be tenuous or shaky. Be assertive. Clearly state your directions and expectations.

An adolescent group seems inclined to shift, at will, from the psychodramatic process to verbal interaction and dialogue. If you allow this to happen, you destroy the warm up as well as the action. For example, while I am directing a psychodrama with an adolescent, other members (the audience) frequently become so involved with the action that they begin to interrupt its flow with questions and interpretations. When that happens, it is very important that I take charge and reestablish the rules (norms) concerning when sharing and questions are important. Spontaneity within the group is essential, but it can also interrupt the flow of action for the protagonist. Usually, it is sufficient for me simply to hold up my hand as a signal to wait.

3. *Keep the drama in the first person.* To be effective, the dialogue in the drama must be in the first person. For example, when the protagonist is speaking with an auxiliary, it is very important that he or she continues to use the personal pronouns I and you. It is relatively easy to keep the protagonist in the first person as long as he or she is in the role. When the protagonist is requested to reverse roles, however, it is not uncommon for the protagonist to say "I think she would say. . . ." At this point, it is very important to model appropriate role reversal behavior by doubling. From time to time, it will be necessary to remind the protagonist and others to remain in role and to concentrate on "being" the absent person or the protagonist.

Another procedure that will help is having the protagonist reverse roles with the auxiliary who is being the absent person. This exchange of roles should happen at the beginning of the session. For example, as soon as the protagonist selects someone to be the absent person, they should reverse roles. This warms up the auxiliary to being the person and the group to his or her presence.

4. *Do not let the group terminate the drama prematurely.* At times, the spontaneity of the group will take over if the director allows it. As I have suggested before, spontaneity is what makes the group function. Within the context of the drama, however, it could be damaging. For example, assume one of the group members is chosen or elects to be a protagonist and is engaged in a psychodramatic encounter with her mother. As the drama unfolds, the director becomes aware that there is a need for the protagonist to deal with some business with a sibling. The decision to bring a brother into the drama must be stated clearly by the director, and the action must be kept moving. If it does not continue, there is the risk that the group may interrupt the drama, break the mood, and begin interjecting their own ideas about what should or should not have been done during the previous encounter with the mother. It is imperative that the director keep the group informed and keep the action progressing.

5. *Have realistic expectations during the sharing stage of the drama.* When I direct adult groups using psychodrama, the sharing stage is highly productive. Other members of the group who have identified with certain segments and have reflected internally upon their own dilemmas and issues experience a great deal of catharsis and personal growth. The same level of introspection leading to profound insights is not characteristic of groups of adolescents. Their focus, most frequently, is outward rather than inward. Therefore, during the sharing stage, most of their comments are directed to the protagonist. My experience suggests that this is not harmful or detrimental to the protagonist. On the contrary, it frequently is beneficial for the protagonist to know the extent to which others have been intensely interested and caring. The honest feedback is growth producing.

It is also important for me as the director to redirect the adolescents' attention inward and to help them find where in their life the drama seemed to take them. To accomplish this, I need to be very sensitive to nonverbal clues. When I observe that someone has been moved by the drama, I invite that person to join me on the stage, and the process begins over again.

### **General Observations**

Recently, during one of my weekly group sessions with adolescents, one member was being urged to talk about an issue. She said "I don't know how to talk about it." Another girl turned to her and said, "Then act it out." This would not have been an option had it not been for the fact the group was accustomed to psychodrama and its value. The exciting outcome was that the girl was able to express her feelings fluently by psychodramatically being in the setting and experiencing the freedom to talk. She also was receiving undivided attention from the other group members.

My final observation concerns the psychodramatic approach to group therapy, which allows us to circumvent the left side of the brain and go directly to the right side of the brain with its rich experiences and imagery. The therapy becomes a three-dimensional experience, rather than a two-dimensional picture, about which one can only talk.

#### REFERENCES

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