

EASING THE WAY TO GROUP WORK: THE FILM CLUB MODEL

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Abstract

Some of those people who could benefit from (group) therapy are reluctant to participate in a therapeutic group, fearing disclosure of emotional content. Film clubs were developed in order to ease the way to group work. Films give the opportunity to connect with one's inner world, project anxieties onto the characters, identify with them and examine the reactions of oneself and of others. The moderately structured and supportive environment enables psychological issues to be addressed from a safe distance. We found that film clubs helped participants to share and process emotionally sensitive issues. A description is provided of a film club, dealing with the issue of "family ties", a painful subject for the participants who were Holocaust survivors or their children. The film club model is suggested as a tool for working through emotionally sensitive issues with various populations.

Introduction

In the professional literature we can find various studies relating to the therapeutic value of using a video to watch filmed group sessions (e.g. Berger, 1993 ; Wachtel, 1983). There is only limited information on the use of motion pictures or documentary films in therapy. There are some descriptions of cases when individual therapy has drawn on the symbolism and metaphors of films (Gunzburg, 1998; Christie & McGrath, 1987). Most surprising among these is the description of Turley and Derdeyn (1990), who report the use of horror films to treat an adolescent hospitalized after an attack of violence. They argue that horror films have a similar function to that of fairy tales; when watching such films, as when hearing a fairy tale, a certain level of fear and anxiety is experienced due to identification with the threatened character. Through the process of identification, the observer draws strength and confidence in his/her own ability to cope with anxieties and fears. The use of films as a tool in family therapy has been reported as well. In fact, the entire process of family therapy was compared with the plot of the film "Mary Poppins" (Newby, Fischer & Reinke, 1992). Apart from cinema films, also home movies have been used in therapy to arouse past memories of family members and reveal emotions about these events (Kaslow & Friedman, 1977).

Most cases in the literature that relate to the use of films in group work deal with psycho-educational goals and interpersonal relations (e.g. Johnson & Iacobucci, 1995). A few studies relate to the use of cinema films as a tool in group therapy in closed institutes with the more severely disturbed. Smith (1974) reported the use of films in treating schizophrenia. She notes the power films have to raise unconscious associations in patients, in a manner similar to the use of dreams in therapeutic work. She found that patients could identify with the characters and drew analogies between conflict situations in the films and similar situations in their own life. The patients were able to observe the manner in which the characters cope with their impulses from a safe distance and were able to learn from this coping. One study dealt with preparing adolescents for discharge from hospitalization by using and discussing the film "Ordinary People" (Duncan, Beck & Granum, 1986). Another therapeutic project with prisoners suffering from PTSD after the Vietnam War included the use of documentary films and the drama "The Deer Hunter" (Sigafos, 1994).

Working with cinema films in group settings is in a way similar to working with other expressive tools. To say, the use of a stimulus in a moderately structured and supportive environment enables psychological issues to be addressed from a safe distance. Films give the opportunity to connect with one's inner world, project anxieties onto the characters, identify with them and examine the reactions of oneself and of others. The use of the medium "film" has the advantage over other methods (like drawing or drama) in that it is socially sanctioned in almost any sector of society.

Description of the film club

Our target group of Holocaust survivors contains many individuals with serious emotional problems (Dasberg, 1992; Kleber & Brom, 1992; Moskovitz & Krell, 1990). The film club model was developed in order to cope with the fact that many of these people could benefit from (group) therapy, but for various reasons are reluctant to participate in group work. We developed an activity that is presented primarily in social terms, to say "a club". It is structured with a clear tool, limited in time, and mostly focused on a specific subject. The emphasis on social characteristics and the structured nature of the activity are intended

to develop a more secure atmosphere and ease the way to group work. At the same time we allowed the possibility of addressing and discussing painful subjects

Over a dozen film clubs have been set up at various locations in Israel. The film clubs concentrated on various issues, such as: interpersonal relationships, womanhood, and the world of thoughts. The following description relates to a film club on the subject of "family relations", an emotionally charged theme for Holocaust survivors and their families (Kleber & Brom, 1992; Barocas & Barocas, 1980).

Structure: This film club included eight meetings, each lasting two hours. The meetings took place every two weeks and were facilitated by the authors of this paper. Each meeting was devoted to a particular relationship within the family: with the mother, with the father, between the generations, between siblings, etc. Short films and film fragments relating to the particular subject were used, after which there was a short break offering a chance for informal encounters. A discussion followed in which the participants raised their experiences and emotions after watching the film. At the beginning of each series issues such as confidentiality and boundaries were discussed. In order to facilitate participation, no commitment to the whole series was required.

Participants: Six to eight participants attended each meeting. Some participants came to only one meeting, while others remained for the whole series. A total of 12 people took part in this activity. The age range was from 40 to 70; there were more women than men. Almost all the participants had experienced the Holocaust as children or adolescents, or were the children of Holocaust survivors.

Description of the meetings: Before screening the film, the participants were asked to consider during the viewing how the events related to their personal life. The participants took an active role in the discussions, sharing intimate information about their original and current families. The atmosphere in the group enabled even sensitive issues such as domestic violence or incest to be raised in public for the first time. The facilitators encouraged and supported the sharing of personal emotions and experiences, while refraining from offering interpretations or using confrontations.

The following is an example of an incident at the club: The meetings on the subject of "the relationship with father" and "the relationship between the generations" used fragments from the film "On Golden Pond". The film paints a wonderful picture of various family relationships. This film stimulated a discussion in which the participants raised personal stories about their fathers, about their own role as fathers, or about grandparents and grandchildren, according to the topic of the meeting. At the meeting devoted to the subject "the relationship with father," one participant spoke of the changes that had occurred in the way he perceived his father. During his childhood he had perceived his father as distant, strong and frightening, while now he saw him as distant, weak and pitiful. At the meeting devoted to inter-generational relations, a Holocaust survivor expressed her pain that not only had she herself grown up without grandparents, but that she was now unable to be a grandmother to her own grandchildren, both due to the physical distance between them and the poor relations between herself and her daughter.

Discussion and conclusion

In developing the film club model a key dilemma was to what extent it would be appropriate to reveal and engage in in-depth discussion of the participants' experiences and emotions? With a little encouragement most participants were willing to reveal their thoughts and emotions, used the club to share painful life stories and reacted with enthusiasm. Although participants were provided with all relevant information, some felt surprised and somewhat threatened by the cathartic atmosphere. Careful monitoring of the needs of each participant in this respect and of the overall level of emotional arousal was requested. We encouraged sharing of contents, but at some times put limits and we also honored the wish not to share. A feedback questionnaire gave support to our positive impression of this way of handling and of the film club model in general.

In conclusion, our experience with Holocaust survivors, their relatives and others shows that film clubs ease the way to group work and help those who usually find it difficult to express emotions to share and process emotionally sensitive issues. We suggest the film club model as a tool for working through emotional contents with various populations.

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