

Psychodrama Techniques in Family Therapy

Families often come to the therapist's office after some changes have occurred and the usual coping mechanisms are not working sufficiently. It could be a loss of a loved one, a divorce, step family problems, and transitional changes – like coping with teenagers or launching children.

Family M. was struggling with several challenges at the same time. John and Mary remarried a year ago. Mary has two children, Susan age 19 and Jim age 15, who live in the household. Mary divorced her first husband 5 years ago. The father of the children left the country and decided to travel. For the last 4 years he has mailed postcards from different countries and called the children on their birthdays. Especially Jim was very attached to his father. Jim often turns his anger against John or gets in fights with other kids at school. Susan has always been the responsible daughter taking care of her younger brother while Mary was working. Susan graduated recently and will leave town for college soon. In the last couple months Mary has been struggling with depression, which puts a strain on her marriage.

Role reversal with an absent family member

One important issue for the children in this family is the absent father. To prepare the family for a role reversal it takes a good warm up like a spectrogram. The family members are asked to place themselves on a line between 0 and 100 according to how close they felt to the father before he left. The one who feels closest to the father (very likely Jim) can be asked where the father would be if he were in the room right now. Jim could pick a chair for the father and place him. Jim could be asked what clothes his father would be wearing and what he would think about the family being here in the therapist's office talking about the difficulties they are having as a family.

These questions deepen the sense of the father's presence and Jim could be asked to sit in his father's chair. I would talk to Jim in his father's role, ask for his name (Tom) and ask him to be his father and answer as he imagines his father would.

Therapist: "Hi Tom, good having you here, today. We were wondering about Jim's trouble at school. Mary is worried about him and I have the impression that he misses you a lot. What do you think is going on with him?"

Tom: "I suppose, he is missing me a lot"

Therapist: "Could you say this directly to him? (Pointing to Jim's chair)"

Tom: "I suppose you are missing me, Jim."

Role reversal

Therapist: "Jim, your father is wondering if you do miss him?"

Jim: "I sure do."

Th.: "Could you tell him this directly? (Pointing to the father's chair)"

Jim: "I miss you, Dad. (Jim starts crying)"

Th.: “Perhaps you can tell him some ways you remember him and how he is missing in your life right now? “

After the role-play Susan could share her feelings about the missing father. So the family can grief together and support each other. Anger could be expressed in a similar manner. Expressing feelings increases the healing process and reduces acting out behaviors and depression.

Role reversals with present family members are not encouraged because it might not result in more freedom and flexibility but could further polarize family member’s positions. It is difficult to play with possibilities if the other person is watching if you get her/him right. A better approach is to explore the roles in the family (e.g. the responsible, the fun person, the hard worker, the dreamer or the risk taker) and do role changes in this manner. So everyone will get to try on new roles and behaviors.

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