

Sandtray work with adult trauma clients: Creating safety, facilitating communication and fostering healing

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Abstract

Thematic analysis of literature related to the use of sandtrays in working with adult trauma survivors found that three main themes permeate this work: safety, communication and active work. In developing and evaluating these themes for their relevance to clinical practice, it was found that sandtray work can be effective in increasing safety for both the client and the psychotherapist, that it is ideally suited to fostering communication of the often 'unspeakable' experience of trauma, and that, through its use of physical media, it facilitates and contains the active, empowering work involved in effectively processing trauma.

Keywords

Sandtray, sandplay, trauma, adult clients, safety, communication, thematic analysis, nightmares.

Introduction

The arts therapies are uniquely positioned to provide trauma survivors with healing modalities that can address the sensory, imaginal, cognitive, emotional, and relational experiences accompanying traumatic experiences, thus enabling processing of the strong emotions that invariably characterise traumatic experiences (Malchiodi, 2007). As persistent hyperarousal, avoidance of trauma material (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011), and inability or unwillingness to talk about traumatic experiences are common trauma symptoms (Wiese, 2007), trauma survivors pose very specific challenges to the therapist, many of them related to the difficulties involved in communicating the often 'unspeakable' experience of trauma.

This article explores how sandtray work may contribute to therapeutic work with adult trauma survivors. It is based on a master's research project (Kosanke, 2013) which used thematic analysis to explore the literature about sandtray work with this client group as part of a training programme in psychotherapy. In this context, the introduction of a modality beyond the spoken word is viewed by some

as innovative despite the origins of sandtray work in Jungian analysis (Steinhardt, 2000). Psychotherapy (and counselling) are often seen as 'talking cures' with the healing potential resting within the therapeutic relationship. However, within the field of the arts therapies, a range of expressive and creative arts methods – and their inter-modal (McNiff, 2004) or multi-modal (Robbins, 1994) combination – have a central place in promoting wellness and healing. It should be noted that much of the literature on sandtray work has been written by Jungian analysts rather than therapists trained in the visual arts and, due to their different origins, sandtray work and art therapy have only recently met in the therapy room (Steinhardt, 2000).

Use of sand, water, and miniatures for processing psychological issues was originally pioneered by Margaret Lowenfeld (1979) who worked primarily with children. Jungian analyst Dora Kalff (1980) called the method 'sandplay' and believed that the nonverbal and symbolic placing of objects in the sand enabled contact with the person's unconscious and allowed healing to occur. While the therapist's intuitive understanding was an essential part