
Section 5: The Practitioner's Corner

The Willingness Exercise Structured Psychodrama: An Illustrated Description

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Structured psychodramas are enactments that have a predetermined beginning, middle, and end. As they create an environment of safety, they are helpful with new groups that might be reluctant to participate in psychodrama. Group members can see where the action leads and where it ends. This can give confidence to group members to step forward and offer themselves as protagonists.

KEYWORDS: Psychodrama; group safety; group confidence; protagonist.

STRUCTURED PSYCHODRAMA

Structured psychodrama is distinguished by having a predetermined beginning, middle, and end. In traditional psychodrama the direction of the drama is uncertain and spontaneous, and it often ends due to time constraints. In some respects structured psychodrama could be considered a warmup exercise but more often is the primary enactment after group warmup.

Structured psychodrama is particularly useful for new groups, who may be hesitant to participate regardless of the warmup. Because it has fixed limits, group members are generally more willing to try it. They can easily see where it goes and how it ends. It is also useful in psychodrama demonstrations.

The willingness exercise has been tested hundreds of times in primarily inpatient settings but is suitable for outpatient work as well. It is also very useful as a diagnostic tool to reveal to the client or patient, group, and director where a protagonist stands on a particular issue, thus indicating the nature of future work.

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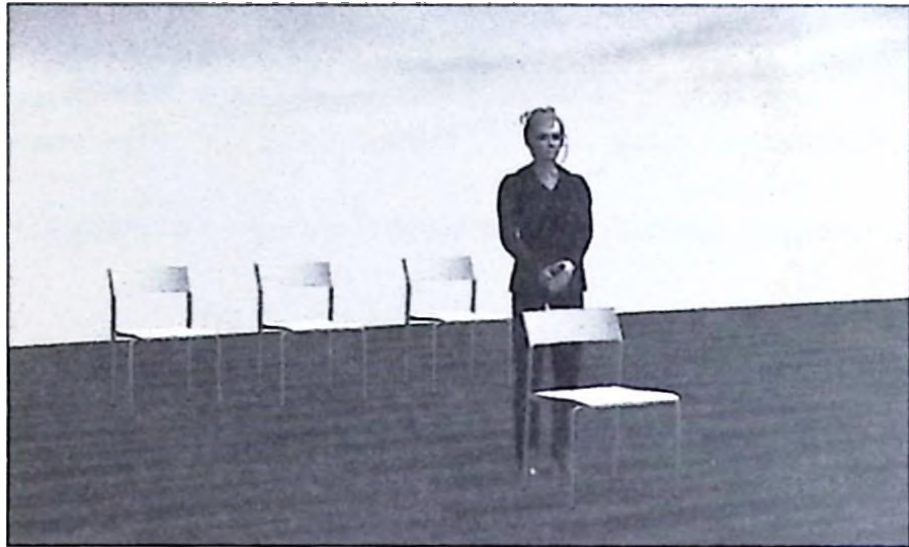


FIGURE 1. The setup of chairs.



FIGURE 2. Interviewing the protagonist.

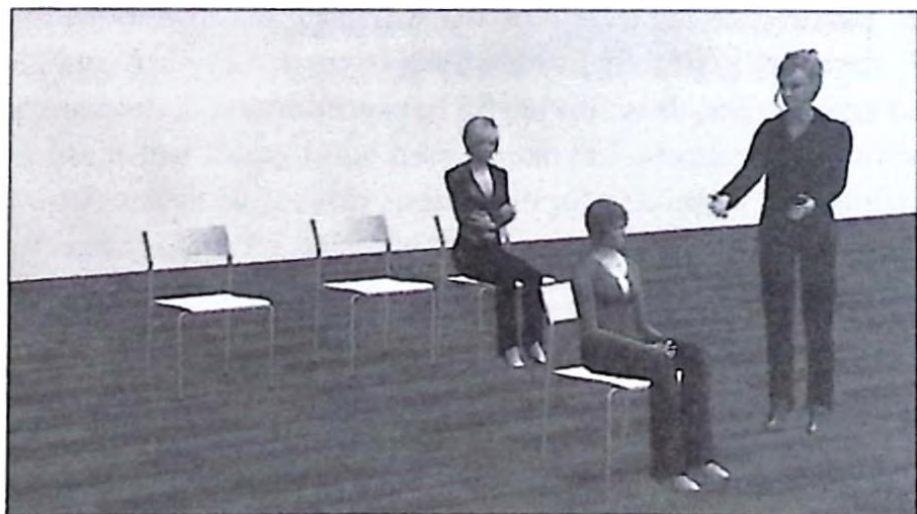


FIGURE 3. The director interviews the auxiliary.

