

PSYCHODRAMA OVERVIEW

Psychodrama is a form of group psychotherapy developed by Jacob L. Moreno, M.D., a Viennese psychiatrist who came to the United States in 1925. J.L. Moreno's wife and chief collaborator, Zerka T. Moreno, contributed significantly to the theory and practice of psychodrama, as did many students and followers of the Morenos. Psychodrama is part of the triadic system developed by Moreno, which includes psychodrama (therapeutic enactment), sociometry (the measurement of group relations), and group psychotherapy (drawing on the power of interpersonal relationships to promote individual and collective healing and growth).

Psychodrama uses various forms of enactment to expand and deepen the purely verbal method of therapy. Because psychodrama brings the body, mind, and emotions into action at once, it can be more powerful than traditional talk therapy alone. J.L. Moreno once said that "the body remembers what the mind forgets." By bringing the body into therapeutic work — through movement, gesture, sound, and action — we can get in touch with memories and experiences that might not be accessible to our conscious mind. Bringing up this information can be helpful in psychological and emotional healing: It can give us access to memories we need to work through, as well as access to inner strengths and resources we may have lost touch with.

Psychodramatic action can help a person achieve insight into a problem, express feelings, complete unfinished actions, and learn new and more satisfying ways of behaving. Although it is typically practiced in therapy groups, psychodrama can be used in individual psychotherapy, and it can also be used for education, skills training, and organization development.

The foundation and wellspring of psychodrama is *spontaneity*, which Moreno believed is an unlimited energy available to all of us. He suggested that spontaneity is akin to a spark of the transcendent that inheres in each of us. More formally, Moreno defined spontaneity as: a novel response to an old situation or an adequate response to a new situation. In other words, we are often confronted with new situations in life, and we must act. This involves exploration, experimentation, and improvisation. It is our spontaneity that enables us to see fresh new ways of doing things that contribute to our own goals and those of others.

Another key concept underlying psychodrama is Moreno's belief that we are all auxiliaries (helpers) to one another. Moreover, Moreno believed that just as we are wounded in relationship, we are healed in relation to others. He developed his particular method of group psychotherapy, which employs action techniques, to promote individual and collective healing.

Moreno drew on the metaphor and methods of the theater, rejecting the pathology-based psychiatric models of his time. He used the concept of *role* as a core construct in his theory of personality and was one of the early proponents of the relational approach to understanding personality and human relations.

A typical psychodrama session consists of three phases:

- **Warm-up:** The director leads the group through a series of experiences to help members become comfortable with one another, explore their connections to each other, identify a theme to explore, and prepare themselves for an enactment. A protagonist (person whose story will be enacted) is chosen, or a decision is made to enact a group story (called a sociodrama).
- **Action:** The director leads the protagonist through a series of scenes to enact his or her story. Group members are asked to play the role of significant others needed for the enactment. Members taking such roles are called "auxiliary egos" or "auxiliaries."
- **Sharing:** Participations are invited to share with the protagonist how the enactment touched them personally.

There are five essential elements of psychodrama:

- **The Director** – The therapist, facilitator, or group leader who structures the session and directs the psychodrama.

- **The Protagonist** – The person whose story is being enacted with help from other group members and the director.
- **The Stage** – The space where the drama is being enacted.
- **The Auxiliaries** – The supporting players who take the roles needed to act out the protagonist’s story. They may take the roles of people, animals, ideas, or any other role needed for the drama.
- **The Audience** – The witnesses to the drama from whom the auxiliaries are drawn and who provide a safe container through which healing and growth occur.

Although each psychodrama occurs spontaneously and is staged as a co-creation of the director, protagonist, and group, there are a number of psychodrama techniques that are used in conducting the psychodrama:

- **Concretization** – This is the essential technique of psychodrama that takes an idea inside someone’s psyche and makes it concrete in the imaginal space of the psychodrama stage (or other action space).
- **Role Reversal** – Role reversal occurs when the protagonist changes places with another, assumes his or her role, and attempts to view the situation from the other’s perspective. Role reversal is literally “standing in another’s place.” Taking another’s perspective through role reversal can enable increased empathy and understanding, as well as perceptual and cognitive shifts.
- **Double** – In the double technique an individual takes on the protagonist’s role along with him or her and offers increased awareness of unexpressed thoughts and feelings. The double stands with the protagonist, attuning empathically with her or him. The double first provides support and, gradually, introduces verbal and nonverbal material not spoken or acted by the protagonist to deepen the protagonist’s awareness and range of action possibilities. There are many types of doubles, including the containing double, the body double, amplifying double, paradoxical double, and others.
- **Mirror** – In this technique, the protagonist is invited to step outside of the action and ask someone to take his/her role so the protagonist can view the situation as if looking into a mirror. This provides distance and perspective.
- **Soliloquy** – The protagonist is invited to speak his inner thoughts and feeling out loud in the moment. This is usually done with the protagonist walking around the action space while sharing his/her inner dialogue.
- **Aside** – The protagonist is invited to turn her/his head to the side and speak aloud what is not being said. The other players are instructed that they cannot hear what the protagonist says during an aside.

Psychodramatists are highly trained professionals able to design sessions to meet the specific clinical needs of the individuals and groups they serve. Some psychodrama sessions may focus on teaching new behaviors and skills (role training), some may be structured to promote emotional expression and release, some may focus on changing perceptions or reframing cognitions, and others may be intended to deepen the protagonist’s connection to the transpersonal or transcendent. Still other psychodrama sessions may focus on some or all of these dimensions simultaneously.

Further information about psychodrama can be obtained from American Society for Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama (ASGPP) at www.asgpp.org. The requirements for psychodrama certification, as well as a listing of certified psychodramatists and psychodrama trainers, can be found at the website of the American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy at www.psychodramacertification.org.