

Psychotherapy Guidebook

CATALYST THERAPY

Nelita Ano

Catalyst Therapy

Nelita Ano

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Catalyst Therapy

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DEFINITION

Catalyst Therapy is a method of psychotherapy that originated out of a need to communicate with children who were not readily accessible to the traditional approaches to therapy. In this method of therapy two modalities of communications are used: drawing and language. These two methods of communication act as catalysts to stimulate patient-therapist interaction.

Catalyst Therapy is a brief method of psychotherapy that can be used as a communication bridge between the child and the therapist. It is used with children who are overwhelmed by guilt feelings, who have a tremendous sense of aloneness, or have had catastrophic experiences that immobilize them. Catalyst Therapy focuses on the child as a communicator of change and as a communicator of past history. The boundaries of the child are vulnerable to intrusion and so the therapist offers two ways of communicating to protect the child and to help him to relate at a pace that is less threatening than usual communication methods.

HISTORY

Catalyst Therapy evolved as the author recognized the need for broader communication modalities when working with children who were not readily accessible to traditional therapeutic approaches.

Winnicott's (1971) use of the squiggle game suggested the effectiveness of graphic communication with children. In personal communication, Robertson and Barford (1970) suggested the long-range significance of graphic communication. Singer (1973) and others have indicated the significance of images as they relate to the inner world of childhood. It was out of this background that I evolved Catalyst Therapy, which uses a graphic/language therapeutic approach.

TECHNIQUE

Catalyst Therapy is a three-stage method of therapy. In the initial communication the child and therapist draw one or more pictures together. Verbal communication is minimal.

The therapist says, "We are going to draw a picture. Watch." The therapist then draws a tree, a path, or some other environmental feature. The therapist then says, "Now you draw."

This dual graphic communication continues until the session terminates. As the therapeutic process develops, the verbal communication

changes and becomes more diversified. However, children in Catalyst Therapy are reluctant communicators, so it is important to proceed slowly to prevent the child from becoming inaccessible again.

If the child is responding with some autonomy, the therapist then moves on to the second stage by introducing an animal with humanlike characteristics. Animals such as a mouse or a rabbit are usually unthreatening and can become easy vehicles for such exploration as anger, sexuality, etc. The child may then be ready to focus on a more aggressive type of animal, such as a tiger. The graphic communication thus offers a broader channel to express aggression safely, which is frequently necessary for reluctant communicators. When communicating through animals appears to be developing without too much anxiety, the therapist then initiates the third stage by introducing the use of communication through thoughts and through words. Balloon-shaped drawings are placed above the animals, in a manner similar to the balloon shapes used in cartoons. However, there are broken-line balloons for thoughts and dreams and solid-lined balloon shapes for words. This is both a recognition of the thought process of children and an expanded way for the child to respond. Usually the child will initiate more direct communication in this stage of graphic/language communication by saying, "I want to talk," or expressing in different words a wish to be a more direct communicator.

APPLICATIONS

Catalyst Therapy is a short-term therapy that offers entrance into more traditional psychotherapy. It is effective with pediatric populations who are usually in the hospital only briefly. It has proved useful with selected anorexia nervosa patients. It has also been helpful with children who have poor self-concepts and feel threatened by a predominantly verbal or acting-out therapeutic approach.