

## Warm Ups: For Your Back Pocket

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Shepherd's Staff Training in Psychodrama

The prospect of directing Psychodrama is anxiety provoking for the beginning and the experienced psychodramatist alike because one never knows the course the drama will take. This anxiety may be heightened when one is beginning to work in a new setting or with a new group. To the degree this anxiety provokes the director's advanced preparation and planning it is an asset.

As a director in training I have learned that attending to the warm-up is essential. It is one aspect of the psychodrama that I can anticipate and plan. The more uncomfortable I am the more important it is that I carefully attend to warming up, my own as director, that of any participating trained auxiliaries, and that of my group. This paper will address purposes, principles, and procedures for warming up and describe various warm-up exercises.

The purpose of warming up is to enhance spontaneity and emotional awareness. Blatner (1973, p. 36) identifies four preconditions for spontaneous behavior:

(1) a sense of trust and safety, (2) norms which allow for the inclusion of nonrational and intuitive dimensions; (3) some feeling of tentative distance, which is one of the elements of "playfulness"; and (4) a movement toward risk-taking involving exploration into novelty.

Warming up starts with the director before the group arrives. The director should begin with his/her expectations. Before I direct a group I ask myself several revealing questions. Do I feel obligated to put on a show (whether or not I have a ready protagonist)? What are my stereotypes about the group members (for example "character disordered" alcoholics)? Am I concerned about the group's stereotypes of me?

Blatner (1973, p. 38) suggests several ways of responding to such concerns. First, discuss one's plans and apprehensions in advance with a coworker. Second, review one's own tolerance for not needing a "dramatic happening" to occur as part of one's introduction to the group, thus clarifying one's own position at the onset (for one's self and the group). Third, allow one's own "negative tele" (subjective sense about the group) to be first on the agenda for the group discussion or psychodrama. Fourth, decline to direct if one feels a great degree of over-involvement and allowing another potential director to direct if one is available.

Finally, in choosing a group warm-up it is important for the director to consider what is known about the intra- or within the group issues, the members' individual issues and concerns, the action that occurred last time, and the warm-ups used previously including their degree of success. I would like to summarize and illustrate these issues in terms of my past psychodrama practice.

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An earlier version of this presentation was made at Eugene Eliasoph's Advanced Supervision Group, Branford, CT, April 12, 1990. The author may be contacted at Shepherd's Staff Christian Counseling Center 731 East 8600 South, Sandy, UT 84094-6312, phone (801) 561-9987 x 25 or [www.ssgcc.com](http://www.ssgcc.com).

I provided a weekly two-hour session at a hospital based 28-day chemical dependency treatment program. Before beginning I discussed my apprehensions with the program director. As I began each group I was aware of my expectations and regularly had told my group I respected their right to say "no" to a warm-up exercise or to any role they were asked to play.

About one half hour before the psychodrama group I mentally reviewed the previous psychodramas and the warm-ups. I kept a record of the warm-up(s) used for each session, the name of the protagonist, and a short one-sentence summary of his main issues. During this time I made a decision about what I anticipated would be an effective warm-up exercise given what I knew.

I arrived 20 minutes early to begin warming-up the staff who planned to participate by allowing them to discuss personal and patient related concerns. Often there were students of the various mental health professions who wanted to sit in. I discussed with them what they knew of psychodrama and what I expected of them.

Next we reviewed the patients with the available staff member who was most knowledgeable of the group issues and individual patients. I evaluated the level of commitment of the patients to the treatment program, the amount of cohesion within the patient community (an important part of the program and facilitative to psychodramatic work), and any other idiosyncratic (unique to this group of patients) issues. I might have changed my warm-up based on this new knowledge. For instance if the group was "not into treatment" I might have done an "into treatment" spectrogram. If the group was new I might have had them arrange themselves in terms of a human map of where they were living before they came to treatment. Or I might have allowed them to form dyads and then introduce each other, or introduce themselves through the eyes of someone in their social atom.

