

Energetic Psychodrama

A Compendium of Terms and Techniques

Books by Kipper (1986), Goldman and Morrison (1984), and Blatner (1973, 1988) and articles by Z. Moreno (1959), Weiner and Sacks (1969), and others list many psychodramatic techniques.

Abandonment Represent feeling abandoned by someone or by a group of people by having the group walk out the door, or to a far corner of the room. The protagonist needs to experience the feelings fully, and then take power to change the experience (eg, creating a new support system, or negotiating a resolution with the people who left).

Act completion This validates protagonists' emotional experiences and sense of active choice by enabling them to experience psychodramatically the fulfillment of a wish, the positive resolution of a dream or conflict, or the recreation of a successful culmination of a previously frustrated or inhibited plan. Another term for this is act gratification. For example, a traumatic or disappointing scene from childhood might be replayed with the elements changed: A co-therapist or another group member takes the role of a 'perfect' parent or teacher. This technique offers a more direct mode for what Franz Alexander called the 'corrective emotional experience' without having the therapist get involved directly in gratifying the patient's needs. (Blatner, 1988)

Act hunger This refers to the inner need, conscious or unconscious, to experience some dimension of emotion or physical action by actually enacting a situation where such self-expression would be part of appropriate role behavior. For example, the need to be triumphant might evoke a scene of being a knight in combat. (Blatner, 1988)

Action sociogram Protagonists portray their perception of the relationships in their families, work settings, the present group, or some other situation as if it were a diorama or sculpture. Distances (far or close) are shown concretely, and feelings are represented in the way people face and by physical gestures. Virginia Satir used this technique under the name family sculpture. It also has been called statue building (Seabourne, 1963). (Blatner, 1988)

Amplification The protagonist's softly spoken words are repeated loudly by a double or by the director; this is especially helpful in a moderately large group setting (Ossorio & Fine, 1957). Alternatively, the protagonist is encouraged to repeat with greater intensity any words softly spoken, and/or to say more about a given idea or feeling. Sometimes the double helps in this process. (Blatner, 1988)

Audience This is usually a therapy group but could be any kind of group, a family, several therapists or staff members. It includes those present who are not playing a specific role in an enactment, though, as noted below, the audience sometimes plays a collective role.

Behind the back The protagonist goes to a corner of the room and turns away from the group. The group proceeds to discuss him as if he was not there. Another variation involves the protagonist's presenting a scene or situation; then the group discusses the issues rather than the person. In a third variation the group is instructed to turn away from the protagonist and to make no response, no matter how provoked, while the protagonist is allowed to talk about his feelings toward each of them (Corsini, 1953). (Blatner, 1988)

Being Held Down If the protagonist feels held down, held back, or smothered in life, you can concretize the experience by having one or more group members physically hold him down. He must use his energy, voice, etc. to get up. Once he gets some part of his body free, allow it to remain free. It is good for other group members to "cheer him on" to continue to break out of this restriction or inhibition.

Body Shame Process A variation of the Shame Process, naming body parts where the individual carries shame. Encourage the protagonist to go back to the original shame, which may be sexual abuse or messages from parents or family. You may have group members play the voices to "plug the person in." Ask her to do completion by saying the opposite about her body. "I love my legs, my breasts, etc." You can assign them to continue to do mirror work at home making positive, loving statements about their body.

Breaking in (also called "plunging in circle") Protagonists portray their efforts to cope with feelings of isolation or to engage their inner feelings by trying forcibly (but not violently) to enter a circle of six to eight group members who are facing inward and holding together (Weiner & Sachs, 1981). (Blatner, 1988)

Breaking out (also called "pressure circle") For a protagonist who feels trapped, the group encircles him, grasps each other's arms, and presses the protagonist in the middle, trying to keep him there, not letting him escape. He then tries to break out of the circle by any method he sees fit (short of violence). The protagonist may name his particular pressures as he experiences them in life, or these may be described simply as a general sense of pressure. If the individual finds this kind of interaction difficult with people, chairs may be used to symbolize the same pressure circle, and he gets rid of them. The group should be no larger than six to eight people (Weiner & Sachs, 1981). (Blatner, 1988)

Chorus The audience or a subgroup of auxiliaries is instructed to repeat certain phrases. Repeating the haunting reproaches, doubts, or other anxiety-provoking words or lines can deepen the protagonist's experience. Supportive statements may be used when the process is moving toward a healthier integration.

Closure Following the action, the director should see to it that the players have an opportunity to "de-role" by talking about their expressions in role and giving themselves some distance from those events. Having them get up and "shake off" the character is often useful. The sharing should be managed so that it does not turn into an analysis of the protagonist's problem. Allow a good deal of time for this process. (Blatner, 1988)

Coaching In the course of an enactment, the director functions as a coach, suggesting to the protagonist or the auxiliaries variations in approach, body posture, pacing of voice, or role definition, often providing explicit encouragement to the protagonist.

