PLAY REVEALS WHAT WORDS CONCEAL:

USING PLAY THERAPY TO CONFRONT WHAT FAMILIES AVOID

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NOTES

Objectives:

Participants will be able to:

1. Define communication from a family systems perspective.

2. Describe family systems concepts that can be useful in identifying unhealthy patterns of family communication that may appear in family play therapy sessions, such as family secrets, family rules, and communication stances.

3. Identify examples of patterns of family communication present in case examples of family play therapy.

4. Identify foundational play therapy skills that can used to promote congruent communication between family members.

5. Describe activities that can be used in the context of family play therapy to facilitate congruent communication between family members.

6. Apply family systems concepts regarding unhealthy family communication to themselves in order to understand their own communication tendencies as play therapists.

About Avoidance

What do families avoid?

- *PAIN*: Families tend to avoid pain (or the potential of it) represented in self, in others, and in life.

- Discomforting ---- Distressing ---- Devastating

Why do families avoid?

- *FEAR*: Families tend to avoid addressing painful experiences due to fear. This fear can be related to a variety of factors:

  o Fear of the unknown…
      i. They are unsure whether or not a given action will make things worse or better personally, relationally, and/or situationally

      ii. They are unsure of what to say/do, how to say/do something, and/or how it will be received

      iii. They are unsure whether saying or doing something is the right thing to do

  o Fear of the known…
      i. They are very sure that a given action will make things worse personally, relationally, and/or situationally (at least in the short term)

      ii. They do not want to hurt another person

- Avoidance works (at least in the short term)!

How is avoidance in families expressed and maintained?

Avoidance is largely expressed and maintained through incongruent communication in the system (of which the therapist is a part).

Communication from a Family Systems Perspective

- Communication = ALL BEHAVIOR

> *"behavior has no opposite. In other words, there is no such thing as nonbehavior…activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot not respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating."*
>
> (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967, pp. 48-49)

- Communication = "REPORT" + "COMMAND" (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967)

    o *Report* = The content of the message: what is literally said or done; "conveys the data of the communication" (p. 53)

    o *Command* = The meaning of the message; how to interpret what is said or done; "refers to what sort of message it is to be taken as" (p. 53)

    o "In every communication, then, the participants offer to each other definitions of their relationship" (Jackson, 1965, p. 8).

        i. Within any given communication, there are multiple messages that are conveyed (Satir, 1983, pp. 129-130):

            1. *Self's idea* (how I see me)
            2. *Self's idea of other* (how I see you)
            3. *Self's idea of other's idea of self* (how I see you seeing me)
            4. *Self's idea of other's idea of self's idea of other* (how I see you seeing me seeing you)
            5. And on and on…

    o In every communication, there is a definition of "me," there is a definition of "you," and there is a definition of "us" that can be inferred. This is what people are often reacting to but are not directly addressing.
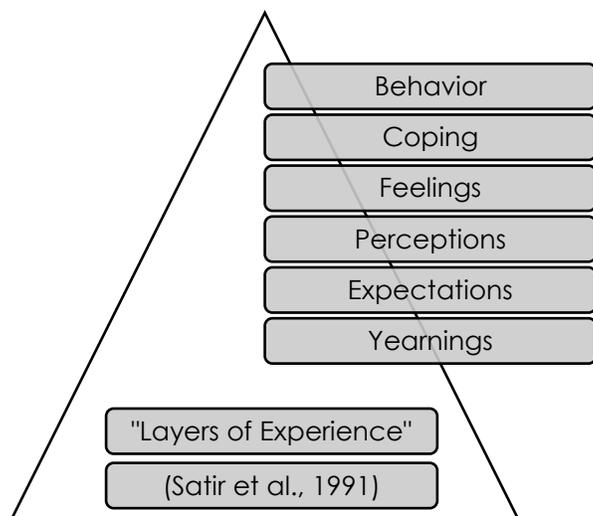
> *"The concept of report and command helps explain why couples, families, friends, coworkers, and basically any two humans can have elaborate, drawn-out arguments over taking out the trash, toilet seat lids, cat litter, toothpaste, and the recalled order of events at last night's party. These arguments, although appearing to be over 'little things,' are really about how the relationship is being defined in relation to the little things; thus, they are about a big thing, namely, how to define each person's role in the relationship…[people] are usually disagreeing about each other's message at the command (relationship) level, not the content. It often helps to move the discussion directly to the metacommunication level, communicating about the command level of the communication."*
>
> (Gehart, 2018, p. 50)

- Communication is best understood in CONTEXT (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967)

  - "all behavior makes sense in context." (Ray & Watzlawick, 2009, p. 186).

  - Trying to understand communication outside its context elicits confusion, misunderstanding, judgment, invalidation, hurt, resistance, and defensiveness.

  - Seeking to understand communication in its context elicits clarity, understanding, acceptance, validation, empathy, collaboration, and connection.

What is congruent communication?

Communication becomes increasingly congruent the more that we acknowledge (1) self, (2) other, and (3) what is transpiring around us and between us (Gehart, 2018, p. 199).

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              Behavior
              Coping
              Feelings
              Perceptions
              Expectations
              Yearnings

        "Layers of Experience"
        (Satir et al., 1991)
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- there is consistency between what we say/do and how we say/do it (Satir et al., 1991, pp. 69-70)

- we clarify "received meaning" with "intended meaning" (Satir et al., 1991)

What are family system dynamics that tend to interfere with congruent communication?

