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PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

Introduction to Sand Therapy Through the Lens of Sandtray-Worldplay

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For over 2000 years, stories have been shared that convey messages and information. Parables, fables, and stories provide externalized information that is interpersonally difficult to hear. Rather than elicit defenses, the story provided the opportunity for the listener to process the image and its impact on their life. Just as a picture speaks a thousand words, in the same way, the sand tray in Sand Therapy is a three-dimensional picture as one communicates a story that provides the projective experience into the self from children thru adulthood.

Gisela DeDomenico, Ph.D., developed SandTray-WorldPlay (ST-WP), whose work was influenced by Margaret Lowenfeld, MD, British Pediatrician. Lowenfeld developed the World Technique, where she used sand trays and a cabinet with drawers filled with miniatures for the builder to build a world that was correct for them. Revolutionary for her time, as psychology was entrenched in analytical schools of thought, Lowenfeld believed that Sand Therapy was to "have the created world confront its maker, rather than having the therapist confront the maker of the world" (Lowenfeld, 1939, p. 79). The process of expanding the builder's understanding of the world to include the experience, thought, and feeling of each miniature or part of the world enlivens the sand tray world. DeDomenico's (2000) work expanded the conceptualization of World Technique or World Play, as it was known in German-speaking countries, to include children, adults, couples, and groups as they gain conscious awareness of meaning through the building of worlds in the sand tray. DeDomenico (2000) was a prolific trainer who taught ST-WP phases, including the Introduction, Building Phase, Builder Experiencing Phase, Joint Builder-Facilitator Experiencing Phase, Reflective Phase, and Clearing Phase with expanded populations. Building on Lowenfeld and DeDomenico's life work, this article aims to provide a conceptual overview of the ST-WP model with a capsulation of client introductions to Sand Therapy.

Conceptual Review of Sandtray-Worldplay

Using ST-WP can create a bridge between the connection with nature, expressive therapies, and psychotherapeutic treatment models as the individual or group uses sensory inputs with their own perceived correctness in creating a world, experiencing the world, and sharing it with a trained witness. As one builds and experiences the world, this opens up the

possibility of connecting more with the self, build trust with others as one is ready, and gather messages about the self, their world, and/or problems/concerns in their world.

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WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

ST-WP can be considered atheoretical and incorporated with other theoretical models, e.g., EMDR, Cognitive-Behavior Therapy, Client-Centered Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, and more.

The therapeutic relationship is one of the key elements of psychotherapy. As clients feel they are in a safe and protected space, they will relax and work in traditional forms of talk therapy or play therapy. Empathy connecting with one's feelings and another person's feelings drives connection. When we are more connected with our own process, the connection brings the energy to the therapeutic relationship, which drives the connection with another being. We are wired to connect with others as humans. Using sand and images in the sand tray activates, stimulates, utilizes, and coordinates all brain functions (Badenoch, 2008).

The use of expressive therapies, Play Therapy, and Sand Therapy provides alternative avenues to language when the patient and therapist are aware of the need to help access alternative ideas, thoughts, or awareness for the receptive client. For some people, their scripts or their belief of what they should do does not create the space for them to connect with the self. As one goes out of their comfort zones, this provides a loosening up on the brain's belief systems as they work their lower brain with movement, sorting, and building. The novelty and nebulous part of play can help children, teens, and adults discover insights that were possibly hidden. In fact, some clients have commented that while building individual or group ST-WP, there is a sacred sense of the powerful work occurring within the participant's psyche.

The use of sand therapy provides therapeutic distance to allow the conscious or unconscious experiences to be shared at any level by the builder. The use of mirroring behavioral intentions and emotional states will enable us to connect with empathy (Siegel, 2011). The information superhighway between the mirror neurons and the limbic areas allows humans to connect on a physiological and emotional level (Siegel, 2011). Mirror neurons are activated during psychotherapy with any theoretical model, particularly ST-WP, as it allows the builder to pace the therapeutic connection in the protected space that play and ST-WP provides. As one moves through the stages of ST-WP, the mirror neurons are activated as empathic responses are provided with the shared experiences. This catalyzes a deepening understanding of the inner and outer world of the self.

ST-WP helps the client gently move into the language centers of the left brain to develop a story only after enlivening the world. "We don't want to catalyze a leap from right to left hemisphere processes, but rather open the highway for the right to offer itself to the left," states sandplay therapist Badenoch (2008, p. 224). Sandtray can be an embodied conversation between our inner world and outer awareness, held and witnessed by another (Badenoch, 2018). Therefore, the use of ST-WP provides a systematic means to integrate both hemispheric functions and address clients' core issues by compensating for the limitations of language skills and higher brain centers. While working with the client, the trained clinician can observe the movement from one brain hemisphere to the other. During most of the session, we support



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

experiencing the world in the sand, and the right brain functions first, which feeds new information for the left brain to reflect and work with. The sense of concreteness and living within their factual side of the brain is comforting, while others must expand what they have experienced and know in their factual knowledge. ST-WP provides a means to integrate our hemispheric functions to address core issues by compensating for the limitations of language skills and higher brain centers. The building and experiencing process supports the acquisition of language skills, which increases the capacity to create and tell one's own story.

