

Sobriety Shop

Structured Role Plays in a Residential Treatment Centre for Alcohol and Drug Dependency

by John Faisandier

John Faisandier was the staff psychodramatist and a clinical supervisor at the Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer Springs. He is a trainer with the Christchurch Institute for Training in Psychodrama. He is now in private practice in Christchurch.

For the past 20 years psychodrama has been integrated into the programme at Queen Mary Hospital, Hanmer Springs. This abstinence based programme addresses the physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs of people in treatment for moderate to severe addictive diseases. Clients at Queen Mary usually stay for five weeks. They attend psychodrama in their 3rd or 4th week for 3 sessions of two and a half hours each.

When they first arrive in the psychodrama room clients are often anxious, fearful and apprehensive. They have seen others come from sessions red eyed and emotional.

"Psychodrama must be terrible if it affects people so much" they say.

The introductory structured activities on the first day focus on establishing a culture of valuing change and an appreciation of

positive authority figures. Above all I seek to increase people's spontaneity and for them to have fun. Fun is an essential ingredient in psychodrama. Jacob Moreno, the founder of psychodrama has on his tombstone "Here lies the man who brought laughter back into psychiatry."

There is a great deal of interest and research about the exact nature of addictive disease and its cause. Research has mostly been conducted on alcoholics (alcohol is legal, drugs aren't) and much of our understanding of drug addiction is an extension of these studies supported by anecdotal evidence.

So far no study has successfully delineated a single alcoholic personality type. Longitudinal studies have revealed only general problem areas which do not 'explain' the later development of alcoholism.

(Jones 1968 & 1971; McCord & McCord 1962) Common features among those who present for treatment are high scores for depression and isolation and low scores for self-esteem. These factors must be addressed in treatment.

During the time in which the disease of addiction develops there is increasing dependence on the chemical substance for symptomatic relief of painful emotional states. "Recovery from the disease must include the development of new ways to handle the feelings, situations and problems that were previously signals for destructive drinking (or drug use) (Blume, 1977, p 353).

It is also commonly recognised that one other feature of addictive disease is the high level of denial and rationalisation about the nature and consequences of a person's drinking or drug use.

Psychodrama is a useful method for work with addictive clients. (Weiner 1958) It provides a way of breaking through isolation, increasing self understanding and self respect, seeing oneself through the eyes of others and increasing spontaneity to develop creative new solutions to life problems.

Psychodrama can be used at various stages of the treatment and recovery process. Sheila Blume has written that in the pre-care or problem identification phase and the detoxification phase it can be useful in a group setting for breaking down denial, especially where group members identify with a protagonist who experiences pain and then relief when denial is overcome. During the rehabilitation phase psychodrama is used to explore personal problems and many addiction related issues are handled at this stage. One of the frequent problems in treatment is that patients become over dependent

on the therapist. In psychodrama the group is the therapeutic agent and group interdependence is promoted which takes the focus off the therapist and assists the addicted person to relate to groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. During long term follow-up and relapse prevention psychodrama can be used to enact a future scene, deal with unresolved family of origin issues or strengthen new roles for recovery.

At Queen Mary we see addiction as a disease and treatment usually is with people in early recovery. Denial is often high. They may have had some involvement with Twelve Step recovery groups while awaiting admission to the hospital, but often times they have used drugs and alcohol right up to entry into treatment. When a group is warmed up to the psychodrama they often focus on issues of early childhood abuse, sexual, physical and emotional, abandonment and low self worth. Protagonists often struggle with their addiction unsure if they really want recovery because it seems worse to face these emotional pains sober than to avoid them drunk or stoned. One way of warming a group up to psychodrama is through Sobriety Shop.

Sobriety Shop was developed in Texas treatment centres by Terry Rustin and Peter Olsson and written up by them in 1993. The original model was Magic Shop developed by Hannah Weiner in the 1950s.

In the traditional enactment of Magic Shop, the protagonist is asked by the director (acting as shopkeeper) to choose specific qualities he or she would like to have; the shopkeeper then negotiates a price for this quality that could include giving up some dysfunctional but tenaciously held

“In the traditional enactment of Magic Shop, the protagonist is asked by the director (acting as shopkeeper) to choose specific qualities he or she would like to have; the shopkeeper then negotiates a price for this quality that could include giving up some dysfunctional but tenaciously held attitude or behaviour or making a commitment to trying out a new behaviour. Within this framework, there are many ways to enact Magic Shop, limited only by the spontaneity of the director, the auxiliaries, and the group ...”

attitude or behaviour or making a commitment to trying out a new behaviour. Within this framework, there are many ways to enact Magic Shop, limited only by the spontaneity of the director, the auxiliaries, and the group.

