

Using Modified Sandplay Therapy as an Adjuvant Therapy in a Patient with Depression

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Objective: Sandplay therapy, founded by Dora Kalff, is a kind of psychotherapy using miniatures for clients to arrange on sand trays. Sandplay therapy which is based on Jungian psychology, Lowenfeld's "World Technique," and Oriental philosophies, has previously been used mainly in children and victims in Taiwan. We report the use of modified sandplay as an adjuvant therapy for an adult patient with depression. **Case Report:** A 34-year-old lesbian patient with depression received modified sandplay therapy in addition to antidepressants. During the sandplay therapy process, we observed the phenomena like "ritual," "centering," and "synchronicity," which are corresponding to Jungian theory. Eventually our patient developed new perspectives, her identity was strengthened, and her condition was improved after the treatment. **Conclusion:** Our case experiences suggest that sandplay therapy may also be helpful when being used in conjunction with concomitant psychiatric treatment for depression.

Key words: sandplay, psychotherapy, Jungian psychology, depression
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Introduction

Sandplay therapy uses miniatures such as figurines, animals, houses or plants for clients to arrange on sand trays. According to Dora Kalff, the founder of sandplay therapy, sandplay therapy was originated from Jungian analytical psychology, Margaret Lowenfeld's "World Technique," and Oriental philosophies like Tibetan Buddhism [1, 2].

World Technique allows children to arrange toys on the ground while sandplay therapy allows

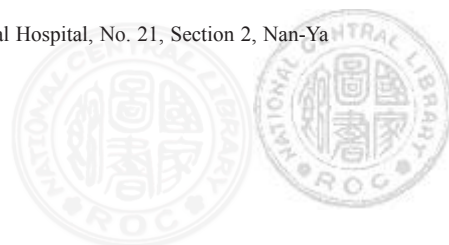
clients to arrange little miniatures in the sandtrays or to mold the sand freely. Both models allow the individual to reveal ideas from their inner psyche.

Following Jungian psychology, sandplay therapy can be used to express the ideas of the client's consciousness, to project the unconsciousness, and sometimes even to reveal archetypes from the collective unconsciousness. The therapist gives a "free and sheltered space," which enables the power of "self-healing" of the client to occur. The whole process of healing is a process of "individuation." "Synchronicity" (a meaningful coincidence) [3] may happen. Images of

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“mandala” (often a centering circle as a symbol of wholeness or the manifestation of the Self) [1] may be seen. Thus, the client may be healed and reaches a better state of self.

With the influence of oriental philosophies, sandplay therapy does not emphasize on intellectual interpretation, but requires the therapist’s full attention and acceptance. Detailed operating techniques and analytical methodologies have been developed [1, 2].

Sandplay therapy has been introduced into Taiwan by Grace Hong in 1999. It was more frequently used in abused victims or children, mostly in social welfare or education systems. Its use in hospital-based psychiatric services has so far been limited in Taiwan [4-8].

Our team adopted sandplay therapy and used it as an adjuvant treatment in addition to current psychiatric services (unpublished materials presented at the annual meetings of Taiwanese Society of Psychiatry in 2006 and 2007 by C. L. Chen, C. T. Shih, and J. Feng). Here we report a case of a depressed lesbian who got married due to parental expectations.

Case Report

Brief history

Jean (a fictitious name) was a 34-year-old female, who grew up in a strict family. Her father was a solemn person, and her mother was submissive and had little interaction with her. Being the eldest daughter, she was taught to obey parents, to be outstanding, and also to take care of her two younger brothers.

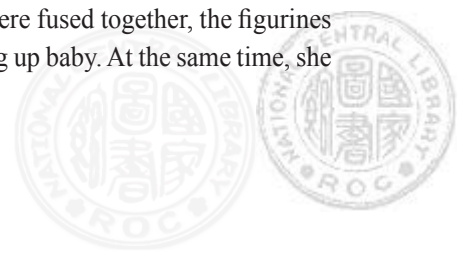
She discovered her own homosexuality when she was in junior high school. She was interested in performance and wished to pursue a career in music. But her parents objected. She was forced to join business vocational school and led an unhap-

py life. After graduation, she worked as an accountant following her parents’ wish. At the age of 20 years, she decided to join a performance theater secretly. Being unable to face a lesbian’s stress, she decided to marry a man who was a truck driver in the same theater at the age of 22 years, after having only known him for one month. She subsequently left the theater.

