

Reaching out to the wounds of health professionals

Online support plan for health professionals involved in the COVID-19 outbreak¹ Document for participating analysts and therapists

The Guidelines listed below are mandatory to ensure uniformity and a protected setting for individual sessions. These directions have not been defined for this specific project. Rather, they are a re-elaboration by our work-group of a methodology developed by Eva Pattis Zoja, and her collaborators, called Expressive Sandwork® which has been employed throughout many years at international level for emergencies.

Points to keep in mind:

- 1- This is not a traditional psychotherapeutic setting, and it cannot be so given the current phase of emergency. It is important to keep in mind that we are personally involved in the problem we are trying to provide help for; and that we cannot rely on our traditional work tools. It is essential that we remain aware of our own vulnerability with respect to this particular problem; and that we remember that we are offering assistance not only through our skills, but also from a sense of shared humanity. Furthermore, the need to manage a virtual presence could represent a new experience for many.
- 2- The aim here is to provide a time and a space where a person can share and place his/her experiences; and where personal resources can arise. It is of the utmost importance that we accept the problems and difficulties that will be expressed, without trying to solve them. However, collaboration is necessary in order to spot potential resources, which could arise from intuitions, spontaneous images, dreams, and physical sensations.
Here, the basic idea is that the psyche is capable of adapting to a setting of 4 sessions. Care must be taken to specify that at the end of the established four meetings there cannot be any further sessions. With this “limited” time lapse in mind, the sessions will become “ritualized” almost automatically. The ritual should include expressions such as: “Today, we will be starting our first session, which will be followed by three more.” “Today we are meeting for the second time, ... ” “ Today we are at our third meeting, ... ” , and so on.
- 3- The psyche’s self-regulating function works only if the following conditions are met:
 - a clear and strong *setting* capable of providing a safe and protected container;
 - the presence of an empathic person, with previous clinical therapeutic and analytic experience.
- 4- Given the situation and in order to facilitate the search for inner resources, which the therapist may have caught in the person, actions such as “mirroring”, reflections, and queries are more effective than interpretations. The starting point for recovering one’s self-confidence and of realizing that one “can make it”, lies in the spark of a self-healing mechanism , which is already present somewhere. Notwithstanding the virtual dimension of the sessions, the body and breathing in particular, represent an important focus of the work. It might prove useful to suggest to the person that he/she imagine an inner safe place (as in trauma therapy: a “unique” place where one can feel safe and protected). Individually, we will all have to draw from our own “resources” as therapists, trying to find the right “pace” to interact with the relationship.

The 4 sessions of 45 minutes each:

Session 1: establish a contact with the person, explore his/her willingness to open up; be prepared for a possible emotional start (silence, anger, tears ...)

Sessions 2 and 3: give space to issues, conflicts, paradoxes, all sorts of “mission impossible”, and so on. Act as a container and observe the person more closely; make every possible effort to “meet” him/her.

Session 4: recapitulation, ritualization of the closure and opening an outlook on what will follow.

After a minimum of 1 month, and a maximum of 4, the person we met with for 4 sessions can ask for 1 further session with the same therapist. Anyone wishing to start an ongoing psychotherapy - no longer free of charge - with the same therapist, will have to wait six (6) months, starting from the last session. However, it is possible to start an ongoing therapeutic path - no longer free of charge - earlier than this time span, as long as it is carried out by a different analyst.

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