Concretization Psychodrama works in part by helping to convert abstract statements into something more concrete, general issues such as "conflict with authorities" into a specific scene with a boss or parent or teacher in the patient's life. Another way of concretizing issues is to convert metaphors into actualities: "I wish they'd get off my back" can be enacted by having weight on the protagonist's back. Feelings of isolation can be enhanced by having the audience withdraw some distance, or perhaps using the technique of breaking in. (Blatner, 1988)

Cutting the action The process of an enactment may be stopped if the participants are unable to continue, when safety is threatened, when the director sees the opportunity to modify the action or bring an important observation to the protagonist's awareness, or when the episode reaches a conclusion. The enactment may continue with any modification. This provides the opportunity of leaving an interaction, standing "outside" in a sense, watching the nuances of one's participation, and reflecting on alternative strategies.

Death scene The protagonist speaks to a significant other played by an auxiliary who is dying or has died; or, alternatively, the protagonist plays the dead person and is spoken to by the group members (Siroka & Schloss, 1968). (Blatner, 1988)

De-role Upon completion of the session, the protagonist speaks to each group member who has played a role and specifically removes the projected identity, "I know you are not my mother. You are Mary, my friend and colleague."

Director In psychodrama the director is the person who facilitates the process of enactment. Usually, the director is the group leader or the patient's therapist. There may also be a co-director or an assistant director to help with the various tasks of keeping the audience members engaged, the auxiliaries on track, and the protagonist moving forward.

Double The protagonist is joined by an auxiliary, either a trained co-therapist or a group member, whose role is to function as a support in presenting the protagonist's position or feelings. Doubles should first work toward establishing an empathic bond with the protagonist. In general, they stand to the side of and at a slight angle to the protagonist so that they can replicate the nonverbal communications and present a kind of "united front." The double is one of the most important and basic techniques in psychodrama (Leveton, 1977). (Blatner, 1988)

Double protagonist session (see *Multiple protagonists*) Relationships can be explored with both parties present and involved, such as a married couple, a patient and a nurse, a parent and a child, and so on.

Dream presentation These may be enacted as if they were happening in the present moment. Auxiliaries portray dream figures, both animate and inanimate. Unfinished dreams may be completed in order to clarify fears and to introduce an affirmation of a positive chosen resolution

(Moreno, 1958). Psychodrama is a good vehicle for this process of extending both dreams and guided fantasies to enhance the inner experience. (Blatner, 1988)

Ego building An honest discussion of the protagonist is carried on by the group while the protagonist quietly faces the group and listens. The group focuses on only the positive qualities. The director stops the discussion once the group has run dry and ascertains how the recipient feels (as well as how the group feels, having said what they did). Any members of the group who desire this experience should be given the same opportunity (Feinberg, 1959). (Blatner, 1988)

Empty chair (also known as "auxiliary chair") Instead of another person (an auxiliary) playing the complementary figure in a protagonist's enactment, an empty chair represents that position. Sometimes this allows for a more spontaneous expression of aggressive or tender feelings, depending on the makeup of the group or the embarrassment of the patient in working with another person (Lippitt, 1958). This is an invaluable technique in a one-to-one therapeutic context and has been incorporated as an integral part of Gestalt therapy. (Blatner, 1988)

Enactment Group members are encouraged to portray their life situations in dramatic form, to physically enact the encounters that have existed only in their memories or fantasies. Thus, the person whose situation is the focus of the group becomes the protagonist and is helped to experience the process of working with the attitudes and feelings in an action format. Enactments can be in the past (memories, redoing experiences), the present, or the future (worries, hopes, testing possible scenarios, fantasies). (Blatner, 1988)

Family psychodrama The therapist or director works with immediate family members or even an extended family group, using role reversal, future projection, and any other appropriate psychodramatic techniques. The family members learn to serve as auxiliaries for each other. This approach includes teaching the family the skills of role reversal as a way of building interpersonal empathic concern, and it has major benefits for the participants. Psychodramatic methods can be powerful diagnostic, therapeutic, and educational tools, significantly increasing the effectiveness of family therapy (Remer, 1986). (Blatner, 1988)

Future projection A specific scene in the future is elaborated and may include subscenes such as the most hoped-for outcome, the most feared event, an exaggerated reaction, a realistic expectation, or just an exploration of some of the dimensions of a forth-coming situation. This becomes an opportunity for rehearsal and behavioral practice (Yablonsky, 1954). (Blatner, 1988)

Goodbye scenes May be reenactment of a past experience or enactment of an experience that was needed but never fulfilled. These are used to complete unfinished business and as important parts of grief work (Blatner, 1985). (Blatner, 1988)

Grief Work Have the dead person be there, maybe covered up with a sheet or lying very still. If it is an abortion, provide something to represent the dead baby. It may be someone who is dying rather than already dead. The touch of a hand can be very powerful. Be sure to process the anger as well as the grief/loss.