During her marriage, her husband was violent and they often quarreled with each other, even during her pregnancy. She felt lonely and started reading books about lesbians. She stayed in her marriage for the sake of her baby. After the birth of her baby at the age of 26 years, she worked in a bank and joined some lesbian groups. Her husband would force her to have sexual intercourse and pressure her to borrow money for their family expenses. Finally she left her husband and moved out. But she was overwhelmed with financial stresses and the fighting for custody of her daughter.

Psychiatric consultation

Jean later decided to seek psychiatric care. She was diagnosed of having major depressive disorder with multiple psychosocial stresses. After receiving antidepressants treatment, she had partial improvement in her depression. But environmental stresses still influenced on her mood frequently and she was followed up in clinic fortnightly. Despite the increased dosage of venlafaxine up to 225 mg/d over one and a half years, her depression persisted. In the clinic, she reported a dream where she stood by a Buddhist nun and saw ten hollow figurines lining up in a row. The first one began to fuse into the second one, and then into the next, and so on. The figurines were changed gradually from an adult into a baby. As the ten figurines were fused together, the figurines became one curling up baby. At the same time, she



woke up curled in bed crying. However, she felt soothed. Her dream seemed to be quite “Jungian”—symbolic, developmental, self-healing, and related to some spiritual elements, so that the doctor decided to invite her to start modified sandplay therapy. The treatment course had a series of 10-week sessions, which took 14 weeks due to some of her absenteeism. Each session was lasted for one hour. For preliminary exploration as in this case, we used dry sandtray only as a conservative approach.

Sandplay course

Tray 1

Jean was late for 45 minutes on her first visit and felt deeply sorry, with her whole body shivering. The therapist allowed her to use a whole hour but explained the rule about being punctual again. She felt excited when she first touched the sand and asked how to play it. She divided the tray into three zones: one for soothing objects, one for her beloved daughter, and one for her sorrows. She used an angel to represent herself and said, “A crucified angel would lose its freedom even though it had wings.”

Tray 2

Jean divided the sandtray into a happy area with angels celebrating a birthday, and a terrible area with devils domineering and humiliating her. She said she would beat down the devils and she really acted to push them down. She looked at the angels and suddenly cried out for a while and then hid it into a shelter. A policeman was put beside the tray for protection. She seemed to gain some positive effect.

Tray 3

Jean’s life was a mess again. She sometimes had suicide ideations. In making the tray, she put many terrible animals haunting a white mask and

a house. In association to the white blank mask, she regarded the mask without eyes representing the purity of a newborn. Interestingly, the whole tray was made in the direction of the therapist instead of facing herself.

Tray 4

Jean was exhausted with her job and daughter. Her girlfriend also kept her at a distance. She made her fourth tray in tears. She buried the mask into the sand, and put a lot of wooden bricks to make a graveyard. She said it was the graveyard in Montmartre in Paris with a famous lesbian writer, M.T. Chiu, being buried inside. She expressed that she would like to visit the place. Finally, she put a mage to sooth all the ghosts (Figure 1).

Tray 5

Jean cried and felt her soul imprisoned. She struggled to pay the bills and often had suicidal ideations. She thought she could not continue the sandplay therapy because she felt as if she was disappearing inside the sandtray. She did nothing to the tray and left it empty.

Tray 6

Jean felt disappointed at first and resisted to make the tray. Later, she tried to present what was in her mind recently, as guided by the therapist’s inspiration. She put a chain diagonally and made many footprints on the sand. As shown in Figure 2, the picture seemed full of tension.

Tray 7

Although Jean felt nothing in her conscious mind, she put a card with an angel on it to represent her. Many rag animals were used to surround and support the card. The whole picture showed a circle with the card representing her in the center.

