

Psychotherapy Guidebook



**ROLEPLAYING
THERAPY**

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Roleplaying Therapy

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Roleplaying Therapy

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DEFINITION

Roleplaying Therapy may be defined as a rehearsal or recapitulation of any event, actual or imagined, for the purpose of amelioration of any real or conceptualized situation. Putting this a bit differently, psychotherapy may be seen essentially as a learning process devoted to changes in behavior, thinking or feeling, but usually all three, and one way to achieve these changes is to actually “do” what is called for. Thus, a person who is afraid to ask someone for a job may learn to overcome his fears and learn the technique of dealing with a job situation through rehearsing such a scene with a friend, or with a stranger in a safe situation. What we have, then, is a kind of rehearsal, a tryout in a situation in which one cannot fail. Similarly, if one has a lot of anger toward some person, he might discharge that anger by “having it out” with that person (which would be reality), or by roleplaying, that is, dealing with someone who represents that person.

Consequently, Roleplaying Therapy says in effect that one way of getting psychological benefit is through actually acting out a problem in a safe situation with people who themselves will play other roles, and in this way

vicariously experiencing emotions, gaining skills, and obtaining information.

It is this writer's opinion, based on considerable knowledge of a variety of psychotherapeutic techniques (Corsini, 1973), that of all psychotherapeutic methods, none of them is more powerful — and consequently more difficult and more potentially dangerous in the wrong hands — than psychodrama, the general name for Roleplaying Therapy.

HISTORY

While we can be sure that roleplaying has been used for a wide variety of purposes throughout the centuries, including psychotherapeutic uses, generally the development of roleplaying as a psychotherapeutic technique is attributed to J. L. Moreno (1946), an Austrian-born psychiatrist who first experimented with theater-in-the-round and then began to treat patients on the psychodrama stage, having them explain their psychological difficulties to others, who might include the therapist and assistants, and then act out the problems with the help of the assistants under the therapist's direction.

This technique, first used in the 1930s, became quite popular. Under Dr. Moreno's direction, a society, The American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, and a journal, Group Psychotherapy, were established, and the procedure has now been more-or-less accepted by many eclectic therapists as an ancillary therapeutic method, both for individual and for

group psychotherapy. A number of books explain the system. Moreno's book (1946) may be too specialized for many people. One by Corsini (1966) and one by Starr (1977) may be more suitable for the general reader.

TECHNIQUE

The technique is essentially that simple: the patient (known as the hero) plays his own role in a situation that may have taken place in the past, or that may be a current situation, or one that is anticipated in the future. He may now act out his role alone, or in interaction with other people who play other roles. Thus, the person acts as though he were actually in the situation portrayed and that the others were actually those in his real life.

Many variations exist. Thus, after finishing a scene, the person may change roles with someone and experience how others react to someone playing himself; or he may watch how someone else plays the role he played in the same way he played it. The first is called "switching" and the second, the "mirror technique." There are dozens of variations, but these are the principal ones.

Roleplaying Therapy can take place alone: that is, if one rehearses a speech in the privacy of one's bedroom, this is a kind of roleplaying. Masturbation can also be seen as Roleplaying Therapy, if the person imagines he is with another person. Roleplaying can take place in a one-to-one

situation with the therapist perhaps playing the role of the client's mother or wife. It can take place in a group therapy situation, in which group members can play a variety of roles to meet the needs of other members. And, it can take place in a situation specifically designed for psychodrama, with a stage, a director, and trained assistants. Such psychodrama situations are found at the Moreno Institute in Beacon, New York, and at several other locations in this country and abroad.

APPLICATIONS

The applications of Roleplaying Therapy have been very wide. It can be used for practically any problem, though it seems especially valuable for dealing with delinquents and criminals. It also has considerable value, when used properly, in marriage difficulties. In terms of specific problems, the considerable literature shows that it has been applied to almost any kind of situation in which psychotherapy can be used.

Also, roleplaying is employed in situations closely allied to psychotherapy, for example, education (Wells, 1962), nursing training (Fein, 1963), industry (Corsini, et al., 1968; Maier, et al., 1975), and in the home (Lippitt, 1947).

Psychodrama may be viewed as a technique that can be used with any therapeutic theory, a general procedure, much like the interview, and

consequently its use does not mean any acceptance of Moreno's sociometric theory. It may also be seen as the method of choice and be employed exclusively. It can be used on a very "light" basis, such as: "Let's see how you talk to your child when you want him to go to bed," or it can be used on a very "heavy" basis, with a whole team of assistants who will act as representatives of people in a patient's life.