

THE DENIAL BUSTER®, A Structured Psychodrama: An Illustrated Description

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Classical psychodrama assumes that the action begins in the present to establish the issue, moves to the past to enact the origins of the issues and determine a corrective, then moves back to the present to reenact with the new corrective. It also assumes that the director "follows" the protagonist wherever the psychodrama goes. Structured psychodrama, as in *The Denial Buster*, imposes a format of roles, and it starts in the present, goes into the future, then returns to the present.

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STRUCTURED PSYCHODRAMA

Structured Psychodrama distinguishes itself 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 contexts, Structured Psychodrama could be considered a warmup exercise, but more often it is the primary enactment following group warmup.

Structured Psychodrama is particularly useful for new groups whose members 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 Denial Buster has been tried and tested hundreds of times in outpatient and inpatient settings. It is also very useful as a diagnostic tool to reveal to the client/patient, group, and director where a protagonist stands on a particular issue about him- or herself, thus indicating the nature of future work.

Psychodrama directors are encouraged to modify the format outlined herein to meet the needs of their work. However, the closer one adheres to this format,

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the more effective the exercise will be. Its power lies in its simplicity.

The Denial Buster is a psychodramatic way to make concrete the attitudes and expectations of a client or patient (herein called the Protagonist). All of the information presented as projections comes from the Protagonist.

The exercise is done with eight empty chairs and a group of eight or more people (see figure 1).

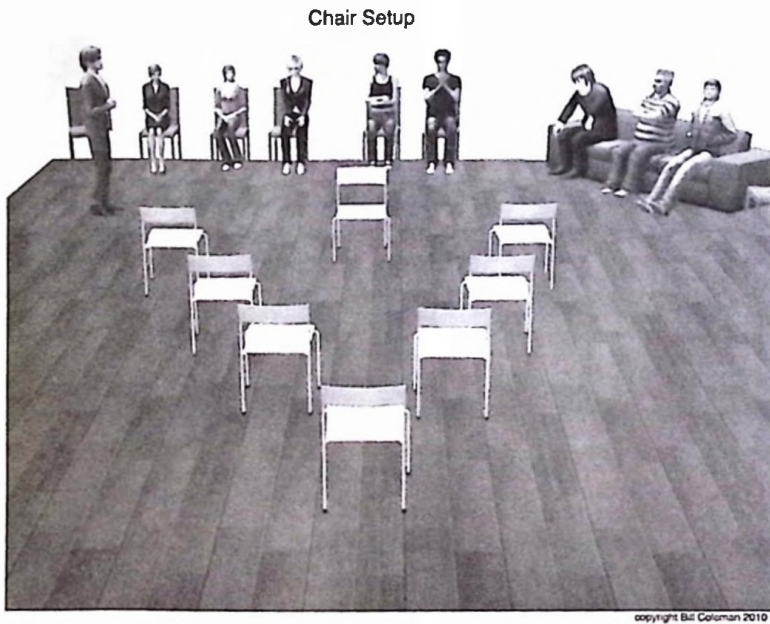


Figure 1. Chair Setup.

At the apex of this V-shaped arrangement is the Protagonist chair. The chair positioned alone facing that of the Protagonist is the Issue chair.

Once a Protagonist is chosen, the Director asks the individual to think of something in their life that needs to change. It could be a behavior, an attitude, or a belief. The Protagonist then chooses another group member to sit in the Issue chair. The Director then tells the two to reverse roles so that the Protagonist is sitting in the Issue chair and the Auxiliary is in the Protagonist chair. The Director then interviews the Protagonist in the role of the Issue.

Example

If the Issue is drinking, the Protagonist assumes the role of a bottle of wine (or beer, etc.). Key questions might be: (1) "How long have you been in her/his life?"; (2) "How much time day do you spend with him/her?"; (3) "Have you heard that he/she

wants to get rid of you, and what do you think about that?"; (4) "What do you actually do for him/her?"

If self-loathing is the Issue, the questions might be much the same. The Issue can be anything. The interview makes it real and establishes it as a Role in the Protagonist's life.

While the Protagonist is in the role of the Issue, the Director asks the group if they would like to ask the Issue any questions. Once the interview is complete the Director asks the Auxiliary and Protagonist to reverse roles so that the Protagonist is back in the apex chair.

The Director then explains how the Protagonist is going to explore the future with regard to the Issue, and invites the Protagonist to sit in the first chair to his or her left. The Director explains that this chair represents time six months into the future (or whatever length of time is appropriate), and that he or she has NOT made any progress dealing with the Issue; in fact, it has gotten worse. If the protagonist says something like, "Well, that will never happen," the Director may acknowledge that it has not happened, but says, "Would you please make it up?"