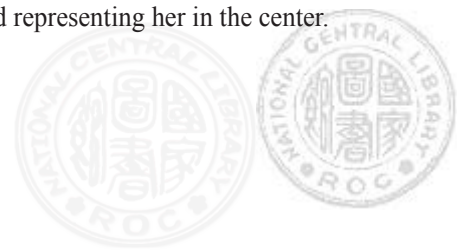




Figure 1

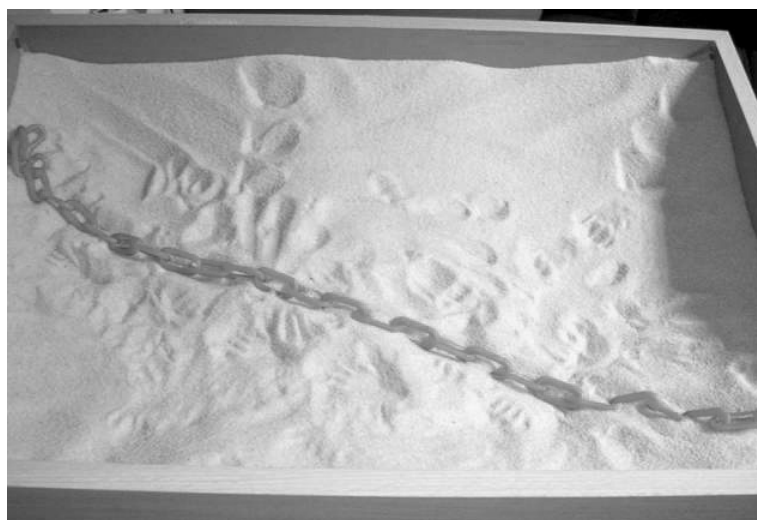


Figure 2

Tray 8

Jean happily announced that she had been divorced and had solved the biggest problem in her life. She built a tower with bricks and took the white mask again and said, “The mask represents me and I’m now walking out of the tower.” She found there was in fact another black mask clinging closely behind the white one which seemed to

be there all along. She took off the black one and was surprised she had never discovered it before. She thought that they were stuck tightly at first but separated them easily. She was enlightened and felt that a breakthrough had occurred. She said, “I feel the white mask laughing when I separate them.” At the end of the session, she was happy (Figure 3).



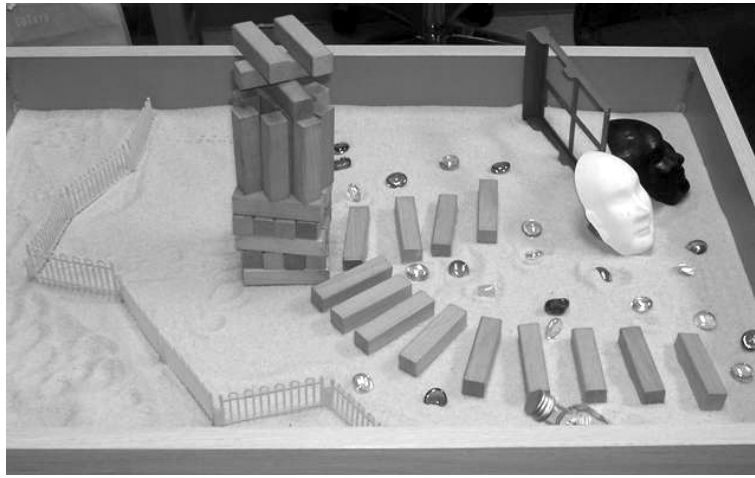


Figure 3

Tray 9

Jean made a tray with the angel, a mage, bears, stones, sandbags, a cross and so on in the sandtray and expressed her anger of the political situation of the society. She said, “The wry cross means the injustice. Everything is in a mess in the wrong time and place.”

Tray 10

In the sandtray, Jean put the angel, the masks, and a bird in an open cage representing her and said, “I have a new attitude. Although there is still something unstable in my mind, I will not fear, because my life is moving forward.” Again, Jean put all figures facing the therapist. At the end of the session, the therapist invited Jean to come to the therapist’s side. Jean was surprised to see it from another point of view. She recalled that she used to have no confidence when she was at the theater. One day, she saw her own performance through the videos and finally realized that the actor’s view was different from the audience’s view. She reflected, “Should I see myself from a different angle?” Jean finished the modified sandplay

therapy course with something she had never experienced before (Figure 4).

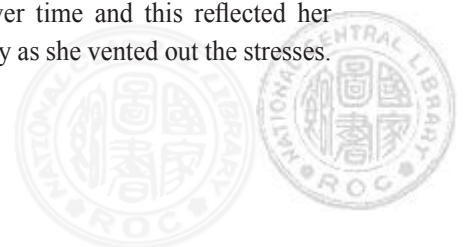
A follow-up note

Jean received follow-ups at our clinic less frequently. She felt more equipped to face her future after the sandplay therapy, but her condition fluctuated later on with stresses from life after divorce and debts. She wished that she could pay off her debt and live with her daughter in the future.

Discussion

During the whole treatment course, Jean’s sandtrays can be understood in the following stages of the Jungian framework:

In the beginning, she accepted this model of therapy and therapist smoothly. Her ideal world and major concerns projected into the tray were seen in tray 1. In tray 2, the good and the bad in her inner world started to conflict each other, while in tray 3, the bad things were burst out as in her real life. The negative parts in the first three trays were increased over time and this reflected her trust in the sandtray as she vented out the stresses.



