

Psychotherapy Guidebook

THE USE OF DREAMS
IN
COUPLES' GROUP THERAPY

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The Use of Dreams in Couples' Group Therapy

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DEFINITION

Dreams deal with the unconscious dynamics underlying the manifest problem the patient brings to the group. While confrontations based on conscious material are often met with denial and aggression, confrontations involving one's own dreams are much easier to accept.

HISTORY

The use of dreams in individual psychotherapy has become a standard procedure of many therapists, but only a few use dreams in couple counseling. And the number of therapists taking advantage of dreams in group therapy for couples is even smaller.

TECHNIQUE

Jung's technique of interpreting dreams on the subjective level is of great advantage in couple counseling. For example, Margaret, a married woman who had been in group therapy for several months with her husband, recounted a dream: "I am in the living room with my husband. He is painting

something black. I tell him not to paint furniture in the living room, but stubbornly he continues. I am beside myself and scream that he never wants to listen to me and that he is always stubborn." Margaret gave the obvious interpretation: "Dennis never listens to me." Dennis, of course, denied this.

Every person not acquainted with dream interpretation has a tendency, just like this dreamer, to interpret the dream on the objective level only. By objective level, Jung means that we find out if the real Dennis is as stubborn as he is in the dream. On the objective level, the black paint is simply taken as black paint. More helpful, though much more confronting, is the interpretation of the dream on the subjective level. It means that every part of the dream, be it a person or just paint, is symbolic of a part of the dreamer's personality.

APPLICATIONS

For Margaret it is, of course, much more important, though more unpleasant, to find out that the stubborn Dennis is a symbol of her own stubbornness; that she is, so to speak, "married" to this stubbornness. The group reminded her how often they had accused her of "painting things too black." Then she admitted that the night preceding the dream she had been arguing with Dennis about his wish to accept a job in another town; she had painted life in that town in the blackest colors. This was irritating to Dennis

and one of the causes of marital strife.

The dream always brings hidden and often negative material to the surface. Therefore, the dreamer at first resists understanding the meaning of the dream. He needs the help of one or several people to interpret it and help him accept it. Often, people are embarrassed to admit, even to themselves, what their fears are. Here, too, the dream can help.

George had a dream reflecting his reaction to an upcoming party: "I was in a lovely, sunny meadow. I was afraid of wild beasts that might be lurking in the high grass and, therefore, took refuge in a stone tower." When it came to meeting people, George often felt as he did in the dream. He had often been reproached by his wife for "withdrawing into an ivory tower" at such times. Once George had brought his anxieties to his peers, he felt closer to them, especially since he found out that they were not "wild beasts lurking in the grass."

Dreams are also helpful in the discussion of sexual problems. For example, Tom was such a hard-working young scientist that his zeal had gotten him into trouble with his young wife, who complained about his working too much. Tom reported this dream: "A vital young nature girl led me to a romantic old European town. We were very much in love and were hiding out in a castle. We made love and were very happy. When the time came to

leave, the girl stepped from the window and flew around, beckoning me to follow. I did, and both of us now flew together over a charmed landscape. I woke up in an elated, happy mood.”

As usual, the group at first got involved with the manifest content of the dream, guessing whether the dream suggested an affair with his lab assistant, Beth, an attractive young nature girl. But this was not what the dream meant.

In further group interaction, Tom explained that Beth, in spite of her heavy work, did all the outdoor things he had done in his youth with girls of her type. “I don’t want to marry such a girl. I just wish I hadn’t stopped mountain climbing myself. If I could now climb for even just a couple of hours, I would really feel as if I could fly.” The therapist suggested a contract between him, the group, and his wife, in which he obliged himself to get back into nature at least every second weekend. His wife was very happy that the group had achieved for Tom what she hadn’t been able to. The group members realized that it would really have been a fatal mistake for Tom to have asked for a divorce in order to marry an outdoor girl, or to go to bed with Beth. In each case, it became obvious to the group that dreams of love or hate were not meant for acting out. The goal was working out the inner problem the dreams point to.

In summary, there are many advantages to using dreams in couples’

group therapy. Unconscious material comes quickly to the surface, providing additional guideposts in diagnosis and prognosis, and reflecting the developmental stages in the group process. Dreams allow for a rapid comprehension of the dynamics underlying the particular conscious problem and they help to clarify the characteristic behavior and anxieties of particular psychological types, such as the introvert, George. Last, they provide a valid appraisal of readiness to terminate.

I want to avoid the impression that interpretation of dreams is used exclusively in couples' groups. The methods of group interaction used are those most group therapists would apply: staying in the here and now, replacing accusations by working through and invoking feeling responses. Dreams should not be looked upon as a cure-all but should be respected as an additional tool for the profession.