Belmont University Research Symposium
(BURS)

Special Events

Spring 4-6-2022

Strengthening Adolescents with Anxiety Through Drama Therapy

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Recommended Citation

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Theatre History 1

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October 2, 2021

<p style="text-align:center">Strengthening Adolescents with Anxiety Through Drama Therapy</p>

In recent years the issues associated with social anxiety have become increasingly common in adolescents. With these issues becoming more common it is important that they continue to be nurtured and helped. With so many forms of therapy though it may be hard for someone to find a practice that suits them. That is where drama therapy comes in. Drama therapy is a fairly new practice that helps these adolescents to become more expressive and engaging in their everyday lives, decrease their social anxieties, and build a new sense of confidence with their anxiety. By gaining a deeper knowledge of theatre and its history, these adolescents are also provided with a new outlet in which they can explore and continue to grow as human beings. With all of this in mind it becomes obvious as to why drama therapy has become so effective in helping these children to grow. Whether it be through group exercises, individual sessions, improvisational theatre, or a structured three step method of putting on a performance, drama therapy has something for everyone no matter what their setbacks in life may be.

Drama therapy typically engages adolescents in a variety of interactive activities designed to strengthen their desire and willingness to engage appropriately with people in their lives. In most cases drama therapy is structured as a group engagement activity in which individuals are required to interact with the other patients through drama based games and performances. In drama therapy it is also common for the patients to participate in more metaphorical or fantasy-based roles. In Orkibi's article he explains that "Clients typically use

role-play to enact fictional and symbolic roles, engage in storymaking and storytelling, puppetry, masks, miniature objects, and rituals to work more indirectly and with a greater dramatic distance from their issues." (pg. 4). Unlike more common practices of therapy, drama therapy's indirect approach to facing an adolescent's issues allows them to create their own understanding of their lives rather than just telling them what is wrong and giving them an exact way of fixing it. Furthermore, when diving deep into the logistics of drama therapy it becomes increasingly more obvious as to why it has become an effective form of therapy. "The answer may lie in drama's inherent quality of being a user-friendly art form that can be mastered relatively intuitively and with less knowledge and practice-driven skills." (Orkibi, pg. 4). Acting, or the practice of living truthfully under imaginary circumstances, allows clients to explore the true depths of their lives in a safe environment, and in doing so, allows them to find who they truly are as human beings.

A common issue for children with anxiety is that they fear that which they don't know. For example, nobody is able to predict the future. Although some people find comfort or challenges within this concept, it can be a very terrifying reality for these adolescents. Within drama therapy there are multiple levels at which a client can engage in their activities. If a client chooses to take a route with more individuality then a therapist has the opportunity to give them a course more centered around their exact characteristics. Disengaging the client from the group activities, although not highly recommended, allows the therapist to put them into characters and scenarios that more deeply connect to their real life circumstances, while still depicting a fictional character. Although more research is needed on the subject, this path, especially at the middle stages of treatment, has shown signs of easing social issues like anxiety. In Orkibi's other article he states that this route "showed that observer-rated child involvement at mid-treatment

was positively associated with diagnostic improvement in primary anxiety disorder." (pg. 2). With this in mind, switching to some more individualized activities can be greatly beneficial in helping to ease social anxiety, further allowing the client to grow. This step is crucial because the more the client's anxiety is lowered the more they will engage in treatments as well as everyday life scenarios. Additionally, by creating a higher sense of confidence the clients will be able to face their fears more head on and come up with better solutions for tackling them.

When diving deeper into the issues of social anxiety the sources for getting help are very few and far between. The sad truth is that doctors would rather pump a child full of pills then point them towards an outlet at which they can explore what makes them nervous, so that they can try to fight their anxiety at its core. Although there are still a few doctors with good intentions, many of them would rather have a client come to them constantly in order to get more money. Practices like this also lead the client into an overly dangerous and exhausting way of life. "Compared with a healthy population, those who meet criteria for social phobia are likely to have higher levels of drug dependency, drug problems, and unemployment, and lower levels of socioeconomic class, household income, quality of life, and educational achievement." (Felsman, pg. 1). This is one of the many reasons that drama therapy is becoming so important for helping to battle these issues. One of the ways that drama therapy can help to combat certain social anxieties is by putting adolescents through an improv based form of treatment. The most important aspect of improvisation is the fact that absolutely nothing can be planned. This is the very aspect of life that can cause an increase of anxiety in a number of individuals. However, learning to be an effective improviser can increase the confidence of the client by giving them the tools they need to knock down social barriers and feel comfortable in situations that are out of their control. "The number one goal of an improviser is to be of most use to one's scene