Psychodrama directors are encouraged to modify the format outlined herein to meet the needs of their work. After much trial and error, however, the closer one adheres to this format the more effective the exercise will be. Its power lies in its simplicity.

THE SETUP

Three empty chairs are spaced a foot apart, facing one direction, with a fourth empty chair in the center facing the same direction (see figure 1).

The director stands behind Chair P and says to the group, "This chair represents something about you that you know needs to change. It could be a behavior, an attitude, or a belief, but you know in your heart that it needs to change. Let me say that again, a behavior, an attitude, or a belief. Please think about that for a moment."

The director pauses to allow them to think about it, then says, "Would everyone please raise your hand. When you know what is in the chair, please put your hand down."

When a sufficient number of group members have lowered their hands (some will always be indecisive), the director asks who would like to describe what that attitude or behavior is. An alternative way is for the director to choose a group member to be a protagonist. The director asks the protagonist to sit in the first chair (see figure 2).

The director interviews the protagonist in the role of the attitude, behavior, or belief. The director will probably have to coach the volunteer to respond in the first person. For example, "I am alcohol, and I look like _____." Or, "I am anger, and I look like _____."

At a minimum, the interview should consist of the following:

- What do you look like?
- Where do you come from?
- How long have you been around?
- What do you do for _____?
- Why don't you just go away?

After the protagonist has been in the role of the behavior, attitude, or belief, the director says, "Choose someone to be this role, and move to the right-hand chair." The person chosen, the auxiliary, sits in the front chair, and the director reinterviews the auxiliary, coaching him or her to say as closely as possible the words used by the protagonist (see figure 3).

With the auxiliary in the front chair, now turned to face the protagonist, the director stands next to the protagonist and explains that they are going to explore different levels of willingness and asks the protagonist to fill in the



FIGURE 4. Director doubles protagonist as "not willing."



FIGURE 5. Director interviews auxiliary as the voice of "not willing."

following sentence: "I am *not willing* to give you up (or change you) because _____." (See figure 4.)

It is very important to stick to the word *willing*, because that is all this exercise is addressing. It is *not* about the act of changing.

After the protagonist has filled in the blank, the director says, "Please choose someone to sit in your chair and move one chair to your right or to the center chair." (See figure 5.)

Once another auxiliary is sitting in Chair A, the director, still standing behind Chair A, asks the auxiliary to repeat exactly what the protagonist said.

The director then moves behind the protagonist in the center chair and asks the protagonist to fill in the following sentence: "I *might be willing* to give you up (change you) if _____." (See figure 6.)

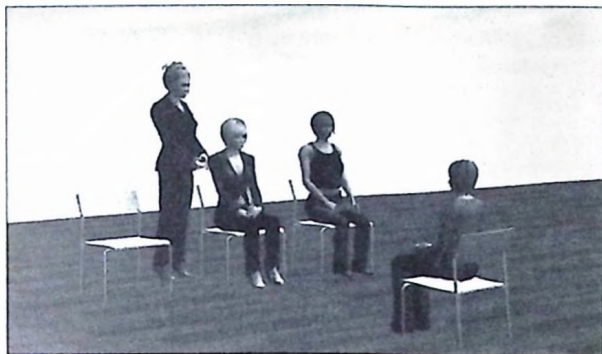


FIGURE 6. Director doubles protagonist as “might be willing if . . .”

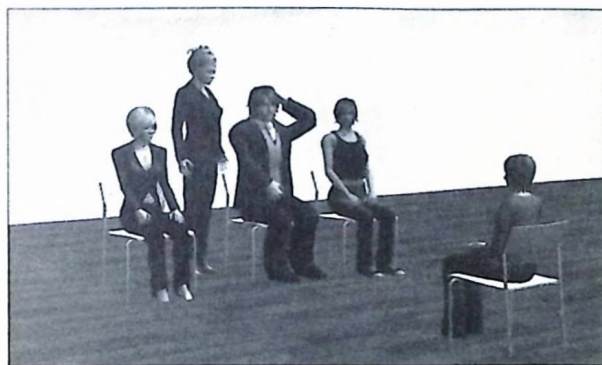


FIGURE 7. Director coaches the auxiliary to repeat “might be willing if . . .”

