

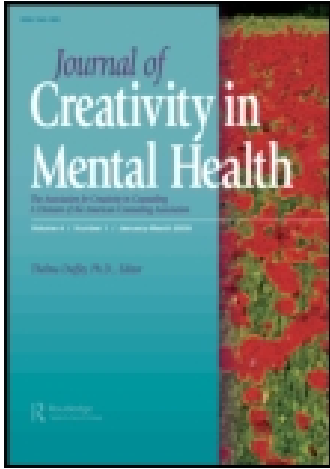
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### The Therapeutic Use of Fairy Tales with Adults in Group Therapy

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## CREATING SPACE FOR CONNECTION: A COLUMN FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE

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*This column is designed to underscore relationally-based creative interventions used by counselors and psychotherapists in their practices. Our intention is to provide examples of novel, innovative ways of working with clients in their efforts to deepen self-awareness and their connections with others. Although the interventions within this column will be presented in a linear “how to” manner, an essential premise of this column is that interventions submitted for publication have a contextual and relational basis. Basic to this column is the therapeutic focus of working through latent hurts and impediments to our clients’ health and happiness. Client goals generally involve creating the requisite emotional space needed for genuine relational choice for connection to manifest.*

*If you have created a useful therapy tool, or if you have adapted an existing creative tool that you would like to share with readers, please follow submission instructions outlined in the Instructions for Authors or use the following model and remit to the journal editor. Submissions may range from 1500 to 3000 words. doi:10.1300/J456v02n04\_08 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006/2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]*

# The Therapeutic Use of Fairy Tales with Adults in Group Therapy

Nina W. Brown

Fairy tales are not just for children. They can hold important messages for people of all ages, as well as for those with special needs. For example, people who present for therapy reporting such issues as fear of abandonment, sibling rivalry, self-esteem, and lack of meaning in life, among others, can benefit from using fairy tales as a springboard for meaningful discussion. Living vicariously through characters whose lives mirror our own can be a powerful therapeutic intervention. This manuscript discusses how fairy tales can be used with adults in a variety of therapeutic contexts.

## *RATIONALE*

Dieckmann (1997) describes fairy tales as a means to access relational problems. Stevens-Gruille and Boersma (1992) proposed that fairy tales can be used therapeutically with adult clients to reframe existential issues. Lubetsky (1989) discussed how these stories can reveal inner thoughts and feelings, expose conflicts and frustrations, reduce anxiety, and help to master developmental tasks. Holton (1995) described the usefulness of fairy tales in the corrections environment. And Dieckmann (1997) used fairy tales with a phobic client, while Whitaker

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(1992) used fairy tales with family therapy. In each of these cases, tales were used to mirror client struggles and to present strategies for resolution.

### ***ASSUMPTIONS***

An underlying tenet of most fairy tales is the struggle against adversity as unavoidable to the human condition. In that vein, fairy tales in counseling can facilitate the identification of tasks and struggles that reemerge throughout life. According to Bettelheim (1989), fairy tales:

1. Suggest experiences that help develop character in the reader
2. Externalize internal processes of the reader
3. Illustrate ways for individuals to find their own solutions to their situations
4. Reassure rather than demand specific actions
5. Intimate that a rewarding, good life can be achieved despite adversity

When used in a group setting, fairy tales can:

1. Reduce defensiveness
2. Increase self-disclosure about core issues
3. Promote connection among members
4. Instill hope
5. Promote the visibility and emergence of existential concerns

### ***Themes and Symbols***

Each fairy tale reflects a number of developmental and existential symbols. Existential issues include: (a) death (turned to stone), (b) assuming responsibility (protecting a person or animals), and (c) loneliness (traveling alone). Developmental issues involve: (a) unrealized or unused parts of self (jewels), (b) destructive parts of self that are not adequately controlled (wild animals or people acting destructively), and (c) disconnection and separateness (leaving home). When used in groups, leaders may identify these symbols and corresponding issues before using the tale with the group. In addition, group members can identify and analyze symbols they find meaningful.

### ***OBJECTIVES FOR THE USING FAIRY TALES IN ADULT GROUP THERAPY***

Fairy tales illustrate that struggles are part of the human condition, unavoidable difficulties that continue throughout a person's life. Al-

though myths and other such stories can be used therapeutically, fairy tales are particularly potent in tapping common existential and developmental issues (Bettleheim, 1989).