The experience of Sand Therapy is facilitated by the introduction to this medium as a therapeutic tool. The introduction provides a framework to support the client in building and experiencing their world in the sand. Gisela DeDomenico in *Sandtray-Worldplay: A comprehensive guide to the use of the sandtray in psychotherapeutic & transformational settings* (2000) provided a detailed introduction to the ST-WP process where parts can be incorporated into the clinician's introduction to the patient.

Child Introduction

Introducing the sand therapy experience to children takes into account many aspects of their developmental age. DeDomenico suggests,

Now that we have talked a little bit and you have told me what you are here for, I want to show you a different way of talking....Let me explain. There are many ways of talking. Some are easier than others. Inside each one of us there is a part that thinks in pictures. These are thinking pictures: they have feelings, color, smell, shapes, though, all put into one. They are real pictures, but they are ever so difficult to put into words. That is why most people do not try.

Here we talk this picture language a lot. It makes it easier to understand one another. Come and see. Here... I think(s) that you can actually make some of those pictures that you have in your head. These pictures will let you think out loud with the pictures. They are all here for you to use when we are together.

Here is a tray of sand (touch it) This one is dry and that one is wet . You can move the sand any way you like.... here is the bottom. It is blue and looks a bit like water.

We have real water too. Here is the pitcher of water. You can use it to make the sand wetter or to make a flood inside the tray. Here we have a towel to clean our hands again. We also have a place to wash up.

Now there are many pictures that can be done with the sand and water. Here on the shelves and in these baskets and drawers you see many objects and things that you may use to make your pictures in the tray of sand. Use them any way you need to....



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

If there is something you cannot find, let me know. I will tell you where it is. If we don't have it, we'll make it or substitute something else.

If you want help getting something down, let me know. And if you have any questions, just ask.

Do you want to try this out?

While you are working, I'll just quietly sit here and watch. You can talk to me while you work if you want to. Remember (what) you make your picture is entirely up to you. You will know when it is right. I will write some notes. I will take some pictures now and then..... DeDomenico, 2020, p. 34-35

Adolescent and Adult Introduction

When working with adults or adolescents, the introductions are varied to meet the client's needs for understanding with a more detailed explanation. DeDomenico suggests,

I would like to introduce you to this psychotherapeutic tool. It is called Sand Tray Play or World Play.... Although we call Sand "play", this activity is really work. It allows your own psyche to speak out loud using sand, water, and any of these very diverse images.

You see, this extraordinary collection is designed to be used as your own personal vocabulary of images. It is a way of telling and weaving your very own story.

You (may) have already noticed how exceedingly difficult it is to express with words the very complex thoughts, feelings, memories and images that enter your awareness during our work time together.

This is because all of us actually think in very complex images. We all speak this image language. This is very activity will allow you to tap your own language of images. This is not a childish task – although it requires you to recapture the spontaneity that children are known for.

It is called play to remind us of the spontaneous and uncensored expression of these images inside our psyche. DeDomenico, 2020, p37

DeDomenico often encouraged builders of a world to trust their heart and mind and to not analyze or censor their work. This encouragement comes early in the building phase and can be reminded as needed during the session. The introduction continues:

This is not a psychological test. You cannot fail, as there is no right or wrong way. No one produces the same picture in the tray. We all create our own.



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

Actually, it is important that you allow yourself to be moved by the images and sand. Trust yourself and choose what seems right at the moment. You will see what I mean, as you start working.

Let me show you more specifically. Here is a dry sand tray and here is a wet one. Choose either one. You may move, shape, sculpt and pattern the sand any way you desire. Notice the bottom of these trays are blue. It looks a bit like water. If you want more water, there is a pitcher of water here. Use it if you wish.

As for these objects that on the shelves, in baskets and in these drawers: pick out those that speak to you and use them any way you wish to arrange them in any order or sequence. Let them correspond to your own inner sense of correctness, and to the nature of the images you experience inside your head (or heart).

Do not worry about what they mean. The meaning will become clear to you. Just experience them and play with them.

If you cannot find something, just ask. I will help you find it or we will make it using these different materials.

While you work, I shall sit here, make some sketches and notes, take a few photographs and be available to assist you.

If you wish to talk, you may. Feel free to work silently. I will give you a five-minute warning before it is time to stop working or just tell me when you are done.

Then we will take a look at what has emerged in the tray. We will have the chance to talk about it then. Go ahead. Trust yourself. Be spontaneous.
DeDomenico, 2020, p. 38

DeDomenico's introduction is rarely used in its entirety but provides the grounding for the elements needed in the introduction. When Sand Therapy is introduced to children, teens, parents, or adults, the images and sand trays provide some curiosity. Sometimes the builder naturally moves toward the sand tray(s) and miniatures with no introduction needed to play in the sand. Sometimes, the individual innately knows what they need and works toward meeting their desired need in the therapeutic space. There are other times that the individual is slow to warm to this process and needs support to engage in the process. Likewise, knowing the source of their reservation will be important to assess.