- Family secrets
  - People, events, problems, and/or subjects that are rarely, if ever, discussed within and/or outside of the family

  - Tends to reinforce unhealthy dynamics among the "insiders" vs. the "outsiders"

  - "We're only as sick as our secrets"

- Family rules (Jackson, 1965)

> *"the family is a rule-governed system… its members behave among themselves in an organized, repetitive manner and…this patterning of behaviors can be abstracted as a governing principle of family life."*
>
> (Jackson, 1965, p. 6)

- o "shared norms and values which govern general patterns of family functioning (Landers, Patton, & Reynolds, 2016, p. 16)

- o Maintain the family's homeostasis

- o Are often unspoken, which adds to their power

- o Tend to become rigid and feel restrictive over time

- o Principle for intervention: "Behave in such a way that the rules must change"

- Communication/Survival stances (Satir et al., 1991)
  - o *Placator:*
    - i. Acknowledges others and context but not self
    - ii. "the person who placates honors the other person and the context of their interaction but does not honor his or her own true feelings" (p. 36).
    - iii. "harbors the seed of caring" (p. 53)

  - o *Blamer*:
    - i. Acknowledges self and context but not others
    - ii. "to blame is to discount others, counting only the self and the context" (p. 41).
    - iii. "harbors…the seed of assertiveness" (p. 53)

  - o *Super-reasonable*:
    - i. Acknowledges context but not self nor others
    - ii. "Being overly reasonable means functioning with respect to the context only, most frequently at the level of data

and logic…The outstanding characteristic of this stance is being inhumanly objective" (p. 45).
  iii. "harbors…the seed of intelligence" (p. 53)

- o *Irrelevant*:
    i. Does not acknowledge self, other, nor context
    ii. "When people are irrelevant, they move continually. This is an attempt to distract people's attention from the issues under discussion" (p. 49).
    iii. "harbors…the seed of creativity and flexibility" (p. 53)

- o *Congruent*:
    i. Acknowledges self, other, and context
    ii. "Choosing congruence means choosing to be ourselves, to relate to and contact others, and to connect with people directly. We wish to respond from a position of caring for ourselves, for other people, and with an awareness of the present context" (p. 66).

- o "We usually use one stance more frequently than others when we interact under stress" (p. 52).

- o "Placating, blaming, and being irrelevant or super-reasonable are attempts to cope with ourselves, others, and context in our effort to survive. We try to express ourselves fully, yet we end up conveying a contradiction" (p. 71).

Using Play Therapy to Promote Congruent Communication

How can play promote more congruent communication between family members?

Communication becomes increasingly congruent the more that it acknowledges (1) self, (2) other, and (3) what is transpiring around us and between us.

- Play promotes *inclusion*.
  - o Play levels the playing field
  - o Cederborg (1997) study: Out of all the words spoken in family therapy sessions, children spoke only 3.5% of them!

- Play promotes *interaction*.
  - The benefit in seeing interactions vs. hearing descriptions
  - Sidesteps overreliance on the use of talking to control and to avoid

> *"When the therapist asks the family questions, the family members control what they are presenting. In selecting what material to communicate, they frequently try hard to put their best foot forward, as it were. But when the therapist gets the family members to interact with each other, transacting some of the problems that they consider dysfunctional…he unleashes sequences beyond the family's control."*
>
> (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, p. 78)

- Play promotes *safety*.
  - Play relaxes defenses
  - You can say something without saying anything
  - Communicating metaphorically/symbolically vs. literally

- Play promotes *self-expression*.
  - Play enlivens
  - Play acts as a vehicle for communication and a bridge to communication
  - Increased self-expression can then promote enhanced understanding of self and other

- Play promotes *spontaneity*.
  - A freer, more permissive environment can be created and maintained through play
  - Play can interrupt our typical / habitual ways of responding and interacting

- Play promotes *connection*.
  - Play provides concrete experiences in the "here-and-now" that can be experienced together and explored together
  - Increased playfulness in the family can build a sense of cohesion and togetherness.

What foundational play therapy skills can be used to promote congruent communication?

> *"For the family system to be open enough to change, its members need a loving, accepting atmosphere, a climate of trust and safety."*
>
> (Satir et al., 1991, p. 94)

- Self of therapist: Being genuine, empathic, and accepting

  "Be With" Attitudes (Landreth, 2012):
  - I am here
  - I hear you
  - I understand
  - I care

- Structuring: Establishing a sense of safety and consistency in the physical and emotional environment of a session
- Attending: Conveying therapeutic presence through being intentional about our posture, pacing, tone of voice, nonverbals, etc.
- Reflective responding (Landreth, 2012):
  - Reflecting *behavior*: Say what you see – note significant behaviors and interactions.
  - Reflecting *content*: Say what is said – paraphrase key information stated by family members.
  - Reflecting *feeling*: Say what emotions you sense – use empathy to acknowledge their inner world.
  - Reflecting *meaning*: Say what sums it up – note relevant patterns and themes.
- Returning responsibility (Landreth, 2012): Responses that invite the child/family to assume responsibility for themselves and empower them.
- Encouragement: Acknowledging the child/family's ideas, efforts, and positive feelings towards themselves.

> *"Feelings are like a human thermometer. A thermometer tells us what temperature it is, which in turn helps us decide what to wear. Feelings tell us about the temperature of our internal processes and help us decide how to be and what to do."*
>
> (Satir et al., 1991, p. 178)

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Self-of-the-Therapist

Genuine
Empathic
Accepting

"I'm here.
I hear you.
I understand.
I care."

(Landreth, 2012)

Incongruent Communication Stances

Family Rules

Play promotes…

Therapeutic Powers of Play

Inclusion, Interaction, Safety, Self-Expression, Spontaneity, Connection

Play Therapy Skills

Reflecting feeling
Reflecting meaning
Returning responsibility
Encouragement

Structuring
Attending
Reflecting behavior
Reflecting content

Family Secrets

CONGRUENCE

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