Objectives for the use of fairy tales with adults include:

1. To stimulate imagination
2. To help identify underlying and continuing concerns
3. To provide context for relational connection
4. To suggest possible solutions
5. To illustrate ways to gain confidence
6. To highlight existing, underlying developmental and existential issues

### ***PROCESS FOR THE USE OF FAIRY TALES WITH ADULTS IN GROUP THERAPY***

The leader selects a fairy tale based on members' core needs, such as becoming authentically present, forming connections, developing a personal identity, and meeting needs for security. Bettleheim (1989) recommends the use of stories that mention existential issues, such as death. He discourages the use of "safe" stories, those that have ambivalent figures, or those that use trickery to win. Myths and fables, while useful in other contexts, are not recommended for this process. Bettleheim and Brown (1996, 1998) suggest that Grimm Brothers Fairy Tales (Grimm, 1944) are particularly relevant to presenting clinical issues.

When using fairy tales in group process, it becomes particularly important for the counselor to know the presenting issues of the group members. Member selection would be contingent upon shared commonalities. Optimally, group leaders select fairy tales that speak to a human condition, but are not likely to trigger emotional expressions too intense for its members to process.

### ***Materials***

In addition to the fairy tale, the following materials are needed for drawing:

1. Large drawing paper or newsprint (11" x 17" or larger), two per person.
2. A set of oil pastels, colored felt markers, or crayons for each person.
3. Tables or other hard surfaces for drawing. Paper can be taped to the walls, if they are smooth enough for drawing.

### ***Procedure***

1. Introduce the activity by telling members that you will be incorporating a fairy tale exercise into the group setting. Advise members that you will read the fairy tale, and then ask them to draw one or two pictures about it. Ask if anyone has any objections and/or questions related to the assignment. If participants ask what the fairy tale is supposed to reveal, relay how it can clarify deeper issues or concerns, and/or highlight existential issues. Also explain that the experience will likely be different for each member.
2. Distribute materials and have members locate where they will draw their pictures. Ask them to sit, close their eyes, and listen as you read the story.
3. Read the fairy tale with inflections, emphasis, and excitement.
4. When finished reading, ask members to open their eyes and draw one or two scenes from the story that seem important to them. Emphasize that artistic talent is not necessary, and deflect comments about lack of artistic talent. Allow sufficient time for drawing. As members seem to be finishing their pictures, ask them to title their pictures.
5. Have each member describe their drawings. Although comments are encouraged, this would not be the time for asking questions or probing deeper. Each member can comment on some particular aspect, such as colors, themes, etc. Comments should be factual and somewhat neutral. As members describe their pictures, note commonalities and how these can be the basis for your comments. It is important that all members have an opportunity to describe their drawings.
6. Once the reporting is complete, the second phase, process and expansion, begins, and the group takes the experience to a deeper level. Leaders start by asking general questions such as: (a) What feelings emerged as you listened to the story, drew your pictures, and described them? (b) What feelings or awareness emerged as you heard and saw what other members drew?
7. From there, you can move to making the questions more focused. For example, ask members what associations and other connections they see between their drawings, the titles they chose, and their current life circumstances. It is very important that you allow members to interpret or make associations for the symbols in their drawings, rather than giving an interpretation of their experience yourself. As the leader, you can ask, "What does \_\_\_ mean for you?" or "What feelings emerge for you as you think about this symbol?"

### ***Suggestions for Follow-Up***

Be prepared to have more important issues emerge than can be addressed in the session. A careful noting of developmental, existential

and current concerns can provide the basis for follow-up. It is helpful to the group to note commonalities, and emphasize universality, connections, and relationships. What can also emerge are members' desires and expressions of hope. These too, can be highlighted and expanded. Many times the leader will not have to do much to encourage members to continue self-exploration, as the fairy tale triggers numerous associations that members generate themselves. As a result, members, then, are more likely to explore their experiences in greater depth and detail. In short, this experience provides considerable material for group and individual member exploration.

