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A Psychosynthesis Approach to the Use of Mental Imagery with Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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Techniques of mental imagery can help sex abuse survivors access the inner wisdom necessary to identify, understand and creatively address issues from the past and develop new and healthier patterns of thinking and behaving. This article documents the innovative and inspiring ways psychosynthesis uses mental imagery with this client population.

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INTRODUCTION

Our culture stresses the development of logic and reason and tends to overlook the more creative, introspective and intuitive dimensions of consciousness. In the United States, the general public is both unfamiliar with and skeptical about techniques that attempt to delve into and explore the unconscious mind with its tangle of instincts, conflicts, motivations and potentials. Specifically, there is a considerable amount of controversy today about the use of mental imagery and its application in the treatment of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Articles abound in the news media about the topic of sexual abuse and often take a negative, sensationalistic point of view about mental health professionals who use these techniques in their work with this client population (Beichman, 1993; Ofshe & Watters, 1994; Pendergrast, 1995). The existence or reality of repressed memories, problems associated with Recovered Memory Therapy, and what has come to be called the False Memory Syndrome, are central to the debate (Calof, 1993a, 1994b; Judy, 1994; Freyd, 1993).

Techniques of mental imagery can be quite powerful and are often very helpful in the counseling process, but they do require specialized training to understand and use well. There is a growing body of literature, research, and clinical experience that documents their usefulness in the recovery work with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. There is, therefore, a need by those who use such techniques to help educate the public, their clients, colleagues and allied medical professionals about the benefits of using mental imagery to help facilitate the exploration, healing, growth, and transformation of the human mind and spirit. Although this article does not examine or explore the issue of false memories per se, it is written as a response to the controversy and debate about the use of innovative counseling techniques with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and is intended to help strengthen the foundation of understanding for the clinical use of mental imagery with these clients.

THE NEED FOR INNER GUIDANCE AND WISDOM

Western culture focuses much of education on the development of rational and analytical mental abilities. Its citizens spend much of their personal and professional time in outgoing and extroverted activities, interests and

concerns. Many people, because they are unfamiliar with, untrusting of, and therefore unwilling to explore or develop the deeper potentials of human consciousness, develop "an immoderate desire for status, material possessions, sensuous enjoyment, mastery of nature and authority over other human beings. These preoccupations can lead to self-assertiveness, individual and collective aggressiveness, and violence" (Assagioli, 1963, p. 3). It is hard for people to experience a close relationship with others for whose lives they are responsible and on whom they, in turn, might call upon when they are threatened or distressed if they are not in touch with their own inner processes (Haronian, 1972). The glimmers of the outer world "are often seen to be of much greater value or importance than are the dynamics of the inner world--feelings, imagination, intuition and inspiration which are often dismissed as vague, fuzzy and rather unreal" (Progoff, 1963, p. 37). Because of this, many people can only seek logical solutions to the perplexing problems that confront them. Or they resort to travel, entertainment, technology or even addictions of one sort or another that tend to distract them from the unhappy or unsatisfying results of their actions in the world.

It seems evident that reason alone cannot help people perceive life in broad and inspiring ways. Science cannot help address or solve all personal difficulties. Entertainment is no substitute for personal growth, nor can others with whom people casually interact fully understand the complex and unique realities that exist within them. Superficial solutions can and do, to some degree, help lessen stress, provide comfort, and lend support. They are no substitute, however, for the hard work required to understand and confront troubling patterns of thinking and behaving and the effort required to find answers to basic questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Such solutions cannot forever protect people from the risks they must take to develop their human resources and make critical decisions, and are of little help when the time comes to take responsibility for what they do. Many people are so one-sided in their approach to reality, so out of touch with their own internal processes, that crises are inevitable. Long before catastrophe occurs, the signs of error show up through a lack of creativity, "an absence of instinct, nervousness, disorientation, and entanglement in difficult situations and problems" (Jung, 1958, p. 310).

Many people ignore much of who they are and what exists within them because it seems so confusing or

dangerous. They may choose not to look behind their masks or beneath their personalities because they are afraid they will despise the person they discover there "and feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful" (Maslow, 1968, p. 60). The result is that they reject much of what makes them truly human. They lose a great deal through ignorance, timidity, laziness or denial; however, from their inner depths also comes their joy, love, pleasure, creativity and self-esteem. Maslow wrote that "by protecting ourselves from the hell within, we cut ourselves off from the heaven within as well" (p. 142).