Once the Director is satisfied that this first six-month chair has been adequately described, the Protagonist is asked to move up one chair and ask somebody to sit in the chair they just vacated. Once this Auxiliary is in place the Director asks that the lines said by the Protagonist be repeated.

The Director then asks the Protagonist, who is now in the second chair to the left, to imagine that another six months have passed and that the Issue has gotten even worse. The Director again interviews the Protagonist, and if he or she cannot offer anything of substance, the Director again says, "Please make it up". The process of choosing a group member to take this chair is then repeated, the Protagonist moves to the final chair, and the Auxiliary repeats what was said.

In the final chair the Director asks the Protagonist to imagine that it is yet another six months into the future and that the Issue has totally taken over his or her life. The Director again asks the Protagonist to describe what is happening. The process of choosing a group member for this chair is repeated, the Protagonist stands up and moves to the side, and the Auxiliary repeats what was said.

The Director then instructs the Protagonist to return to the apex chair and listen while each Auxiliary repeats their lines.

The entire process is then repeated in the chairs to the right. However, with each six-month period that passes, the situation has now gotten better. Once all three chairs have been occupied with Auxiliaries, the Protagonist returns to the apex chair and listens as the Auxiliaries repeat their lines.

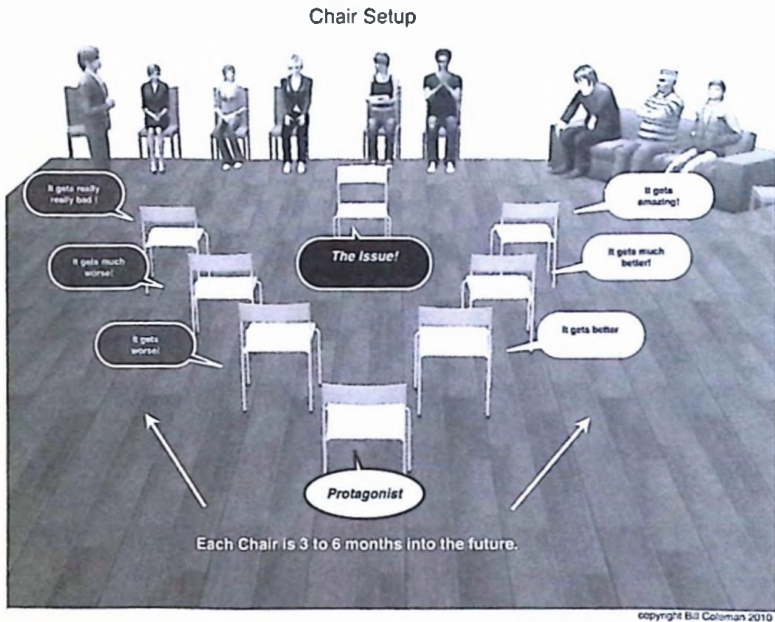


Figure 2. Identity of each chair.

With the view reversed, this illustration shows all the chairs occupied with the Issue chair in the foreground.

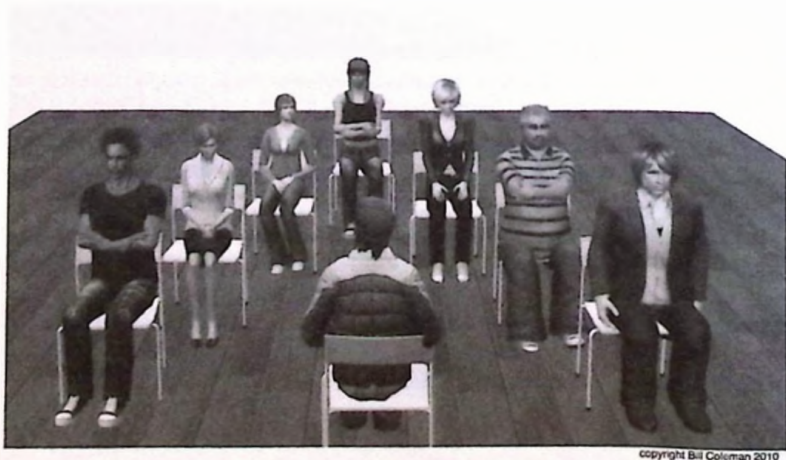


Figure 3. Chairs with Auxiliaries.

Figure 3 shows the setup from the opposite perspective, with all the chairs occupied. The Issue chair is in the foreground.

Once both sides of the V have been occupied and the Auxiliaries have repeated their lines, the Psychodrama can go in many different directions. The Director may choose to end it there and proceed to deroling and group sharing. Another option is to have the Protagonist stand between the two first six-month chairs and have the Auxiliaries take his or her arm and gently pull. This could be followed by a soliloquy by the Protagonist about what it feels like to be pulled in both directions.

Regardless of how the Psychodrama ends, it is essential to leave sufficient time for all Auxiliaries to derole and for the group to process the enactment.