“In contrast to the classic enactment of Magic Shop, the director of Sobriety Shop first asks protagonists to give something up, not to choose something they want. The reason for this is based on our

understanding of alcoholics and drug addicts, whose many negative qualities (such as lying, stealing, and grandiosity) have been essential to their survival. Their willingness to give up these characteristics is the true measure of their motivation for recovery.” (Rustin & Olsson 1993)

The initial focus is therefore on giving up a dysfunctional but highly valued personal characteristic. Group members are invited to bring something to trade in at the shop. One at a time they come forward and say what they have brought. They face their first spontaneity test when the director asks them to display in action what it is they have brought. There can be much hilarity as the shopkeeper (director) demands proof that this is a good quality dysfunctional characteristic. This can also be a moment of insight and realisation for the protagonist.

The action then moves quickly from the problem to the solution, devoting the majority of the session to the use of the new quality or behaviour. This style reflects a common approach to addiction treatment: identify the problems but focus on the solutions. Here the protagonist asks for some new quality and then is required to demonstrate how it might be enacted in their life. Surprising scenes emerge, sometimes this may extend into a vignette or indeed a full psychodrama enacted on the following days. In a typical session at Queen Mary there is usually only time for two or three group members to come shopping. However with sharing there is opportunity for all to process what they have taken part in.

Setting Up Sobriety Shop

The shop counter is set up on the

stage and the group invited to help establish a business and make a billboard. What kind of things could this shop take as trade-ins. What are some of the qualities they have too much of and no longer need or want in their lives. The list includes such things as:

Low self esteem, insecurities, stubbornness, anger, selfishness, stinking thinking, emptiness, debt, denial, impatience, abuse, addiction, pride, nausea, violence, anxiety, bad attitude, resentment, fear, shame, guilt, loneliness, arrogance, self hate, jealousy, laziness, greed, hangovers and so on.

A sign writer lists all these things on one half of the blackboard. We then focus on the take-aways. What would they like to buy from this shop? On the other half of the board we write a list which may include:

self-esteem, love, compassion, self-awareness, financial security, motivation, respect, communication, self-acceptance, self-control, honesty, healthy pride, happiness, work, sharing, intimacy, care, creativity, life, hope, trust, boundaries, humour, tolerance, forgiveness, openness, confidence, feelings.

The group is usually very thoughtful by this stage. It is now time for business. The Director becomes the shop keeper. There is often a lot of prompting to be "Open All Hours" and act like Arkwright from the popular TV programme. Certainly the shop keeper can be mean and stingy if necessary, especially if someone tries to trade-in some half baked quality. By taking on the role of the shopkeeper the Director warms the group up more fully to acting and models spontaneity.

"By taking on the role of the shopkeeper the Director warms the group up more fully to acting and models spontaneity. When someone steps forward into the shop the Director needs to establish a good relationship with them. As with all psychodrama much is achieved in the encounter ..."

When someone steps forward into the shop the Director needs to establish a good relationship with them. As with all psychodrama much is achieved in the encounter. "Being with" the protagonist who is usually fearful and anxious assists them to warm up more fully to themselves. Sometimes the protagonist may be full of bravado, meeting them both in the fun and with seriousness becomes a significant moment when they realise we are not just playing a silly game but dealing with their real life issues.

Some Typical Enactments

Gloria a 30 year old mother and alcoholic, who has been sober for several months, steps into the shop and wants to trade in her three children. The auxiliaries play out the squabbling children well and she knows she has had enough of their noise. It is also clear she is avoiding something in herself. She discovers

in the enactment that she really wants to get rid of her impatience and take on tolerance. When she role reverses with tolerance she gives herself the advice that she must get to sleep earlier and not stay up until two o'clock in the morning. At first she rejects tolerance. "This solution is too easy" she says. With coaching she opens herself to the nurturing that going to bed early implies. She also realises how much she loves her children and would never really want to give them away.

Brian, now in his 40s, has been in recovery for a while and wants to trade in his ailing body. He chooses auxiliaries to be parts of his body that experience pain. As he observes himself from the outside he realises how well he has done to survive so far. He wants to take serenity with him and enacts a moment at prayer when he is surrounded by serenity and acceptance. "This is you" he tells himself as he massages himself lovingly.