I arrived to the room five minutes beforehand to arrange it to my satisfaction. I started my portion of the group after they have concluded the standard AA type introduction, "I'm Sam. I'm addicted to weed and alcohol." From the time the patients arrived I was alert to issues that may have suggested an idea for an existential or undirected warm-up or that would have suggested a different structured or "canned" warm-up. At times this meant I was coming up with my third warm-up for the group. **However, because I had prepared my self and thought through what kind of warm-up might be effective I avoided experiencing excessive anxiety about what I was going to do. I was able to keep my own spontaneity because I had "a warm-up in my back pocket."**

At the point I formally began group I liked to stand up and begin walking around as the physical movement helped me in warming-up or keeping warmed up. I varied my proximity with the group members depending on who was the focus and as a way to show my interest, support, or introspection. Almost always this lowered my anxiety and increased my spontaneity.

I would ask who had previously never been in psychodrama and ask them what they had heard about it. I then allowed group members who had been in previous sessions to describe what it had been like for them. I underscored what I saw as defining aspects of the technique as they alluded to them. Then I would state what I saw to be the important ground rules and my reasons for them: starting on time, ending on time, and not allowing anyone to leave in the middle except for unavoidable and unforeseen reasons. I also stated that it was each patient's and participating staff's prerogative not to participate in any exercise or role they found objectionable. I made the staff or other patients available to

help patients remain in the room during scenarios that they might not otherwise have been able to tolerate. Likewise I liked to remind participating staff of the importance, though usually infrequent need, for this role.

Sometimes the group needed more than one warm-up. I have learned from experience which structured warm-ups more easily led into action. I have also been open to discussing with the group their reluctance to proceed and have respected what they told me. Often this would lead to a psychodrama and was productive in and of itself. On one occasion it resulted in a sociodrama.

## For Your Back Pocket

As a beginning psychodramatist I could not find a source listing more than several examples of structured warm-ups. The kinds of warm-up that I observed in training groups often were not sufficient in other settings. As a result I have tried to keep track of successful ones I have observed, heard about, or developed. Some may look down on this approach as gimmicky or as a bag of tricks. I use it strategically and carefully. When I have thoroughly thought through a warm-up and am warmed-up myself I have been able to develop warm-ups extemporaneously. Eugene Eliasoph (personal communication, May 11, 1989) at the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama presented on and categorized "Types of Warm-ups: Imagery, Structured, Sociometric, and Existential." I will list and discuss warm-ups within this framework. I concede that there is substantial overlap among these categories and that I have found very similar warm-ups used by different people.

### Imagery

"Imagine a person with whom you have some unfinished business. If you remember two flip a coin in your mind to pick one." Help any group member who is having difficulty identifying someone. "Imagine yourself facing that person. Notice the shape of their face, their expression, their posture, what they are wearing, etc. (go through the five senses to set the scene). Talk to that person or allow them to talk to you." After sufficient time allow each group member to say who they encountered. On the second time around allow each group member to identify what was said and the impact. Set two empty chairs in the center of the room and allow as many as desire to sit in the one chair and speak with the other person. This can make for some very effective short psychodramas (each protagonist having three or so exchanges with the other person) or could lead to a more extended enactment. This warm-up often warms participants up to actions they need to take with others in their social atom in the immediate future.

Related Idea: for alcoholics, "imagine the person affected the most by your alcohol" (Estes, 1988). Another person could be put in one of the chairs so the protagonist is addressing them as the other person. This auxiliary could respond as the other person at the director's discretion (it would be particularly valuable to have a trained or experienced auxiliary to play this role). Also, the chair can be positioned such as to provoke certain sorts of confrontations. For example, the chair can be positioned facing away from the protagonist

to represent someone who ignores the participants, or upside down to represent someone with whom the participants might be angry.

Another Related Idea: "Imagine someone you have unfinished business with, someone to whom you need to talk, or to give a message. Pick up the pillow in the middle of the room and choose someone in the circle of group members that could represent this other person. Walk over to them, talk to them, explain what the pillow represents, give it to them, and then return to your seat." The person who receives the pillow should not talk (unless prompted by the director). The pillow receiver should pass the pillow one person to the right or left. This avoids the appearance of the receiver throwing back what the protagonist gave. Like the other unfinished business exercises this one is always very fruitful, helpful, and powerful if used sensitively.