As before, the director coaches the protagonist to use the word *willing*, not the word *ready*.

After the protagonist fills in the sentence, the director asks him or her to move over one chair and choose someone to sit in the center chair and repeat the line (see figure 7).

Next, the director, standing behind Chair C, asks the protagonist to fill in the following sentence: “I am *now completely willing* to give you up (or change you) *because* _____.” (See figure 8.)

Again, it is important to coach the protagonist to stick to the words *completely willing*, not *ready* or *able*.

The director then asks the protagonist to step to the side and asks someone else to sit in the left chair and repeat the line (see figure 9).



FIGURE 8. Director doubles protagonist as "now completely willing."



FIGURE 9. Director coaches auxiliary to repeat "now completely willing."

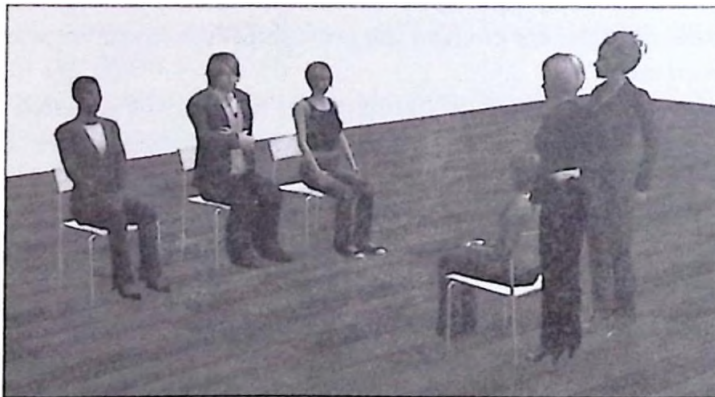


FIGURE 10. Protagonist listens to each auxiliary repeat his or her lines.

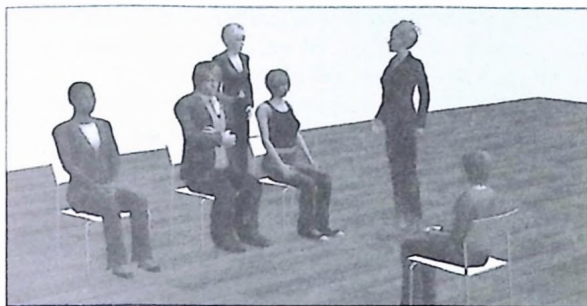


FIGURE 11. Protagonist listens behind the auxiliaries repeating their lines.

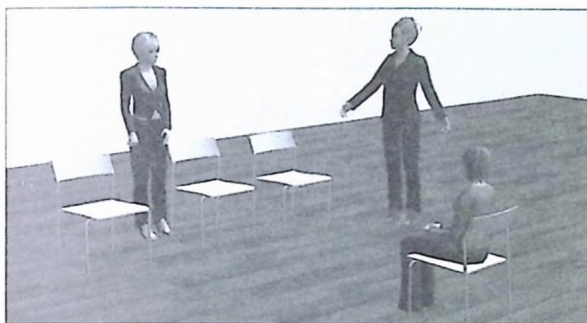


FIGURE 12. The protagonist speaks to the issue.

The director then asks the protagonist to stand behind the behavior, attitude, or belief that needs to change and to listen to each auxiliary repeat his or her lines (see figure 10). If they are having trouble, the director will need to double these roles.

The director then asks the protagonist to stand behind the three chairs and move back and forth while each auxiliary repeats his or her lines one at a time (see figure 11).

The director asks the protagonist to stand behind the place where she feels she is at the moment. The three auxiliaries return to their seats.

Finally, the director asks the protagonist to speak directly to the issue from the place where she feels she is at the moment (see figure 12). It is helpful to offer statements of praise for her authenticity.

At this point the psychodrama can go in many different directions, and it is up to the director to make this determination. Time can be a factor, and the director might end the exercise there and invite someone else to be the protagonist. The director may decide to explore the issue further. A common way to expand the

psychodrama is to ask the protagonist to indicate what kind of support she will need to move her to the next place. That can develop into another psychodrama.

For best results, keep it simple and concrete.

The author would like to hear about your experiences using this structured psychodrama and how you have modified or expanded it.

NOTE

This psychodrama structure detailed in this article was originally described by Louise Lipman and later developed by the author.