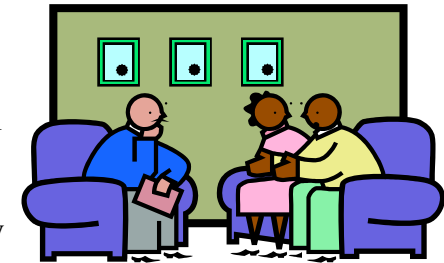




Sandtray Therapy: More than Words

There are times when a person seems to lack the words needed to describe an experience or feeling. There are also people who lack the ability to express themselves in words. These are people who may not benefit from regular talk therapy in the way many others can. Who are these people and how can someone work with them in a helpful manner?

Anyone who has children or has worked with children has seen that they have a limited ability to put into words how they feel and what they think. Children are much more likely to act out, draw, color, or rehearse through imaginary play. This is the appropriate manner of expression for children and should be the guide for how members of the helping professions interact with children. There are adults who also fall into this category, such as those with intellectual disabilities and those who have experienced trauma. It is well known that people who have experienced a traumatic event may put themselves in other similar situations with the hope of changing the outcome and mastering the trauma, often to no avail. Therapy needs to allow these clients to act, to use their senses, which remember the trauma, and to remain safe.



One therapeutic method for working with the above-mentioned clientele is sandtray therapy. Sandtray therapy is a form of play therapy that occurs in a roughly 19"x30" box that is blue on the bottom and sides and has enough sand to cover the bottom. The client is given access to a large variety of figures to be used to make a scene in the sandtray. Outside of this instruction, the rest is up to the client. After the client is satisfied with the scene in the sandtray, the therapist will ask some follow-up questions in order to better understand the scene that was created. Sometimes the therapist and client will just sit with the sandtray, allowing the image to be taken in by the mind, and other times the scene in the sandtray may be interpreted to help the client understand what issues and conflicts may be most pressing and what possible solutions may exist. This works through the sandtray's ability to be symbolic, much like a dream, and therefore can express numerous issues at the same time.



One of the healing factors of sandtray therapy is its use of the sensation of touch and physical movement. The client can touch and move the sand, may pick up and handle a wide variety of textures in the figures and other items. The client may actually move around the sandtray and/or may place the figures to symbolize movement in the sandtray. This access to the non-verbal memories and areas of the brain can be healing with or without being connected to the use of language. However, it is common and quite helpful to examine, describe and interpret the sandtray work, making the connection between verbal and non-verbal areas of the brain, allowing the client the chance to obtain and practice the skill of using logic and thinking to regulate emotional reactions that were previously unregulated.

Sandtray therapy, as with other forms of therapy, requires that the client and therapist have developed a strong working relationship in which the client feels safe to express his or her self and has been understood. Without this safe and protected space, the therapy will not be effective.

As mentioned previously, sandtray therapy is a form of play therapy. Play is not just for children. I am a firm believer that the ability to play is as important for adults as it is for children. Since the early history of clinical psychology, the ability to play has been considered an important aspect of the healthy personality. A recent trend in the world of therapy is the emphasis on the here-and-now present moment and the use of mindfulness skills to achieve this focus on the present. Playing is a great mindfulness exercise in that it is an escape from thinking about what one has to do later or about regrets from the past. Playing is about having fun right now and often leads to the healing touch of laughter. An important note is that children and adults need to develop the ability to stop playing and to accomplish other activities, so that play does not become a method of avoidance. Having a time limit on therapy sessions is one method through which this skill is taught to clients and therapists alike.



Whether you need to work through some deep traumatic issues, have a child that could use some support or just need time to get away and remember what it was like to play, Eunoia Family Resource Center is here in Fairmont to assist individuals, couples, families, children, adolescents and adults.

Dr. Brandon Scott Dugan,
Psy.D., Licensed Psychologist

**For more information about sandtray therapy with Dr. Dugan,
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www.wellminded.org**