Near-psychodramatic Experiences as a Psychiatric Nursing Student

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In a world filled with uncertainty, psychodrama carves a niche for itself through its many-faceted aspects in the lives of people. Although I have not heard of psychodrama before this course, I was impressed and deeply moved by its wide-ranging applications and therapeutic value to me as a person and as a psychiatric nursing student. I admit that at first, I was taken aback by its seeming invasive nature of personal privacy, I have soon realized its revolutionary capacity to help people by providing alternate, albeit unorthodox ways, to look at their issues in different perspectives, and somehow find resolutions. I found J.L. Moreno’s original works difficult to understand as they tend to contain dense and heavy reading, with numerous allusions to parallel realities and figures of speech. However, the way Dayton expounded on his theories and went beyond to make psychodrama more grounded in reality helped me to see the power of the medium and the strength behind the philosophy (Dayton, 2010). Oflaz et al (2011) state that psychodrama is particularly relevant to nurses who conduct their craft in a person-to-person basis with their clients. The authors claim that to be effective in these interpersonal relationships, nurses need to develop and practice self-awareness as there are frequent opportunities for nurses to be emotionally provoked in dealing with patients. However, as a student nurse, I have no direct access to psychodrama sessions but may utilize more convenient and easier strategies such as near-psychodramatic techniques. Out of the varied forms of psychodrama, I find that guided imagery, letter writing and journaling with a photograph provide appropriate experiential learning for me to process stress related to aspects in my personal and student lives.

In journaling with a photograph, I was able to express my sentiments against my father, whom I did not have a good relationship with while growing up. My father was an abusive
husband and the fights bred insecurity in me which put a toll on my emotional health. As a near psychodramatic technique, journaling with a photograph was cathartic for me because I was finally able to process my emotions around him. Writing as if speaking to him while he was holding my infant son allowed me to express my pent up emotions that I have long thought to be buried. His photograph cuddling my child reminded me of my anger at his inability to create a secure family atmosphere for me and my siblings. It opened up the hurt, but with the wisdom of maturity and lived experience, I unexpectedly felt compassion towards him and the life he chose to lead. Now that I am learning about psychiatric disorders, I am convinced that he had an undiagnosed mental disorder which explained his unstable conditions. I remember that he was very much paranoid about people trying to hurt him and conjured up several scenarios which always frightened and worried me as a child. In the process of speaking to him, I realized that I held some good memories of him from my childhood and it was all I needed to bring up the affection and regard that I had stamped down when I grew up. My tone turned forgiving in spite of the accusing start. After that experience, I began to think of my father more frequently, and remembered him as a loving person rather than that hateful character who ruined my childhood. For such a short, easy exercise, this psychodramatic tool helped me work out complicated emotions such as anger, guilt, regret and forgiveness which would have remained buried.

In the same way, letter writing to my son (the grown child from the picture with my father) proved to be cathartic as well. Recently, I felt that I was not connecting very well with my eight-year old son and I have been getting frustrated with dealing with him. However, after doing the journaling with a photograph, I realized that I was also guilty of creating negative emotions in my son as I had accused my father of doing the same with me. The realization jolted me into writing him and asking for forgiveness. I renewed my vow to make life not easy for him but to
make him feel more loved and secure in the knowledge that I will be there for him no matter what. Growing up, I did not have this sense of security so I that I was constantly feeling abandoned and unloved. With my son, I reiterated my commitment to him to love, support and encourage him so he can be the best he can, in whatever way he wants to. I surprised myself with this commitment as I have a tendency to dictate and control, especially towards people in my life. Both journaling and letter writing were very good psychodramatic tools to use. As near-psychodramatic techniques, they are very effective, convenient to use, unexpectedly powerful in simplicity (Dayton, 2010), and are something I will definitely use as personal tools and would recommend to a future patient to use. Unlike the actual psychodrama, these strategies can be used in private, without the seemingly invasive and highly-charged complexities of the real thing (Dayton, 2005). Being introverted, these psychodramatic techniques worked out well for me and will also be beneficial for future patients who are introverted and introspective as well. Prasko et al (2009) identifies letter-writing as an extension of an ongoing therapy done by a patient at his own pace which helps in evoking emotions associated with early experiences and in processing these emotions to find release and closure. The authors wrote that patients have had remarkable success using this technique especially in coming up with their own ideas for resolution. They further state that allowing the patients to think for themselves gave them a sense of empowerment and hope that recovery is not far off. As a future nurse, I would certainly encourage these near psychodramatic techniques as I feel that they are simple, usable and can be done anytime and anywhere the patient feels comfortable. Also, knowing how something that starts out simple but can develop into something passionate and emotionally-charged experience will help me empathize with difficulties and negative feelings the patient may soon face.
Guided imagery is another technique that I found helpful and very soothing. In my exercise, I focused on that only place that I have ever felt comfortable, that of solitude in prayer. In times of turmoil and emotional stress, prayer always eases my discomfort, so I directed my imagery to that place where I feel loved and blessed, with my Shepherd guiding me along green pastures and quiet waters. This image has never failed to restore peace and comfort in me, so I know how powerful imagery can be in combatting stress and highly-charged emotions. Utay and Miller (2006) write that while guided imagery has been in use for over a century by various groups to facilitate religious, indigenous and medical traditions, it is currently viewed as a complementary and alternative therapy. Its therapeutic benefits are most notable in the field of counseling in issues such as grief, decision-making and eating disorders by promoting relaxation, positive thinking, and creativity in problem-solving (Utay & Miller, 2006). The authors also cite research studies that point to benefits of guided imagery in medical scenarios such as pain management, and in sports training. Similarly, Dayton (2005) states that guided imagery’s soothing effect elevates immune levels and directs the mind into positive thinking. She asserts that people instinctively tend to self-soothe in times of stress and anxiety, and guided imagery is a positive avenue for such a personal strategy. She also stresses that people who turn to drugs, alcohol and other forms of self-destructive activities do so in an effort to self-soothe. The importance of this technique should not be underestimated. In my personal imageries, I always end with a more positive outlook and more energy to tackle the issue. I compare the experience to resetting back to default, a way to go back to base and start again. I believe that people often get mired in the intricacies of life until they work themselves up to serious anxiety, and going back to base one may just be what they need. In the heat of the moment, it is easy to get caught up in the tension and be swept away by its magnitude and negativism. I feel that the use of this
near psychodramatic technique will be very helpful for me as a student as I move on to dealing more with people with psychiatric issues. From research, I’ve read that health care professionals, especially nurses, are frequently subjected to burnout resulting from the burdens of caregiving and administrative duties. I believe that guided imagery can provide soothing relief from these pressures and enable me to recharge and deliver therapeutic care to patients who might also benefit from the same technique, and at the same time, guide them with a knowledge borne form personal experience.

In summary, I found my course in psychodrama an enlightening and extraordinary experience, as I have not previously thought that this discipline can be integrated seamlessly into psychiatric nursing. Journaling with a photograph, letter writing and guided imagery as near psychodramatic strategies do provide useful ways not only for personal de-stressing, but to empathize with patients and assist them in their journey to release the past, hold on the present and hope for a better future.
References


