

CREATIVE PRACTICES: PART 2

What Is Sandplay Therapy?

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Sandplay is a powerful non-verbal, expressive arts and play therapy approach that can serve as an adjunctive technique to traditional verbal therapy. Developed by Swiss Analyst Dora Kalff, sandplay is a Jungian-oriented, symbolic form of therapy that gives both child and adult clients the opportunity to portray (rather than verbalize) feelings and experiences often inaccessible and/or difficult to express in words.

A basic premise of sandplay therapy is that the psyche possesses a natural tendency to heal itself, given the proper conditions. Similar to how our physical wounds heal under beneficial conditions, the psyche also has an instinctual wisdom that emerges when left free to operate naturally in a protected environment.

The aim of sandplay is to activate healing energies at the deepest level of the psyche by using miniatures and the sand tray to reflect the client's inner world. By this activity and through the experience of free and creative play, unconscious processes are



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made visible in this three-dimensional form, much like the dream experience.

In addition to Kalff's *sandplay* approach, the term *sand tray* is also used to refer to the use of miniatures in a shallow box filled with sand. However, *sand tray* is a generic term that is used appropriately when the tray is being utilized for research or as an assessment instrument, and when it is used with more than one individual (e.g., families, couples, and groups), as well as in situations where a therapist is not present, or when the therapist is an active participant in a directive or interactive capacity.

Thus, sandplay provides a vehicle for the unconscious to let itself be seen and known. Through the process of playfully creating sand trays, individuals often retrieve lost memories; work through trauma; discover unrealized aspects of the personality; and integrate parts of their personality that lead to a sense of greater balance, wholeness, and an enriched, more satisfying life.

The sandplay method is deceptively simple. The therapist creates a free and protected environment in which the client can relax and let his or her internal state be accessed and expressed. Using sand, water, and miniature objects within a shallow box, the client creates a three-dimensional picture (i.e., a concrete manifestation) of his or her inner imaginal world. However, some children, mostly those 8 years old or younger, create dynamic pictures that are constantly in movement until coming to rest when the child moves on to something else in the therapy room. In this way sandplay helps honor and illuminate the client's internal symbolic world and provides a place for its expression within a safe container, the tray filled with sand.

Upon completion of a sandplay picture during a therapy session, the client may make comments about the scene. However, interpretations and discussions about the trays by the therapist are not initiated until after a series of trays (called a *sandplay process*) have been created over time. It is important that the sandplay process remain at a non-verbal, instinctive level, rather than a cognitive, intellectual one, so that the unconscious can continue to be accessed without client concern about what the therapist has said or will say about the sand picture.

After the client leaves a sandplay session, the therapist photographs the scene; this picture is then stored with the client's other sandplay photos, awaiting completion of the sandplay process. Finally, when the sandplay process seems to come to a rest, the client and therapist may view the

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photographs and reflect on and decipher the content of the trays and the process itself. Providing such a window into the unconscious deepens understanding of the individual psyche and provides a framework for future verbal therapy.

The most important aspect of using sandplay is the preparation and personal development of the individual therapist. Becoming an effective sandplay therapist is an engaging and circuitous process that requires the ability to receive, facilitate, and understand the profound experiences and imagery that this medium can evoke. Comprehensive clinical training, involvement in one's own personal therapy, and experience as a practicing therapist are all important. It is recommended that therapists interested in sandplay training read and take courses in sandplay, Jungian theory, and symbolism, and complete their own sandplay process in order to enhance understanding of the therapeutic process. Further, a sandplay consultation group experience can be very helpful.

In 1982, Dora Kalff officially founded the International Society of Sandplay Therapy (ISST). Since that early period, sandplay has spread worldwide with official national associations in England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Switzerland, and the United States. In order to be a Certified Sandplay Therapist (CST), candidates must successfully complete a series of educational requirements, write papers, involve themselves in their own personal sandplay process, and participate in group and individual supervision. To become a Certified Sandplay Therapist—Teacher (CST-T), and thus be certified to teach and supervise others, additional requirements must be met, such as co-teaching with a certified teacher and presenting cases before an evaluative audience.

Because sandplay is one of the few therapeutic techniques in which language skills are unnecessary for understanding the expressions of the psyche, it has truly become a cross-cultural method that is now practiced therapeutically worldwide. Within this ever-shrinking world, sandplay now offers us a unique opportunity to view universal, archetypal patterns as well as observe the unfolding development of the individual psyche. ▲

A list of suggested readings may be obtained from the LACPA office at 818-905-0410.

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