

Sandplay – not just for kids



I have recently completed some training in sandplay therapy and symbol work.

Sandplay? I hear you say, is that like kids playing in the sandpit at kinder?

Well, yes and no. Instead of a sandpit, a sandtray is used about the size of 75cm by 55cm and 20cm high. It is designed for you to see the whole tray without moving your head. The idea is that the tray represents a snapshot of your world, whether it be an internal conflict, decision, relationship, or a dynamic with someone or something external. It is painted blue on the inside to stimulate a sense of water or sky. The toys are referred to as symbols, and may be any small size object, such as animals, people, stones, shells, or any kind of miniature thing.

What happens is that the symbols are displayed on shelves and the client is asked to select the ones that stand out. Have you heard the saying “a picture is worth a thousand words”? Well, it’s like that with symbols. The symbols represent various aspects of the client’s current state of being in this present moment; whether it is thoughts, feelings or body sensations. Whatever holds the most energy or charge for the client in this moment will be projected on to the symbols. Sometimes, the client is aware of his/her troubling issues, other times, the unconscious mind selects the symbols without cognitive understanding.

There are things in our awareness that we are thinking, planning or worrying about, as well as things outside our awareness that are sitting there waiting for an opportunity to be

processed or revealed. Some of these come out in our dreams. It is believed that there are many more things floating around in the unconscious mind than in our awareness. Some reasons for that may be – we are too busy, or overwhelmed to deal with a certain issue and the mind “puts it away” for us to help us function in the every day. The thing is, whether we are aware of an issue or not, it is still in our psyche – (mind and body), influencing our behaviour and decisions. Some “put away” or repressed issues may come out as unexplained body aches or pains. Others grind away at our wellbeing and resilience making us short tempered or grumpy. There are also positive “lost” things in our unconscious mind. These may be disowned parts of self that were not allowed to exist because our caregivers disapproved of them. For example, a child who wanted to be an artist and was told that choice would not amount to anything and became an accountant instead. This disowned potential is lying dormant in the unconscious mind waiting for the right conditions to emerge, like a seed in the ground in the winter, waiting for spring.

So, back to what happens with the sand tray and symbols. The client arranges the chosen symbols in the sandtray. A process begins to happen. The client may describe the sand creation to the therapist. More symbols may be added, existing ones moved around or removed. The therapist asks the client to connect to the feelings associated with the symbols. Deeper emotions begin to emerge and be expressed. Sensations in the body begin to reveal their mystery. Understanding and awareness is obtained.

At this stage, you may be thinking – oh that sounds a bit full on! It does not feel like I have much control over what’s floating around in my unconscious mind, only to be spewed out into the sand tray for all to witness!

Well, let me tell you about your inner healer. The inner healer is a natural guiding principle that is part of your mind’s mechanics, as the heart is part of your body’s mechanics. The inner healer is always moving you towards healing and wholeness. Just like the body, when it is hurt or wounded, knows how to heal itself, provided the appropriate environment, so too the psyche knows what needs to be worked on to bring you psychological wellbeing. The inner healer will not bring up material that you are not ready for nor able to deal with. The inner healer will bring up material in the order and manner that is exactly appropriate for you at the time. That is as sure as your next breath or heartbeat. The trained therapist will not impose his/her ideas or solutions. The trained therapist will closely work with your inner healer to draw out your own answers and solutions to the issues and conflicts within you.

I hope you are now sufficiently reassured in your own mind and body healing capacity. Let me further explain a deeper process that may take place as part of your sandplay session. Remember that the chosen symbols in the sand tray represent an aspect of yourself or an external person or entity that you are trying to find some kind of resolution with. At times, an additional process is required to bring this to fruition. For some issues, a dialogue may be entered into with a symbol. The therapist will guide you to express anything that is needing to be said to this symbolic part, person or entity. A conversation may emerge. It may feel like the symbol is talking back.

“Wooah, I hear you say. You want me to talk to a stone in the sandtray? I am not that crazy!” Well, it’s not crazy, it’s smart. Communicating your likes, dislikes, needs or wishes are the only way to change a relationship with another. This applies whether it is a part of yourself, someone you are in relationship with or even a deceased person. This kind of communication with a symbolic aspect in your life brings deep change, healing and empowerment.

For other issues, it may be appropriate to role play the symbol - that is, actually talking, sitting, or moving like you are this symbol for a short while. Guided by the trained therapist, you enter a meditative type state where you take on aspects of the symbol and reveal deeper meanings or messages from the unconscious part of your psyche.

Are you saying something like: "Now you are really freaking me out! First, you want me to talk to a stone, and now you want me to act like a stone! I don't know about this sandplay therapy. It sounds pretty weird."

Weird? No, Unconventional? Yes. It's not your regular sit in a chair and discuss your issues type of therapy. But then your regular talking therapy does not produce such profound transformative insights and healing. When you just talk about things, you are only using the cognitive, thinking part of your mind. You are not accessing all the other rich wells' of wisdom that your body and the unconscious mind possess. Remember, your inner healer has your back. It will not take you to a place that you are not ready to deal with. Similarly, it wants healing, growth and wellbeing for you. The inner healer will work hard to access your own strengths, positive memories and resources to move you closer to your goals. That is the natural force of life.

The last part of a sandplay session is reserved for integration. That is embedding the insights and awareness that were gained from the work into your everyday consciousness, so that they can go home with you and not remain just a fleeting moment of wisdom that will pass like a cloud of smoke or a dream. Integration may consist of further telling of the story, writing in a journal, drawing, taking photos or just resting. The therapist will ensure that you are leaving the counselling room as yourself and not as a stone.

Have you ever seen children playing with toys? Have you noticed that they commonly re-enact what is happening for them in their lives? Have you heard them talk as if they were one of their toys, or talk to the toys? Well, guess what? They are doing their inner processing work, and so can you. However, when you are grown up you have to pay a therapist to help you do what you naturally did as a child.

References

Pearson, M., & Wilson, H. (2001). *Sandplay and symbol work: Emotional healing and personal development with children, adolescents and adults*. Melbourne: ACER Press.