Hypnodrama A psychodrama is enacted after first inducing a mild state of trance in the protagonist and perhaps also the group. A therapist who uses this method should have adequate training in hypnotherapy (Greenberg, 1977, pp. 231-303).

Idealizations A protagonist may portray his ideal self in a scene, and this role may also be used for dialogue with other parts of his identity. The ideal other, as parent, child, or mate, may be created by using surplus reality, usually in order to engage in a scene of act completion. For example, a protagonist may become his ideal parent in an act of reparenting or may experience an ideal mother or father in a scene where he is reparented. The prop of a rocking chair is often useful for such scenes. (Blatner, 1988)

Identity A protagonist chooses two auxiliaries, one to represent himself and the other to represent his "negative identity" - that is, a person he hates, despises, or just dislikes. (Alternatively, he can compare his own present sense of himself with his ideal self.) Then, as the protagonist lists essential differences, the two auxiliaries, starting back to back in the center of the room, take a step apart. If the protagonist mentions a similarity rather than a difference, the auxiliaries retrace a step.

An alternative technique may be used to clarify and reduce transference phenomena. If the protagonist is treating his wife like his mother, his therapist like his minister, himself like his father, or any other two figures in his life, have him do a similar technique, starting with the two auxiliaries standing several feet apart. With each stated similarity they take one step together, and with each stated difference they take one step apart (Miller, 1972). (Blatner, 1988)

Intensification Goldman and Morrison (1984) note that feelings can be made more intense and explicit by using a variety of techniques, such as echoing or repeating the main message of a situation or a verbalized expression of a feeling, having protagonists put their bodies in the shape of their feeling, or locating the feeling in their bodies. I sometimes intensify an action sociogram by having the various people in the protagonist's social atom surround him and converge on him slowly, each speaking his particular message. Thus, a person who feels caught in the middle or torn apart can experience this form of concretization by having the auxiliaries who are playing the roles of their social atom pull, pick, or press on them, saying the lines ever more insistently and loudly until the protagonist feels overwhelmed and has a catharsis of emotion that prepares him for further work toward integration. (Blatner, 1988)

Mirror The protagonist stands back and watches while the role he portrayed is replayed by an auxiliary. A family interaction may also be mirrored, or a parent can watch a scene from his own childhood as a way of gaining insight regarding his own parenting behavior. This is a human version of videotape playback. It can be a powerful confrontational technique and must be used with discretion (Torrance, 1978). (Blatner, 1988)

Mirror Work One way to force protagonists to really look at themselves or confront themselves is to provide a mirror for them to look into, seeing their reflection as they talk to themselves. For example, it can be used for someone who is not seeing himself clearly or who is in denial, or for someone who has been angry at himself and needs to do forgiveness work.

Multiple protagonists (*See Family psychodrama, Double protagonist*) Psychodrama may be used to catalyze more authentic encounters and to generate creative problem solving among several people, such as members of a family or a small group. In this sense, Moreno was doing "conjoint therapy" (a prelude to family therapy) in the 1930s. Active systems-oriented family therapy skills are closely related to those used in leading psychodrama groups. (Blatner, 1988)

Nonviolence A fundamental precept of psychodrama is the contractual agreement of the group to do no harm to one another. Psychodrama is an active modality at times and involves verbal and physical expressions of feeling, including fantasies of violence. The directors and group members take responsibility for channeling these feelings into activities that symbolically express the feelings, such as having mattresses, pillows, rubber hose or batatas to pound with.

Pushing with Pillows When the protagonist feels helpless, powerless, or overwhelmed, use this "push through" or "push against" process. The person stands, facing someone who is perceived to be an obstacle in his life, and push. There must be a pillow between them for protection and safety. It is important for the protagonist to verbalize his feelings while physically acting them out.

Reformed auxiliary ego After exploring a protagonist's situation and evoking the catharsis associated with discovering the pain of an unfulfilled need, it is sometimes useful to offer a corrective emotional experience. The auxiliary, who may be playing a harsh or depressed parent, for example, is instructed to portray the role in a more nurturing, validating, empathic, or supportive manner. Having the patient identify what behaviors might fulfill the unmet needs adds to the overall experience of insight (Sacks, 1970). (Blatner, 1988)

Re-Parenting Have the person "fire" his/her unhealthy parents and recruit a new healthy family to experience receiving nurturing, support, and love.

