

Sandtray: life on the palm of your hand: a practical manual for applying game therapy in a sandbox

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Reviewed by Jiří Kameník

Many of us have our childhood linked to memories of playing in the sandbox free of all the worries. This confined space can provide a safe haven for ideas, desires and wishes in an environment without restrictions and worries. These characteristics make the sandbox ideal for achieving therapeutic change. The book *Sandtray – life on the palm of your hand* by Veronika Galusová can become your guide through this procedure.

The book is a practical manual for the application of game therapy in a sandbox. It contains basic information for those who, with the help of *Sandtray*, would like to widen the range of their therapeutic skills. This eclectic approach allows you to use *Sandtray* with other methods either simultaneously or sequentially, as appropriate for your situation.

The publication follows to a certain extent a well-known foreign title *The Sandtray therapy: a practical manual* by Homeyer Sweeney, which should be published in the near future as its 4th edition. The author also drew inspiration from the works of Virginia Satirová and Madeleine do Little.

However the topic of *Sandtray* has not been published in the Czech environment. On the pages of this book can be found inspiration, enthusiasm and authentic practical experience. The world hidden under a layer of sand is being slowly uncovered for the reader through reports and illustrative photographs.

During the narrative, readers are introduced to the theoretical concepts of psychotherapeutic practice which are fundamental for the *Sandtray*. A necessary part is also a description of the therapy room, equipment, including figures and other objects.

Each meeting in the sandbox is divided into several phases, including preparing the room, welcoming and listening to the problem, a scene in the sandbox, change in

the scene in the sandbox, reflecting on the experience and appreciation, and finally taking a photo. In addition to the description of these parts, inspiring exercises are prepared for readers.

The chapters “The Road to Healthy Self-Esteem”, “Discovering and Anchoring Life Values” and “Compensating for Internal Tension” form the introductory story reports in this book.

Self-esteem and self-evaluation are one of the most common topics which make people seek professional psychological help. The author herself observes that, regardless of the problem, the client always seeks and strengthens his own value and faith in himself and in his ability.

In her story, an eighteen year old Soňa tells us about her feeling that everybody is more successful than her that everyone is constantly watching and evaluating her. She was most satisfied in the gym when she was facing a considerable physical exertion. Soňa tried the Sandtray method for the first time during the second meeting. The creation of the image of “healthy self-confidence” together with the experienced emotions completed a scene in front and inside the sandbox, in which there was no need to compare oneself with others and Soňa managed to turn the feeling of anxiety into a feeling of relaxation. Soňa spent a total of four meetings in the sandbox before she found the key to solving her problems and began to trust herself more.

In sandtray therapy, the client assumes responsibility for himself in the maximum possible way, and therefore also for his path to healing. Healing requires a change in old and dysfunctional behaviours and attitudes in an individual’s life. Every change in the sandtray leads to a practical skill that can be immediately applied in life.

Jaroslav was 26 at the time of his first visit and had been trying to cope with the break-up with his girlfriend for a long time. As a result of the unsuccessful relationship, Jaroslav suffered from feelings of frustration and failure, which have recently burdened him so much that he could not concentrate on work and slept poorly. As he believed in the God he was burdened with the idea of sleeping with a woman he had not married. How many forms can masculinity take in a therapeutic sandbox? Is it possible to find common characteristics of a successful and composed man in one picture? What role do the sheriff’s star and the figure of a young girl in a red dress play? Will an element of harmony appear in a scene full of fear and uncertainty, a vision of a positive future? And what role will faith play in the picture and in Jaroslav’s life? Jaroslav visited the therapy two more times. He no longer wanted to work with the sandbox. He began to actively change a lot of things in his life, and he only needed to sort out his thoughts during conversation and confirm his decisions. The experience at the sandbox was crucial for him and gave him a lot of energy.

The main healing phase in the sandtray process is the release of internal tension. Despite the initial shyness and the effort to control their activities in the playroom, adult clients quickly immerse themselves in creative activities that engulf them.

Uncertainty is replaced by a feeling of sobriety, during which long-suppressed contents begin to emerge. Children begin to compensate for their inner tension directly through play or image building. Sometimes the action in the sandbox is very fast and sometimes it is repeated over and over again.

The scenery of the “Battle Desert”, which turned into a “Dead Desert” during the session, is a picture of the inner tension, disappointment and insecurity of little Lukáš, whose family fell apart due to domestic violence. Lukáš has just started going to second grade. He was anxious and quiet, he didn’t get much involved with his classmates. Lukáš has just started going to second grade. He was anxious and quiet, he didn’t get much involved in the team. He had no friends. The evening was very tearful. Therapy was supposed to help boost his self-confidence. The dynamic process, in which everything was killed and destroyed until the moment of utter destruction, was in direct conflict with the personality of a gentle and shy boy. How to bring little Lukáš to a positive change in a picture full of destruction, ruin and suffering? And is it even possible to feel safe in this world? The topic of combat and subsequent laying sand and burying is an important form of compensation. In such a case, it is necessary for the action to take place, often repeatedly. When working with clients, the most important part of therapy is the client, who knows what he needs, himself. The therapist is there for him and he should accompany him, not tell him what to do!

During the therapeutic session, attention is paid to emotions, which always have a direct impact on the client’s physical experience. In sandtray, clients experience very deep emotions that often surprise them. Clients are often ashamed of them and consider it their failure. The therapist’s task is to help the client recognize their emotions and to identify how and where he experiences them in the body and find a suitable way to express them.

How we treat ourselves and other people depends on what we have learned in our original family. We repeat the same patterns and the same gestures simply because we “looked” at them. Creating a family image offers us the perfect opportunity to find meaning in all relationships in our life experience so far. Sandtray is thus ideal for working with family schemes and constellations.

Most of us assign different values to different parts of our “I”. We perceive some positively because the environment reacts positively to them. We consider the parts that we associate with the negative reactions of the environment to be undesirable and we try to hide them. The party of personal parts, following the example of V. Satir, usually took place in a group of 15 to 40 people who were willing to dramatically portray roles representing the various internal parts of the host, ie. the person whose parts are to be played. Everything happens in a large room using disguises and scenery...

Sandtray through this technique can help the client in finding different qualities of displayed attributes or skills. We could call it the polarisation technique. In

addition to the extreme variants of the same part, it is possible to look for a suitable and strengthening variant for the client on the scale between these poles.

Sandtray allows the therapy of a couple and a group. The therapist can get a complete picture of mutual communication, experienced patterns, roles, ways of dealing with the rules, meeting personal and shared needs in a family environment, etc. Depending on the needs and wishes of clients, you can work with a couple on either one or two sandboxes at the same time. Both have their advantages.

Conclusion

The publication *Sandtray – Life in the Palm of Your Hand* brings the reader comprehensive information on both the theoretical framework and practical application. The book is written in an accessible and readable form with a predominance of narration, which is set in a theoretical psychotherapeutic context. It will also offer readers numerous recommendations for purchasing your own therapeutic sandbox, including toys and other items. The publication is suitable for anyone who deals with the topic of the game in the context of therapeutic action and is looking for other ways and inspiration in their practice.

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