Psychodrama With Adolescents: Management Techniques That Work

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ABSTRACT. Management methods used with adolescents in psychodrama groups in a psychiatric treatment center are described in this article. The environmental setting, social norms, structure of sessions, and therapist's style are detailed. Management of group processes to counter disintegrative forces are also discussed.

A PSYCHODRAMA GROUP was planned for the Day Treatment Program of the newly opened Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre (M.A.T.C.). The center, for adolescents with conditions ranging from mild to severe psychiatric illness, offers residential and outpatient programs. These programs include individual therapy, family work, academics, work experience, and social and personal learning programs. The staff includes a multidisciplinary team of psychiatrists, doctors, nursing staff, occupational therapists, day treatment child care workers, community mental health workers, and volunteers.

The programs are scaled to each youth's level of functioning. The team assesses the individual's needs and determines an assignment to possible program components. The psychodrama group was open to those lacking verbal communication skills adequate for other psychotherapy groups.

The group met once a week for 2½ hours. Membership was open, with new clients being assigned and others being moved out of the program.

The inexperienced leader of the psychodrama group was enthusiastic, had had a crash course in methods/techniques, and was reading the relevant available literature (Blatner, 1973; Greensberg, 1974; Moreno, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1951, 1958, 1963; Overholser and Enneis, 1960; Yablonsky, 1976). Ahead lay the challenge of implementing a therapeutic technique with dynamite potential for a group of children who were both explosive and recalcitrant.

After a year's experience with this therapy procedure, we reflected on why the program worked with a group of adolescents compromised by

psychiatric illness and normal "adolescent psychosis." Our review pointed to the specific management methods that had evolved. These techniques are consistent with those described by Yalom (1975, 1980, 1983) and also include management techniques that were a result of the interplay of the adolescents with the therapist.

Establishment of Goals

Four goals were established. Three of these were spelled out and reiterated to the participants, both in a direct didactic and in a subtle way through the work that was set out at each meeting. These goals encouraged a sense of personal worth, promoted self-empowerment, and expanded consciousness. The fourth goal, possibly embarrassing to youth if articulated outright, provided the opportunity to play together—an experience that most of the participants sorely lacked.

Managing the Physical and Social Environment

The environment in which important psychodrama work could unfold had to be carefully managed by the group leaders. The youth in the group, easily intimidated by a new experience, personal exposure, and risk taking, required a solid social framework and an ensured safe and secure environment.

The group began meeting in the familiar setting of the treatment center and later, as the group and its practices were established, moved out to the rehearsal rooms of the Manitoba Prairie Theatre Exchange, a community theater and theater school. This change of scene, initiated because of the practical problem of limited space in the treatment center, signaled to the participants that they could use the community resources much as other youth do. Consequently, the new setting fostered socially mature and responsible behavior.

Just as every social organization has spoken and unspoken rules, this group developed a few simple guidelines at its first meeting. Later these were printed up for each member to keep in a notebook. One guideline emphasized respect for persons and for their privacy. Any disclosure made in the group was privileged information; no verbal abuse was allowed. Sharing of feelings and thoughts was at the discretion of the owner. Each member had the right not to participate in the work and to leave the group and rejoin the following week. The length of the break was set. Group consensus developed, and the facilitator's control often came about by referring to the established written rules.

An important aspect of the structure of each session was the certainty of the occurrence of certain events. Social amenities began each working ses-

sion. Coffee, juice, cookies, and other snacks were the first order of the day. The simple ritual of passing around the cups and treats was visibly enjoyed. Beyond this, the ceremony became an important communion-like experience. This initial act of breaking bread together helped set the mood and decorum.

The rationale and the potential of "breaking bread together" was presented to the adolescents in a didactic way. The concept was well received. Further along, this possible scenario was presented: Group members could share food with each other and family and peers, much as they did in psychodrama meetings. With this part of the program as well as other parts, the sense of personal efficacy was built. The participants gradually became the providers of the shared food. Based on this opening ritual, the session moved from a simple beginning to a more elaborate or demanding personal and social experience.