A source of inner guidance and inspiration must be found if people are to effectively handle the traumas, changes and developmental crises that inevitably occur. Victor Frankl (1969), survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, said the search for meaning is a primary force in people's lives. How does one go about this search? One of the greatest challenges in life is to discover, develop, learn to trust and use the deep springs of wisdom that flow within each one of us. The search for meaning must be taken up and answers to fundamental questions (e.g., Who am I? Where am I going? What is getting in my way? What is my next step?) can only truly be found within the realms of the unconscious mind (Miller, 1975).

IMAGERY, THE SYMBOLIC PROCESS, AND PSYCHOSYNTHESIS

The search for inner guidance and wisdom brings people into contact with processes that operate very differently from those of the rational mind. The shift of attention from external to internal reality generally puts people in touch with the unconscious mind and specifically with the function of imagination. As a species, the human race has developed many languages with which to communicate with one another. The unconscious mind, however, communicates to everyone in the same way, that is, through images and symbols (Fromm, 1951). People need to learn how to deal with this unusual language to access, explore, understand and develop the deeper and higher aspects of their human nature.

There are levels of inner awareness possible to experience and explore that can provide people with a view on life far more expansive and significant than can analysis or reason alone. One of the principle challenges facing mental health professionals is to help clients expand their awareness of self, others and the worlds they create and in which they live. Watzlawick (1978) suggested, however, that psychotherapy far too often tries to help people who need healing, growth or transformation with left hemispheric, linear tools of explanation, argument, analysis, confrontation, interpretation and the like. The more expansive modes of consciousness of the right

hemisphere, imagery, symbolism, metaphor and myth, seem to be the best path to therapeutic change because they access most directly the individual's implicit world image (Brown, 1989). Progoff stated that "evoking the depths of ourselves is a way to the renewal of our humanity. It is a way, and a method, by which we can become more truly and fully persons and by which we can carry ourselves beyond the subjectivity of being merely individuals in a self-seeking world" (1963, p. xv).

Psychosynthesis, first articulated by the Italian Psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1888 -1974), is a discipline that directs people toward the deep dimensions of the unconscious mind. The term Psychosynthesis has, at its root, two Greek words: syn, which means "together", and thesis, which means "a placing". The concept of synthesis implies a placing together of parts so as to form an integrated whole, and Psychosynthesis refers to a process directed toward the integration and harmonious expression of the totality of human nature--physical, emotional, mental and spiritual (Gerard, 1964).

Psychosynthesis presents a model for understanding the developmental process and how consciousness evolves within individuals, in groups and in society (Assagioli, 1965a, 1973b; Crampton, 1972; Vargiu, 1971). It also proposes "a process of integral education directed toward the development of a balanced, radiant and efficient personality. It offers a way to treat psychological and psychosomatic disturbances and its goal is the realization of the Self" (Assagioli, 1965b, p. 30). One of the principle contributions of Psychosynthesis to counseling and psychotherapy is its emphasis on the exploration of the symbolic process and its use of techniques of creative visualization and mental imagery to achieve the goals mentioned above.

Fromm stated, "Symbolic language is a language in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts are expressed as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world. It is a language which has a different logic from the conventional one we speak in the daytime" (p. 7). Learning how to enter the deep dimension of the psyche "in a disciplined way is the key to the methodology of personal growth...one must become attuned to its dynamic ways of operation, its principles and its paradoxes (Progoff, 1963, p. 208). Assagioli went further to state that "symbolic language is also a means of expression, and constitutes a useful and at times indispensable aid to catching and then illuminating reality" (Assagioli, 1963, p. 8).

When people learn to relax, let go of their personality patterns and their controlling, rational minds and tune into their unconscious inner depths, through the lens

of images and symbols they find reflections of the many potent dynamics that operate within them. Assagioli (1974) outlined 10 laws which, he thought, govern the operations of the unconscious mind. For instance, "Law IX: Urges, drives, desires and emotions tend and demand to be expressed... We must learn how to give adequate and constructive...expression to each of these...If we fail to do so, if fear, condemnation, or other motives induce us to deny or repress them, they produce psychological and nervous stress...and are apt to create psychosomatic disorders" (p.60). He went on to say that "We are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify ourselves" (Assagioli, 1965b, p. 22). He outlined the two step process of disidentification as: a. the disintegration of the harmful images or complexes; b. the control and utilization of the energies thus set free (p. 23).