### **CASE ILLUSTRATION**

The following exercise was conducted with a group of five female undergraduate students, ranging in age from 22-45. The fairy tale selected was the Grimm Brothers' "The Shoemaker and the Elves" (Grimm, 1944 p. 279). The tale tells of a shoemaker who became very poor through no fault of his own. With only enough materials for one pair of shoes, he cut out the pattern intending to finish the shoes the next day. When he arose, the shoes were finished, and a customer paid enough money so that he could buy materials for two pairs. Before long, he had many pairs of shoes in his shop. Near Christmas he and his wife decided to stay awake to see how the shoes were made, and discovered the elves that helped them. His wife suggested that they make clothes for the elves, as they had none. The elves were delighted. Group members drew the following scenes:

1. The shoemaker and wife sitting before a fire in a fireplace with a big Christmas tree in the room.
2. The shoemaker and wife in one room marveling at the shoes made by the elves, and racks of shoes in another room.
3. Two elves (one male, one female) in new clothes climbing out of window. The shoemaker and wife watching behind a curtain.
4. The shoemaker and wife walking in the room and spying completed shoes on table.
5. Money and credit cards. (This drawing was interesting as it went directly to one member's current concern and was not explicitly a part of the story.)



Metaphors for symbols in the story were identified by consulting Bettelheim (1989) and Brown (1996), who suggest metaphor identification. Suggested metaphors for the symbols were:

1. Shoemaker and wife—people in distress
2. Elves—helpful and magical spirits
3. Shoes—resources needed for living
4. Racks of shoes—saved and collected resources
5. Christmas tree—wishing, hopeful

There were a number of developmental and existential issues that emerged through this exercise, including issues of responsibility, freedom, and will. Group discussions helped participants to process common life experiences and their hopes for resolution. They also served as a forum for participants to discuss the sobering realities that life presents, such as making ones own way in the world, wishing others would help pave the way for us, and the wonderful gift that comes through mutual support.

All students were finishing their undergraduate degrees and the exercise allowed them to express their anxiety about their current situations and the future. Some students would be financially independent for the first time. One member, whose parents temporarily continued to support her, was concerned about her ability to manage her financial concerns, given her credit card debt. The fairy tale touched on presenting issues and concerns for this group and demonstrated their experiences of commonality and universality around these issues. At the same time, their particular situations were different, and the exercise revealed anxieties concerning their uncertain futures, leaving school, and entering the workplace.

### ***REQUIREMENTS AND LIMITATIONS***

There are some counter-indications for the use of fairy tales. Group members who are unable to follow directions, members who are physically disruptive, or those who cannot sit still long enough to listen to the story may not benefit from the exercise. However, most members, even those suffering bouts of anxiety and other stressful conditions, can use fairy tales as creative mediums effectively.

One caution in using fairy tales as an adjunct to counseling is that some tales depict women either as passive, or as mean and cruel. Males, on the other hand, are often depicted as strong action takers. For that reason, it is important for the counselor to select carefully, so as to avoid promoting gender biased material and perpetuating pejorative stereotypes. When carefully processed, the reported use of fairy tales in the therapeutic literature for children and adults seems to support the notion of universality for the characters regardless of gender (Cashdan, 1988). The stories speak of human concerns, dilemmas, and situations. The deeper significance of these stories can be accessed by most people, with therapeutic assistance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Fairy tales hold much promise as a therapeutic tool, and there is evidence of its efficacy in tapping deep and important personal issues for group members. They can help give voice to expressing difficult, abstract, and complex problems and issues. The stories can illustrate hope for survival, restoration of meaning and purpose for life. They can also illustrate how primitive impulses can be contained and managed, and provide temporary and permanent solutions for some difficult problems. Fairy tales can also help people conceptualize how to develop their authentic selves, and embrace autonomy while also experiencing connection. In that vein, they can help members shore up self-esteem, promote an understanding of the universality of struggle and survival, demonstrate the integration of the polarities within each person, and directly address existential anxieties core to the human condition.

### **NOTE**

The Therapeutic Use of Fairy Tales with Adults is one example of an intervention that can be used in working with adults in group therapy for existential or developmental issues. There are a myriad of methods and interventions that counselors can utilize when working with such issues. A prominent goal of The Association for Creativity in Counseling (ACC) and Journal of Creativity in Mental Health (JCMH) is to focus on exploring innovative interventions used within a theoretically sound and supportive therapeutic relationship. This column will feature interventions for working with the various issues found in contemporary practice.

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