

Dramatherapy and autism

Dramatherapy uses the creative media of drama, movement, voice, and more, to develop a safe, containing and enabling method of therapy. Whilst everyone can access dramatherapy, it is particularly useful for those who might find a more direct, verbal or cognitive approach difficult. Therefore it can be a supportive therapeutic intervention for autistic people.

What is dramatherapy?

The British Association of Dramatherapists (BADth), the professional body for dramatherapists in the UK, defines Dramatherapy as follows:

‘Dramatherapy has as its main focus the intentional use of healing aspects of drama and theatre as the therapeutic process. It is a method of working and playing that uses action methods to facilitate creativity, imagination, learning, insight and growth.’

The profession draws on a broad range of psychology theory and ideologies of theatre practitioners. Dramatherapists are writing to increase the academic canon, and research into autism which supports the benefits documented in a special edition of BADth's Journal and a multi-authored book, Dramatherapy and Autism (Routledge 2017).

Dramatherapists train at Masters level and are state-registered by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Dramatherapy interventions

A crucial starting point for therapeutic work with autistic people is developing the therapeutic relationship between client and dramatherapist. This is primarily about listening and allowing the client to feel heard, entering into their world, but also to sense how someone is feeling when they might not have the words to describe it, even if the client is verbal.
Dramatherapists use an assortment of methods and choose what feels appropriate for individuals or groups across the autistic spectrum. We focus on two types of client here as they are areas of personal research, and demonstrate the breadth of application for dramatherapy with autistic people.

**Autistic people who also have complex needs and are non-verbal**

Without formal language, an alternative channel for communication is sought, so the client and therapist can truly be alongside each other. Our research uncovered thirty different creative interventions offered to autistic people, including appropriate touch, movement, recorded music, holding, objects, voice, mirroring, song and percussion.

- When someone has no spoken language, movement can be important for communicating thoughts and feelings, but we can all become stuck in specific patterns. With movement, the dramatherapist aims to enter into the client’s world and meet the energy, then invite the potential for expansion of movement vocabulary by amplifying, exaggerating, mirroring, conversing and witnessing. This may also support the client with their emotional vocabulary.

- Dramatherapists use objects and sensory material as a method of projective play, where the client unconsciously projects feelings and emotions onto external objects, providing some distance and making those feelings easier to manage. For those people who find eye contact difficult, it also enables the client and dramatherapist to engage in a safer way.

- For clients who use wheelchairs most of their day, being out of the chair and physically held and supported by the dramatherapist can be powerful and produce a sense of well-being. In some cases it may connect the client to early life experiences that were limited or absent.

**People with Asperger syndrome**

Often living fairly independent lives, individuals have a sense of what they want to achieve, but the challenge is how to connect with the world they want to inhabit. Dramatherapy can support in rehearsing and practising aspects of life, and exploring the emotional content within.

- By improvising around job interviews, funerals, romance, etc..., the client explores different ways of being through role-play, and reflects on personal resources needed in real life situations. Playing a role of power can support someone who feels they have no power.

- Clients can use creative fantasy as a coping mechanism to compensate for feelings of isolation or as an enjoyable mental escape from the world. With the structure of a scheduled, supportive session, dramatherapy enables a place of refuge, or a vantage point from which to reflect on life.
Within a group scenario, clients can witness and learn from each other, cope with the unknown, work with spontaneity, and develop peer relationships and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In both research studies, positive outcomes in dramatherapy were reported, particularly in the areas of developing relationship, self-esteem and confidence, lessening anxiety, and positive mental health. With the breadth of possible interventions, sessions really can be tailored to individual clients to make more connections and increase individual potential.

To find a dramatherapist in your area, go to BADth's website: badth.org.uk

References:

- Dramatherapy and Autism. Deborah Haythorne and Anna Seymour editors. Routledge, 2017
- Dramatherapy, Volume 35, issue 1, Routledge 2013