Pictures at an Exhibition "Allow a memorable portrait to come in to your mind. Let it emerge on the wall of your mind. What are you feeling as it is emerging? Who is in it? What kind of frame does it have? Is your place in the picture or outside of it? As it becomes clearer what kind of feelings are you having? Role reverse and speak for each person in the portrait. Choose group members to represent the people in your portrait and arrange them. What would you like to change in your portrait?"

## Structured

Action Spectrogram: "Arrange yourself across the room in terms of how into the treatment program (this group) you are now with this wall representing being very into it and this opposite one representing being very much out of the program (or group)." Allow each member to take a position and state the reason for their choice of position. Observe commonalities and themes. "Now using the same continuum arrange yourselves in terms of where you want to be." Help members identify what they need to work on to get to where they want to be.

Related Ideas: Spectrograms can be devised to physically portray feelings or attitudes about any number of persons or issues: mother, risk-taking, God, etc.

Human Map: "Rearrange yourselves spatially around the room to show where you were born. This way is North, this way South, and East, and West. Talk with each other to find your right place. Now move to where you were before you arrived here." The director now can work with one specific person and let them tell how they got to where they are now. Questions like "what significant things are happening there," or "what are you feeling like there," or "who did you leave behind" can lead into a psychodramatic enactment.

Related Ideas: This same exercise could be used in terms of a future projection, that is "map where you **will be** when you leave here . . . then go to where you would **like to be**. What would you need to do to get from where you will be when you leave here to get to where you want to be?"

"Choose something in the room that represents how you are feeling." Allow each member time to identify something to themselves. Allow each person to say what he or she chose. If someone is unable to identify something ask them how they feel and allow the group to suggest some ideas. After each has identified what they chose go around again allowing each to identify why they chose what they chose and the associated feeling. Draw out group members as you go around helping them to identify the specific issue to which their

feelings are related. Clarify issues such that group members could work on them through psychodramatic enactment. Have the group help you to identify commonalities or themes.

Related Ideas: "Choose . . . a color, a weather condition, a part of this picture or mural on the wall, something you eat, a state of jello, one of the conglomeration of items in the center of the room . . . that could represent how you are feeling." Follow the same ideas as the approach described above.

"Choose an Animal that could represent how you are feeling. On the count of three become that animal and congregate with those animals you would congregate with in the wild." Follow the same ideas as delineated under "Choose something in the room . . ."

"Greet this Stuffed Animal as if it Were You." Pass around the animal. Encourage the group to greet themselves without words. Help each person warm-up to their work and identify group themes.

Present a wrapped box as a stimulus. Allow each person time to remember the best Christmas gift they ever received. On the first go-around have each identify what they are feeling and then later the gift. On the next go-around have them each identify why, what the gift meant, and what it was like to receive. Let the group help identify themes. Help each member identify an issue to which the feelings are related and develop it to the point they could become a protagonist. This is a warm-up I like to use around Christmas time.

Related Ideas: "best gift given (instead of received), pretend an issue you need to work on is in the box, pretend the box contains something you need. You received a letter from someone. Who? What does it say?"

## Sociometric

"Introduce yourself through the eyes of someone else in your social atom (someone who knows you). Assume their mannerisms and words as best you can." Go around the room with each person identifying who would introduce them. Help those who are having a hard time thinking of anyone. Go around again doing the introduction. "What was it like to hear them introduce you?"

"Choose someone you would like to know. What was it like to be chosen? What was it like to be the chooser? Was that a familiar role? Are you satisfied with it? Interview them for one minute observing their behavior. Change interviewers. Now show your partner how they appeared. What is it like being the other person? What is it like seeing yourself? Is there something about yourself you would like to understand better or to change?"

## Existential

"What is going on in your life right now?"

"Who did you bring in with you? Speak for them?"

"What do you need to work on before you leave today?"

"What do you need to work on before returning home?"

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