partner, meaning that each improviser should be identifying things [they] can do to help the moment, the scene, the show...behaving attentively, with [their] last thought being about [themselves], succeeding to the extent that they are supporting one another's performance." (Felsman, pg. 2). This method not only promotes a willingness to interact with other people, but it helps the client to build trust in others that could otherwise further be inhibited by their anxiety. One way of getting engaged in different forms of improvisational theatre would be an after school program. In Felsman's article he and his colleagues go in depth about the details of an afterschool program they designed geared towards high school and middle schoolers. Of the 266 students that participated 62.8% of them showed that they strongly agreed that they learned how to use what they learned in the course in their everyday lives. Some of the skills they learned included the idea of becoming comfortable performing in front of others and actively attempting to be fully engaged in certain activities. Although the researchers agreed that they need further research to fully prove their methods, they found strong evidence of their work having a positive impact on the students who participated.

Another effective way of battling social anxiety is by having the client participate in therapeutic theatre. Although this title may sound a little redundant, the point of therapeutic theatre is to engage clients in a structured, multi-step process with a performance based approach. In Cook's article she expresses how in 1994 one therapist "proposed a three-phase therapeutic theatre process used by current practitioners, which included the rehearsal process, the public performance, and the post-production processing with participants." (pg. 1). Cook's article, although mostly focused on those with disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome, incorporates those with mental illnesses and anxiety. By using a structured three-phase process participants get the opportunity to interact with others who have a variety of

disabilities, and in doing so are taught how to give support and strength to others around them. This particular practice not only teaches the participants a new skill like helping others, but it helps them break down some of their social barriers and become more comfortable doing so. Likewise, practices like this help to break the stigma against these individuals. By showing the public the kind of amazing work these individuals can do they are then challenged to rethink some of the ideals that have been put in place nasty stereotypes and false accusations.

Further building on the idea of therapeutic theatre, the ideas behind a performance like this are to not only teach the participants new skills, but also to help them see the true potential that they have to make their voices heard. In Geiger's article she expresses many questions that the public brought forward when hearing that such a performance would be taking place. The biggest question was whether or not such a performance should be held in the first place. When asked such a question, she left it up to the participants to make that decision. This was the first step in helping the participants to break out of their comfort zones. "Several voices were heard in the group regarding the performance; no one objected, and the majority expressed enthusiasm." (Geiger, pg. 4). The performance they ended up doing included elements of improvisation, as well as some structured elements, making it a perfect use of everything that drama therapy has to offer. In the end the participants learned skills that helped them with scenarios involving "relations with authority figures, passiveness vs. activeness, and limited emotional expression." (Geiger, pg. 4). By using this process the participants were given a new skill set that will not only help them to interact with others, but also unlock the true potential of what they're capable of achieving.

One final question that gets asked among communities and institutions is if there are ample spaces to conduct dramatherapy. In Leigh's book she expresses how, when conducting

drama therapy at a university, her course was moved from room to room on a yearly basis. During this time she was moved from an old, disused gym, to a conference room, and finally a large room that was catered to her program. Through adaptability she was able to make each of these spaces work and found ways of providing her clients with a course that was still structured and beneficial to their wellbeing. Although drama therapy is still new and being developed, the fact is that theatre is adaptable. Unlike other therapy practice, drama therapy has the ability to take place in a wide array of spaces and there are always ways to make the spaces work.

As social issues like anxiety become more common than ever the need to help treat these issues becomes increasingly important. With the issues of poor practices by traditional doctors and a lack of care for anxiety the need for drama therapy continues to grow. Through the use of immersive and structured techniques patients are given an outlet in which they can be expressive, learn to overcome their fears, and become more comfortable living in their own skin. In addition, the practices used in drama therapy supply the patients with a new set of tools in which they can use to be more confident and adaptive individuals. Lastly, by teaching the patients about the history of theatre they are given a new outlet in which they can explore and further find ways of expressing themselves. With a multitude of treatment methods, there is a form of drama therapy for everyone. So no matter what disability or mental illness someone may have they will always be able to find help in drama therapy.

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