Once troubling internal dynamics are identified, they can be pulled together and personified in mental imagery. In this way, then, they can be seen objectively, examined, confronted, explored in depth, and integrated. In Psychosynthesis, these personifications are called Subpersonalities (Assagioli, 1965b; Rowan, 1990). Relaxation helps people disidentify from their roles, responsibilities and concerns. Imagination helps them look within and view their energies, activities, problems and potentials broadly, creatively, so they can see their patterns and understand how they operate. The imagination is itself synthetic, because it "can operate at several levels concurrently: those of sensation, feeling, thinking and intuition" (Assagioli, 1965b, p. 143). Imagination can also help people integrate diverse energies in a way the rational mind can never do. Where before, people were simply aware that internal patterns, energies and dynamics existed but were separate, discreet, and in opposition to one another. Through mental imagery, they can see how these forces operate and fit together in complimentary ways. People can initiate and witness a dramatic process of transformation by cooperating with the laws and operations of the unconscious mind and, by consequence, begin to act in ways that naturally reflect their increasing integrity and wholeness.

THE PRINCIPLE OF WHOLENESS AND MANDALA ART

Remen (1984) suggested there is an impulse and yearning toward wholeness within people, a wholeness that already exists but from which they are consciously separated. Imagery itself is "that process of movement

toward wholeness...it is that process made visible. The process will cloak itself in pictures that are not random. They are unique to each individual; they are purposeful" (p. 86). Arguelles and Arguelles (1972), in their book on a form of symbolic art called the mandala, stated, "If nature is a harmony and a man a part of nature, then man himself must be innately harmonic. The laws governing his mind and body reflect and partake of the functioning of greater nature" (p. 53). I (Brown, 1991a) have written that "the very fact that mandalas are drawn round can lead us to an experience of wholeness when we take the time to create them and then wonder what they mean" (p. 3). Their basic design supports the concept that there is "a kind of central point within the psyche, to which everything is related, by which everything is arranged, and which is itself a source of energy" (Jung, 1959, p. 73). Assagioli (1965b) defined this central point as the Higher or spiritual Self and developed Psychosynthesis as an approach to help people integrate their psychological resources around and through the guidance of this Self. He stated that the experience of the spiritual Self brings with it "a sense of freedom, of expansion, of communication with other Selves and with reality, and there is a sense of Universality. It feels itself at the same time individual and universal" (p. 87).

Working with imagination can help people understand, align and cooperate with the laws of nature and with the self-balancing wisdom of life. "The inherent capacity of the universe to heal and reintegrate itself in its individual parts is made accessible to man through the symbolic dimension" (Progoff, 1963, p. xiii). Imagination offers people a way to gather, store and integrate information about the psyche, then transform and use their energies in the best ways possible to address and resolve our problems so that they may move through their lives with ever increasing love and wisdom.

TRANSFORMING THE EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

From these general reflections come more specific thoughts about counseling adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. It is difficult for many people to understand how profound are the effects of such early traumatic experience and how long it takes to transform them. As basic trust develops in the counseling process, clients learn how to allow awareness to slowly, gently flow back toward the roots or origins of their dysfunctional patterns of thinking and behaving and gradually connect to the power

lying deep within the center of us all. To resolve the effects of childhood sexual abuse, they must learn how to identify, take responsibility for, and resolve the self-doubt, self-criticism, self-hate, self-abuse, guardedness, defensiveness, distrust and fear which is often a consequence of abuse.

Increasingly, research and clinical experience suggests that the process of transforming the effects of childhood sexual abuse can be successfully encouraged, stimulated, and facilitated through the use of techniques that broaden and expand consciousness. From 20 years' experience using Psychosynthesis in counseling, I developed an exercise called Creative Explorations of Inner Space (1992) that I use with sex abuse survivors. The 11 techniques employed in the CEIS process are used sequentially to move clients toward an ever deeper exploration of the issue on which their counseling is focused. The techniques use both left and right brain capacities in a wholistic way to access and develop specific human resources. They include: disidentification-role distance; deep relaxation-calm presence; reflective thinking-mental clarity; receptive thinking-insight; visualization-imagination; mandala art-pattern recognition and creative self-expression; analysis-understanding; inner dialogue-intuition; psychodrama-empathy; grounding-motivation; and planning-commitment.