The second regular item at the group sessions was a warm up. Breathing, muscle relaxation, and imagining of a personal sanctuary or safe spot (a minimal meditation) were predictable events. Again, each of the three was introduced with some simple didactic material laying out the rationale to the participants. These exercises began as brief tasks requiring little effort or self-exposure and built to more demanding ones. As with all of the other activities, participation here was optional.

A small portable board on which the day's work was written was part of every meeting, a visual map to organize both one's time and forthcoming experiences. There were constants—eating together, warm ups of breathing, muscle relaxation and imaging, the break period, structured and purposeful games, and acting out one's own story by using doubling, mirroring, the antagonist, and the entire arsenal of psychodrama.

Managing the Group Process

Active management was required to develop and maintain the group momentum and to keep the group moving in the direction of personal challenge and more strenuous social engagement. A constant counterpressure was the individual's depression, anger, insecurity, disparagement, psychotic states, negativism, and social patterns of disruption. The need to gauge and ameliorate any young person's rising anxiety levels as a result of the social situation or of intrapsychic phenomena was another counterpressure.

When one member states, "This group sucks," while another is laid out in a prone position—the picture of passive resistance, a third sits arms akimbo with neck and head drawn into a living block of anger and hostility, a fourth smiles at visions he cannot share with others present, a fifth

enters and stands on the coffee table, and a sixth is devouring her nails, the initial inertia is well defined for the group leaders.

Yalom (1983) suggests two keys to working with a group of people low in personal and interpersonal function: vigorous structure and sustained, sensitive support for the participants. A third key emerged in this working group—sufficient belief, on the part of the group leaders, in the importance and validity of the tasks at hand. Vigorous structure, meaningful support, and belief in the specific task emerged as three factors that were the counterforces to the disintegrative currents.

A variety of short tasks requiring a limited attention span fitted the realistic abilities of the participants to concentrate. Most exercises required less than 5 minutes to complete. As the participants became comfortable, this was expanded to 7 and 9 minutes. Rarely did a piece exceed 15 minutes of working time. The exception was the unfolding of personal psychodrama.

Short tasks also seemed to keep anxiety levels down. Work or exposure requiring personal examination, brief intimate contact, or a foray into a totally new experience such as conscious breathing were kept initially brief to mitigate the rising anxiety of participants. The rule that one did not have to participate but could not disrupt others at work helped to alleviate anxiety levels. Confident in the validity of the task at hand, the leaders were not upset if only one or if no one tried a newly introduced item.

Short tasks, each having a solid yet changing focus, moved across the spectrum from a general to a more personal or private level. For example, a piece of work on the theme of personal worth began in the following manner. As part of the warm-up section, the focus was on neck-muscle relaxation, and these instructions were given to the group by the leader.

> Pretend that you are wearing a magnificent diamond and it rests in the hollow of your neck. Now that you have it on, sit in such a way as to show its brilliance and sparkle.

Because everyone was wearing a diamond, each focused on his or her own experience of showing off the rare jewel. The next time this item is presented, the "pretend you have a diamond" still has a solid focus, but the focus has moved from a neck exercise to both a personal and a shared experience. A large crystal on a chain was offered to each participant in turn. Fixing it in place, they could move to adjust usual postures to show its brilliance. They were asked to notice what had changed in their bodies, as well as how it felt to be a part of some object of great worth. No one had to do the work or put this experience in words.

Others present were invited to comment on the changes seen in the person whose turn it was to wear the item of great worth. No didactic elaboration broke the mood or the power of the theatrical moment. The element

of surprise of a real diamond and the ceremony of affixing it on one's neck converged in an unexpected moment of ritual and personal experience.

Participation in the work by the leaders lowered anxiety. Leaders served as the partner of those participants who needed the safety of an adult instead of a peer. Venturing into the unfolding actions became safe when an adult actively supported the youngster's efforts.