Replay Scenes may be reenacted with changes in order to experience more ventilation, a happier ending, a more effective interpersonal strategy, a desensitized response to a frightening situation, or similar outcome. The setting, the participants, the protagonist's behavior, or another person's behavior may be varied. However, it is best to change only one variable at a time. (Blatner, 1988)

Rock and breathe Starting the session with a tantrum is a good way to get the protagonist out of his head and into feelings. Energy and emotions begin to move and flow. It serves as an energetic hypnotic induction.

Role playing The focus in role playing is on finding the best approach for a problem. It is most often used in business, industry, and education. Actually, the boundaries between role playing and sociodrama, and even psychodrama, are often blurred. In general, however, role playing is not aimed at discovering the deeper feelings involved in a person's behavior. Problem-centered role playing is more like sociodrama, because it is aimed at defining the various aspects of the problem. Method-centered role playing explores alternative strategies for dealing with the problem. Rehearsing and refining these approaches becomes role training.

Role reversal The major participants in an interaction change roles. When a protagonist in a psychodrama role reverses, it is a way of transcending the habitual limitations of egocentricity. Role reversal is indicated when it is appropriate for the protagonist to empathize with the other person's viewpoint. Also, role reversal is used during the setting up of a scene and the warming up of an auxiliary. The protagonist reverses roles and demonstrates how the other person in the scene behaves, thus giving verbal and nonverbal cues to the auxiliary so that the scene is played relatively close to the protagonist's experience. (Blatner, 1988)

Role training The goal is primarily to rehearse or refine a role, such as how to behave in a job interview, how to ask someone for a date, how to say no to a salesperson, and so on. The basic task is usually established at the outset, and no major effort is made to explore deep feelings involved (Seabourne, 1985).

Rope-Tied To concretize the feeling of being dependently “tied” to family members in an unhealthy way, have people in the group hold and pull on ropes or sheets that are tied to the protagonist. This can also represent people or competing demands pulling at you from all directions.

Running Having the protagonist run in place, steadied by hands against the wall or someone's support, concretizes “running away” as a child or perhaps a situation from which the person should have run, but couldn't (like sexual or physical abuse), or wanting to run away from something (intimacy, or challenge).

Shame Work Have the protagonist stand in the middle of the group circle and keep completing the stem sentence “Something I wouldn't want you to know about me . . .” until all the shame is revealed and released. Then complete by going around and looking each person in the eye and make a statement, such as “I want you to see and accept me for who I am.”

Sociodrama A situation is explored in terms of a single major role relationship, such as patients and doctors, teachers and administrators, conservatives and liberals, and so on. The unique specifics and combinations of roles that make up the lives of real individuals are addressed in *psychodrama*. However, general issues relating to people in a given group offer excellent material for sociodrama. This approach is helpful in learning about or creatively exploring the possibilities inherent in the challenges of various social and other forms of roles. (Blatner, 1988)

Sociometry Moreno's method of measuring the interpersonal relationships in a group can be used also as a warm-up for group interactions. The basic method employs paper and pencil and has each person note his preferred choice of other group members as partners in various activities. After these are posted in the form of a chart or diagram, the results are shared with the group. It becomes obvious who are the “stars” and who are relative isolates. The various positions become the themes for psychodramatic explorations. There are also a variety of ways of demonstrating sociometric choices without paper or pencils. (Blatner, 1988)

Surplus reality One can enact not only scenes that involve the real events in one's life but also the scenes that, as Zerka Moreno has said, “have never happened, will never happen, or can

never happen." These scenes often represent hopes, fears, and unfinished psychological business that are experienced as being in some ways more real than the events of everyday existence. Psychodrama permits people to use imagination as the basis of enactments, and this in turn validates our capacity to participate in experiences that are "bigger than life." Moreno called psychodrama "the Theatre of Truth" because what is really true for people includes the realms of their emotions, their fantasies, and their surplus realities. (Blatner, 1988)

Symbolic realization Symbolic situations are enacted. For example, if the protagonist feels weighed down by problems, suggest that an auxiliary or two gently hang over his back. If the protagonist feels isolated or trapped, have him do the breaking-in or breaking-out exercise, having to relate to a group of auxiliaries in a small circle. (Blatner, 1988)

Towel Pull Have someone in the group try to take a towel, or some other safe object, away from the protagonist to represent someone who has taken something from you, or is trying to.

Trust Fall Have the person fall backward, eyes closed, into the arms of the group. This is helpful for people who have trust issues. This can be done at the end of the main enactment process to anchor the trusting resource state.

Warm-up A wide variety of techniques can be used to develop group cohesion, focus a group on its task, or create a special atmosphere, orientation, or theme in a group. Individuals can also be helped to enter an area of psychological or emotional exploration, whether their own or someone else's, using techniques mentioned throughout this section (Weiner & Sacks, 1969). (Blatner, 1988)

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