About using dreams in the treatment of sex abuse survivors, Bogart (1993) stated "dreams...provide illuminating insights that can be important resources for psychotherapy...[they are] symbolic representations of the inner world, revealing unresolved developmental issues, psychodynamic conflicts, and major features of the individual's affect states and object relations; while also leading the individual forward toward greater wholeness, guided by the mysterious, integrative, and seemingly prescient center of awareness that Jung called the Self" (p. 203).

Roland (1993) used visualization to jog blocked memories, to help survivors recall past incidents of abuse, and to facilitate growth and change in the therapeutic process. One visualization exercise, "Parents-Running-Through-A-Field", helps clients uncover memories of the family unit, understand their role in it, and explore the emotional relationships between family members. Another, "Meeting Your Inner Child", can provide a sense of hope and empowerment. Through this exercise, "the survivor gains the necessary power and knowledge to reframe the situation and accept him - or herself as the adult who will protect the child in the future. The mental health counselor's nonjudgmental acceptance of any abusive

memories must be made clear to the client so that both the adult and the inner child can proceed" (p. 366). Many practitioners using mental imagery with this client population seem to share this point of view.

Abbott and Boskin (1985) developed a program called The Inner Child Workshop. In a group context, and with the use of mental imagery, the client can contact and heal the wounded child, recall historical family relationships, and come to understand the belief systems that the child created to make sense of his or her world. Fredrickson (1992) stated that "buried memories of abuse intrude into your consciousness through dreams, images, flashbacks, or bodily sensations" (p. 44). She gave specific advice about how counselors and their clients can work with dreams, story-telling, journal writing, body work, hypnosis and art to uncover and work through traumatic but repressed experiences of sexual abuse. Ratican (1992) offered a good review of current literature on the use of these techniques with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and asserts that "an eclectic combination of techniques is needed to uncover memories, explore and ventilate feelings, and change the survivor's perspectives on the abuse" (p. 36).

Darou (1992) documented how the story-telling technique of Richard Gardner and the fantasy work of Violet Oaklander were combined in one session in the treatment of a 14 year old sexual abuse survivor/offender. The effect was to help the client feel understood, overcome his defenses and resistance, understand his behaviors and their origins, and gain a clear sense of his obligations toward his own victims. Darou reported that, 2 years after this intervention, the client had not reoffended (February 17, 1995, personal communication).

Caveney (1988) took what she called a transpersonal approach to healing the wounds of adults abused as children. She developed a complex three step process to help clients complete their recovery work through the use of mental imagery that included: (a) healing the inner family; (b) letting go: stepping out of the family system; © the choice to live fully: discovering and expressing purpose (p. 61). Caveney went on to say that "it cannot be overemphasized that the essence of healing the wounds of abuse has to do with the restoration of the right relationship between and among members of the inner family and/or surrogates. Reconciliation with the external family members may or may not occur. It is not essential to the healing process" (p.72).

O'Hanlon (1993) conducted solution-oriented hypnosis in counseling he described as Possibility Therapy. "It is different from traditional hypnotic approaches in that it is more permissive, more inclusive, and more validating of whatever the "subject" is doing during the induction and however he or she responds while in trance" (p. 105). This work has three general strategies for effecting positive change in survivors of sexual abuse: 1) acknowledge past and present experiences without closing down the possibilities for change; 2) help the person value and associate to dissociated, disowned, and devalued aspects of experience or self; 3) and, rehabilitate a sense or vision of a future with meaning and possibilities.

SUMMARY

Despite the advantages of Western culture, medical science and technology, there is a great need to focus more attention on the comprehensive development of the powers and resources of the unconscious mind and human spirit. A growing number of counselors and medical professionals have begun to incorporate holistic techniques such as the use of the mandala, creative visualization and meditation into their practice (Cornell, 1994). The techniques mentioned in this article activate right hemispheric functions of image, symbol, metaphor and myth. These techniques seem to awaken biological, psychological and spiritual resources too long buried, undeveloped or denied. These resources, in turn, can help those who use them resolve specific negative patterns of thinking and behaving that often result from sexual abuse, such as bulimia (Brown, 1991b). Psychosynthesis is a discipline that is in the forefront of the movement to examine, explore and make more widely available techniques of mental imagery, and is helping to blaze a trail toward further inquiry, research, training and dialogue about their use.

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