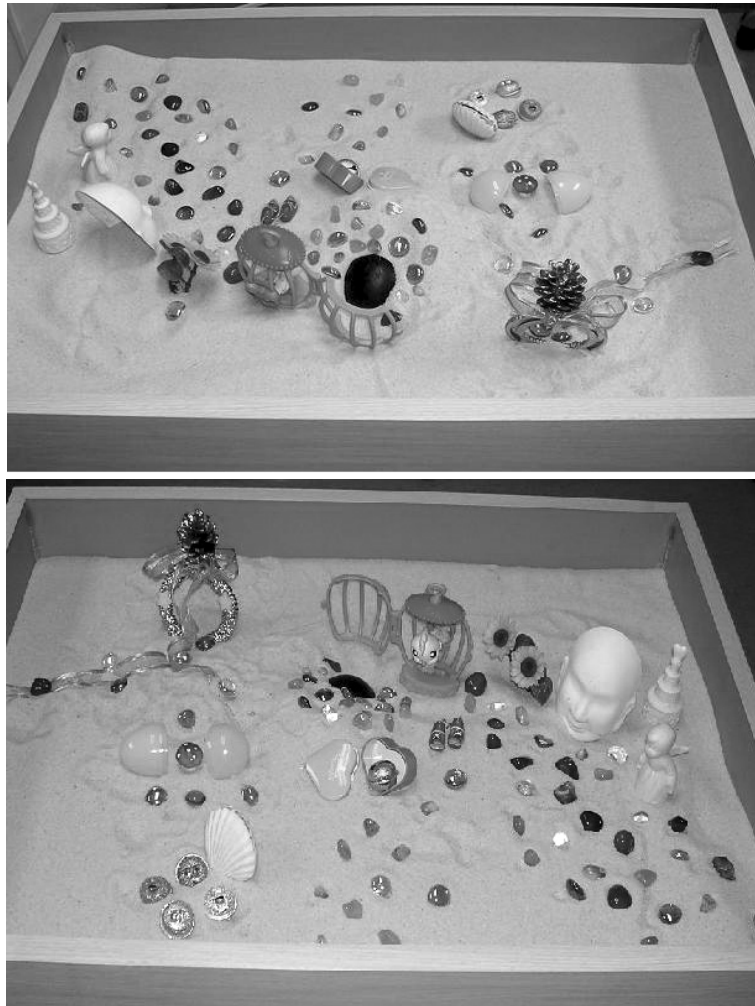


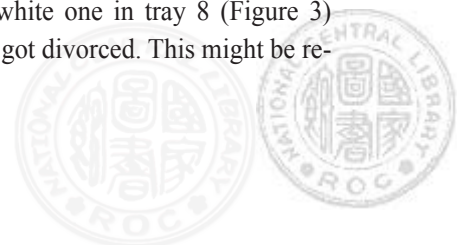
Figure 4

As the tension was increased, she finally reached a point that was portrayed as the graveyard in the tray 4 (Figure 1). This tray was typically a “ritual” that would sooth the sorrows during sandplay therapy. The therapist seemed to establish “a free and sheltered space” for her to express herself freely.

In tray 5, her empty sandtray was on one hand her resistance to express her inner world, but on the other hand a calming process of her unconsciousness after the ritual in the former tray. The

chaos and the tension persisted till tray 6 (Figure 2) as presented by a chain and some footprints. In tray 7, the “centered” phenomenon [1, 2] was usually seen when the energy of the unconsciousness was settled down. The round circle with her (the card) in the center might be a primitive picture of “mandala” [2], which was typically full of the power of self-healing.

Luckily, she happened to discover the black mask behind the white one in tray 8 (Figure 3) right after she had got divorced. This might be re-



garded as a kind of “synchronicity” [3] and could help her to consolidate the belief of her own power. Though she was troubled again in tray 9, she made a tray full of symbols of liberation, beauty, and good in the last tray (Figure 4). The therapist’s invitation to change her perspective facilitated her self-reflection and self-confidence. As she became more and more capable of identifying her own ability and sexuality, she was heading towards the process of “individuation.”

In this case, we present a positive experience of adopting modified sandplay therapy into psychiatric practice. Sandplay therapy, which may be a possible modality in combination with our current work, can be helpful for adults to express themselves beyond words. Even when psychotropic agents are used concomitantly, sandplay therapy, we believe, may be used to facilitate better therapeutic effects.

Sandplay therapy is still a new field in Taiwan. Further study is needed to differentiate psychotherapeutic from psychopharmacological effects in such combination therapy. This case report is only a pilot sample and should be treated as preliminary in finding. Further well-designed studies are also recommended.

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