Theresa wants to trade-in low self esteem, which is making her doubt the value of going to N.A. meetings, for self acceptance. She is a 26 year old addict who has been attending Narcotics Anonymous for about four months. She enacts a scene where she is driving home and hears eight different voices giving her negative messages. She is driving a bus load of critics. She concretises acceptance. Immediately the Sabotaging Critic tells her she doesn't deserve this. The auxiliaries playing Theresa and her self acceptance maximise their roles and sensuously enjoy each other. From behind the chair where she has been banished, Theresa observes this scene and begins to laugh and enjoy it too. She joins with herself in a warm, loving embrace.

Jeremy, a 20 year old addict,

wants to trade his arrogance for faith. He shows his arrogance when he meets his former drug dealer in the street. He thinks he can easily say no to the offer of drugs but quickly finds out the power of his addiction as he is attracted to the prospect of scoring once more. The group assist him with their feedback and coaching. He warms up to believing in recovery and with a definitive statement turns and walks away from the dealer.

Jenny is a 23 year old intravenous drug user who has seen a lot of her friends die from drug overdoses. She remembers walking away from people who were dying and wants to trade-in the harshness in her. She has a vision of becoming a counsellor and warms up to caring for a dying drug addict which she enacts tenderly with the appropriate boundaries and self care.

Sharing

Sharing is essential and can be effected in many different ways. Sharing could be after several shoppers have completed their 'purchases' however I have come to realise that each shopper's scene has tremendous impact on the group, this is after all the first time most of them have seen psychodrama. There is usually a need for some brief sharing to occur after each enactment. This helps to bring the protagonist back into the group and gives the group members opportunity to process the vignettes and come to terms with the idea that psychodrama, as well as being fun, is also a powerful way of working on the real issues of addiction and recovery.

Discussion

The power of concretising life shows in this exercise. Clients are

"In recovery circles a favourite slogan is "Fake it 'til you make it" Begin acting a role and eventually the thinking and feeling components will follow. Psychodrama is a great way for clients to begin acting in new ways and to evaluate the immediate impact such ways of acting have on their lives and on the lives of others. Sobriety Shop begins this process ..."

continually surprised by what emerges. The increased spontaneity and creativity leads to unexpected possibilities – some so simple they can hardly be believed. However when they are experienced on the stage the protagonist knows this is the right thing. Like Bede, who wanted to replace negativity with positivity. When asked to enact a future scene with this new positive attitude he had himself waking up in the morning and greeting members of the group in a cheerful way.

New roles such as these need to be nurtured and integrated into the protagonist's life and their programme of recovery. The roles need to be continually re-enforced through repetitive actions. This process is inherent in the Twelve Step Fellowship philosophy of: "You must act your way into better

thinking and not rely on thinking your way into better acting". While in treatment clients are encouraged to practise their new roles with group members. They report back to their primary therapy group what they have done and get feedback and encouragement to continue expanding these new healthy roles. They also write in their daily journal about the drama and some have found that daily affirmations also assist in strengthening a new positive image of themselves.

Conclusion

In recovery circles a favourite slogan is "Fake it 'til you make it" Begin acting a role and eventually the thinking and feeling components will follow. Psychodrama is a great way for clients to begin acting in new ways and to evaluate the immediate impact such ways of acting have on their lives and on the lives of others. Sobriety Shop begins this process. There are many ways that Sobriety Shop can be adapted to groups and individuals. It provides a vehicle for spontaneous enactments within a structure that looks playful and fun. It addresses directly the issues of recovery for addicted clients and provides an excellent warm-up for subsequent major dramas.

References

- Blume, Sheila B, () Psychodrama in the Treatment of Alcoholism in Therapeutic Approaches to Alcoholism, 349-358
- Jones, M.C. (1968) Personality correlates and antecedents of drinking patterns in men. J. Consult Clin. Psych. 32:2-12 cited in Blume op cit.
- Jones, M.C. (1971) Personality antecedents and correlates of drinking patterns in women. J.

Consult Clin. Psych. 36:61-69
cited in Blume op cit.

McCord W & McCord J A (1962)
Longitudinal Study of the
Personality of Alcoholics in
Pittman D & Snyder C (eds.)
Society, Culture and Drinking
Patterns John Wiley & Sons N.Y.
cited in Blume op cit.

Rustin, T. A. & Olsson P.A. (1993)
Sobriety Shop – A Variation on
Magic Shop for Addiction
Treatment Patients. Journal of
Group Psychotherapy,
Psychodrama and Sociometry,
Spring, 12-23.

Wiener, Hannah (19)