

Haptotherapy in New York: Workshop for the Westchester Group Psychotherapy Society

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Introduction

As it is the aim of the International Journal of Haptonomy and Haptotherapy (IJHH) to provide a discussion forum on developments in practices concerning the field of haptonomy and haptotherapy, we were very happy to receive an invitation in April 2018 from the Westchester Group Psychotherapy Society, New York USA. They asked to send in a proposal for a haptotherapy workshop, a biography and a literature list. Our highly intellectualized world makes high demands on our cognitive selves at the expense of our sense of touch. We often do not realize the benefits of integrating touch in therapy. A workshop was proposed which would explore the world of tactile sensations within ourselves and within a group.

The applied teaching methods included lecture, experiential exercises and discussion. The learning objective was to introduce the group to several important phenomena associated with touch. The participants would learn to feel and discover the place in their body where they are centered, carry themselves and find their basic trust. They would also learn how to integrate tactile experiences into group therapy. The proposal was accepted and a request was made to build a workshop around the theme "Can haptotherapy be integrated into group psychotherapy?".

Workshop

The workshop was held in a beautiful neo-classic building on April 13, 2019. The group consisted of experienced psychotherapists who conduct group work with adolescents, children and families in diverse settings. It was asked not to use a PowerPoint because of the importance of eye contact in maintaining contact with the group,

which is also one of the principles in group psychotherapy.

Several participants were not allowed to touch because they were bound to, the no-touch rule in the therapist-client relationship, established by psychoanalysts. Therefore, an important subtheme of the workshop was moving "from primitive tact to affective contact". After an introduction about the meaning of the word haptonomy and a brief introduction and demonstration about how haptotherapy is used in Dutch healthcare, we began trying out some tactile experiences and ended with affective contact. In the tactile experiences, the participants touched objects without seeing them. The objects were immediately recognized. Participants experimented with feeling themselves, feeling the chair, feeling the space around them with the other persons in it. At this time during the workshop, one of the participants commented: "We came in as 'islands' and now a circle has formed and we are all connected; the circle is complete"

The participants worked in pairs with an inflated balloon, so one person could feel the other person through the material and experience what happens when weight shifts or moves. The group was very involved and would have been able to spend the entire afternoon working with balloons. The whole group connected through the balloons with each other and moved together.

During the discussion, the enthusiastic group came up with a lot of questions and examples on how they could integrate contact through touch and feeling in their work. There were questions about Veldman's hexagram, which was in the handout and introduced as an interaction model. Questions regarding problems the group had encountered in

their professional practice concerning tact and feeling were very interesting. Several of the group members stated that they would be able to integrate working with a balloon into their group therapy with adolescences, to create awareness of self, and to feel the difference between self and others.

Conclusion

It was concluded that it may be functional to integrate haptotherapy into group therapy. The objective is then to become aware of oneself and to feel one's own boundaries and limits, and to be able to differentiate between oneself and the others. This could lead to an increased feeling of safety, attachment and autonomy, and one can learn to have affective contact with oneself, others and the outside world.

At the beginning of the workshop, everybody shook hands, as we did again at the end of the workshop. The group was asked if they felt a difference. They did and it was visible. When they shook hands for the last time, they were able to affirm the person and integrate the whole person, while at the same time receiving this affirmation themselves. The group was invited to send in articles to the International Journal of Haptonomy and Haptotherapy and we thanked the participants for participating in this adventurous experiment.

Giving this workshop in the U.S.A. was very inspiring. It is clear that integrating haptotherapy in group psychotherapy is a field that needs more exploration and research. Following from this, we hope to inspire more haptotherapists to experience the benefits of working internationally and to conduct wider research on the integration of haptotherapy into group therapy.