We start the introduction with the possibility of building images in their mind or making a three-dimensional picture. They are encouraged to touch the different types of sand, noticing what the builder is drawn to. Permission is given to move the sand up high or down low, noticing the blue at the bottom of the tray. While looking at the miniatures, pointing out images of the earth, buildings, animals, people, etc., they are encouraged to use any image(s) that they are



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

drawn to or speak to them. If there is something they need, let the clinician know. Likewise, the clinician will be taking notes while observing the building phase.

Whether during the initial introduction to the Sandtray or as it seems appropriate, the below is an example of the introduction standardly used in practice.

Case Study

A middle school-aged male was referred by a pediatric clinic due to an ongoing physiological problem that impacted his quality of life. An extensive medical workup identified no medical cause. Although a minimum introduction is needed at first, as some clients quickly gravitate toward the sand, the trained clinician will offer the introduction as there is an opening in the play process. That was not the case as this young person was frozen to his seat next to their mother as we discussed different possibilities of working together, including the introduction of ST-WP. Working with the parents of children and teens is important so they develop an understanding of the process. After a brief overview was given to the parents, the individual was given a more detailed introduction. Below is an example of a script used to introduce Sand Therapy.

There are times we can use words to work together, but other times we might not know what to say or feel stuck. Working with the sand is a way to build a three-dimensional picture of anything the client desires and to experience the built world. First, notice the different sand types and possibly touch them as we look. The clinician notices what is touched and what is avoided during this time. You can make the sand go as high or as low as you want in the sand tray. The clinician demonstrates this while saying,

You can use any of the images that represent the different parts of life and or the world in the sand tray. Notice what speaks to you or connects with the picture in your mind that you want to build. Here are shells, different water animals, wood, stones, and different things of the earth. Here are fire, ice, and elements of the earth, e.g., wind and water, with different images. There are trees, and you can use as many or as few of the images as you would like.

Transportation vehicles, fences, buildings, and blocks are located there. Here are animals of all kinds, from reptiles and small critters to animals of the jungle, woods, or farms. You will notice people of all types on these shelves, from the masculine to the feminine. On the top shelves, you will notice images of spirituality or higher power.

You can choose the miniature(s) that speaks to you. If you cannot reach anything, please let me know, and we can figure out how to get the image(s). I will be taking notes over here if you need anything.



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

Building Phase

The clinician provided the introduction as the builder moved his hands through the sand and looked through the miniatures. What a person looks at, touches, chooses, or does not choose is all relevant information. Validate and support movement that is witnessed with the client. This young person chose an elephant and placed him in the center of the tray.



After moving the sand for some time, he was done building. Sand therapy sessions (s) can occur in one or many sessions. The collection of sandtrays over the course of at least three sessions is helpful to gain a fuller understanding of the client and the worlds in the sand. In this phase, just being present with the one elephant gave possibilities to the inner world of this young person.

If there needs to be changes to the sand tray world, the builder may change it at any time during or after the building phase. Therefore, the builder is given permission to change the world at any time during the introduction or supporting movement needed.

Builder Experiencing and Joint Experiencing Phase

It is important for the clinician to not judge the world but hold the world's glistening possibilities or ideas. The clinician asks to join the builder on his side of the sand tray. As the builder started experiencing the world, they noted how heavy the load was for the elephant. Being the elephant and connecting with the elephant opened the pathway for discussing the load. The need for other beings to build connections in the world as a possibility was experienced.

Reflective Phase

The phases of ST-WP flow or can happen concurrently. In this case, the client's discussion of loneliness and struggle in their life was explored and experienced. The need for support and



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

connection in daily life was amplified. This was later discussed with his parents, which can be used with the sand tray or didactics. The belief that a picture speaks 1000 words, this clinician often uses the resource of the sand tray. The physiological symptoms were remitted over the next two weeks, and the client's mood improved.

Clearing Phase

At the end of the session, the client leaves the room, and the therapist has the opportunity to sit with the world to experience the elephant. This provides the opportunity to gain additional connections and insights. The magnitude of loneliness and the pressure of this young person's experience is seen, felt, and heard. In our fast-paced society with expectations, this phase is often skipped. Encouraging oneself to slow down and spend time with the builder's world is an additional source of information to maximize the therapeutic gains of this treatment model.

Conclusion

Clinicians guide the introductory language to meet the individual's needs. The possibility of a person choosing an image they connect with or that speaks to them is often used as part of the introduction. This language is shifted with certain clinical populations, such as psychosis, that might get confused with internal voices. Inviting the person to explore or touch the sand and images are important as they connect with this therapeutic medium.

ST-WP is a treatment model that blends experiences with life, as one uses miniatures to create a world that opens the connection with one's inner self. Blending our outer and inner worlds facilitates a deeper connection with the self and others. As our relationship and trust in another human grow, this can be the foundation for further growth with other relationships. As we encounter different worlds, cultures, and life experiences, we see the juxtaposition or dialectical thought processes and bridge the learning from the session into everyday life application. As we introduce our clients to this process, we open up potential space for inner growth.

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**WORLD JOURNAL FOR
SAND THERAPY PRACTICE**
PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

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