Sustained sensitive support was important. As Yalom (1983) states, random style does not work. Support and encouragement must be specifically tailored to the working moment and the individual. Often, it is better to compliment (minimally) the work that an individual has just done, rather than the individual. Leaders must be sufficiently pleasant to encourage participation and security, and of course, the pleasantness does affect the atmosphere. A little selective deafness to baiting barbs, sulks, grossness—all and any testing behaviors—helps. Because many of the participants are personally and socially underdeveloped, interpreting their attention-seeking antics as legitimate wit is often an important route to effective support for the participant. An example of this follows.

A boy was telling a story to a doll. The doll was treated as a group member. Through the year, it was used in many roles, from newborn to abandoned infant to child-abuse victim. This day, the doll was portrayed as a total brat with whom the protagonist had to baby-sit. In the role of baby-sitter, the student was telling it a story. A blue glass box with a mirror bottom was used as the imaginative probe. The tale had obvious personal meaning and, in the middle of the story, which held all the participants in rapt attention, another member stood up, made motions with his elbow, and uttered guttural noises. His potential disruption to the mood and work was quickly turned into a contribution as the protagonist was asked to pause in his story so that the Samurai war lord could make his contribution. After the dance of the gutturals and elbows was completed, the story continued its measured flow. Ordinarily, this storyteller monopolizes and upstages everyone around him. The Samurai warrior usually is disruptive as a way of alleviating his anxieties. In a rare moment for both, cooperation resulted. The drama was enhanced by the dance. The story then continued, carrying the storyteller and his audience to the concluding moment. The king looked into the glass box with its mirror bottom and, after his many misadventures, saw only his lonely self.

The leader's ability to provide sustained and sensitive support is derived from his or her respect for the participants, both for their suffering and for the small steps they are taking to increase personal consciousness and enhance their self-worth and self-empowerment. The following vignette encompasses a few theatrical moments when some of these small steps

were evident. The auxiliary support and attentiveness of the other individuals present were important for this moment of acting out one's own truth.

Case Example

A boy (A) with a history of suicide attempts and severe depression, who was a product of an impoverished and disrupted home, approached the group leader stating that he had never had a birthday party. It was decided that a party would take place. A cake inscribed with his name and a suitable gift were purchased, although it was not the actual day of A's birthday. As he had pointed out, by the correct date he would have graduated out of the psychotherapy group. Much to his surprise (and the element of surprise is an invaluable ingredient in psychodrama work), the cotherapists introduced an unexpected event into the party. Pulling appropriate props for a good fairy and a bad fairy from a large green bag, the two leaders began an enactment of Sleeping Beauty, revised to meet the birthday boy's story. The table became the cradle, and a very tall participant agreed to be the baby crying on cue, as the sad facts of baby A's birth were described. The bad fairy had not been invited to the birth celebration, and the 4 P-Curses of Pimples, Pain, Poverty, and Problems had been laid on this misbegotten child. All those present had to try to lift the curse from the crying, helpless infant. One participant offered Clearasil for the pimples, another a bag of gold for the poverty, a third friendship, a fourth understanding for the problems, another a stainless steel sign to be worn by the infant, stating: I am capable and lovable. The protagonist watched his story unfold, became quiet, and then began to cry, sharing with the group the pain associated with miscarried hopes of being recognized and valued. The group was again a source of help, willing to support him in his pain, as they had moments before supported his celebration by eating and drinking together.

Conclusion

Management of the milieu and group processes of the Psychodrama Program for Adolescents was a vital aspect of the treatment at the Manitoba Centre. Careful attention to all aspects of the background structures created a safe environment and permitted the clients to begin the journey of personal empowerment, discovery of self-worth, and expanding consciousness by using psychodrama modes. The program blended the elements of predictability and surprise with a goodly dose of fun and humor.

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