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Storytelling - Intervention method for children affected by war trauma

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Abstract: The war in Ukraine is the largest humanitarian crisis that Europe has faced in recent years, and our country, Romania, was directly involved in managing the situation created by the refuge of millions of Ukrainians (in particular, mothers and children) who left the country at the beginning of the armed conflict. This type of conflict has had a strong negative impact on children, especially Ukrainian children, and the thus generated trauma can affect the development of self-identity, of spirituality or of the world perspective due to its influence on cognitive processes involving the development of trust, intimacy, control, security, and power. Through our case study we capture the psychological effects of war on children, and the technique „storytelling” as an effective method of intervention in treating war trauma in children.

Keywords: armed conflict, crisis, trauma, child, intervention, storytelling.

I. Impact of the armed conflict on children

Ukraine is the largest country in Europe that has recently faced a range of political and military crises involving violence and aggression. Armed conflicts in Ukraine are having a strong negative impact on children, especially Ukrainian children. Feelings of panic, stress or anxiety control invade most children who have managed to escape the war, especially children who have been trapped in areas severely affected by combats.

Before reaching adulthood, most children are exposed to one or more traumatic events implying „real or threatened death or serious injury or other menace to physical integrity” (Costello et al, 2002, p. 99-112). Some of these events are personal, caused either by an accident or by deliberate violence against the child. Others, such as natural disasters and mass accidents, may engage entire families or communities. The most extreme traumas implicate high degrees of threat, directly targeted to the child for long periods of time, which cause a loss of social support. Alternatively, lighter trauma implies exposures that are either short-lived, only slightly threatening, or cause an increase in the availability of social support (Hetherington, 1999).



1.1 The crisis

The crisis is that situation in which a person faces a major obstacle that blocks his life goals and cannot be overcome by ordinary methods of problem solving. A period of disorganization follows, then a period of depression (inefficient methods of problem solving are implemented) (Caplan G., 1961).

The crisis is a high stress generating period that negatively affects a person's ability to think and act effectively (Ion, Al. Dumitru, 2008).

1.2. Stages of a crisis

John Leach (1994) stages crisis situations in 5 major categories:

- The threat and warning stage (pre-impact stage) characterized by feelings of denial, invulnerability, crystallized states of threat doubled by the incapacity to stop the imminent disaster.
- The impact stage - when the disaster effectively occurs.
- The recoil stage - representing the stage of comprehending the seriousness of the situation.
- The rescue stage
- The post-trauma stage

1.3. Stages of crisis reactions

Gerald Caplan (1961) notes some important stages of crisis reactions:

- Initial increase in voltage as a response to an event
- Increased blood pressure disrupting everyday life
- Unsolved tension leads to depression.
- Failure to resolve the crisis might cause a psychological problem.

The relocation crisis has a significant impact on the individual and the whole family: the social network is lost, and people might experience isolation, despair, uncertainty, loneliness, as well as difficulties in adapting to the new location (Sluzki, 1992).

1.4. The child in crisis

The psychological effects of war or terrorism on children were studied through research on various events that took place after World War II. Examples include the Holocaust (Sagi-Schwartz et al, 2003, p. 1082–1086), the riots in Belfast in Northern Ireland, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (Hadi and Llabre, 1998, p. 45-46) and the ongoing saga of ethnic rivalry in Sri Lanka (Chase et al., 1999, pag. 379–390) and the effects of ethnic cleansing in Cambodia (Mollica et al., 1997, p. 1098–1106) (Dyregrov et al., 2000, p. 3-21).

As found in research on this topic, there is a dose-response effect: the more the child is directly exposed to injury, the more likely the post-traumatic stress disorder increases, characterized by intrusive manifestations, avoidance symptoms, hyperactivity, sudden mood swings (Pine and Cohen, 2002, p. 519–531).

Many studies of child trauma have proven that direct harm to the self, parents and other loved ones is associated with several symptoms of trauma. Thus, children do not have the capacity to fully understand events, they fail to verbalize everything that happens to them, and their capability for an emotionally self-regulation is insufficiently developed (Pine and Cohen, 2002, p. 519–531). Among the signs of trauma, the specialists list:



- Fear
- Anger
- Easy transition from one emotional state to another
- Inconsistent and / or irrational thoughts about causal relationships
- Feeling guiltiness
- Feelings of shame for lack of competence
- Avoidance of contacts with other children
- Search for children with emotional or behavioural problems
- Self-injuries
- Violent behaviour
- Escape
- Excessive attachment behaviour
- Regressive behaviours
- Low school performance
- Withdrawal from the relationship
- Avoidance of social contacts, rejecting them outside the home or even avoidance for leaving the house
- Fast pulse and high blood pressure
- Abdominal pain, headache, vomiting, diarrhoea, constipation
- Food difficulties
- Fluctuations of appetite

The study of children in refugee camps is equivocal in terms of „distant trauma". Several researchers have concluded that events that threaten the survival of the self or of the parents lead more to post-traumatic stress than experiences with forced removal from home, as it is usually the case in refugee camps (Sack et al., 1999, p. 1173–1179; Dyregrov et al., 2000, p. 3-21; Mollica et al. al, 1997, p. 1098–1106; Allwood et al, 2002, 450–457). However, refugee camps can still be extremely dangerous environments where children are exposed to horrific trauma. On the other hand, these children might be less exposed to direct trauma than children living in regions actively involved in a war.

Secondary exposure through the media and rumours is a growing concern due to the degree of exposure to the media among children in modern societies and the intensity of live dissemination. There is an increased concern for people of all ages face to the potential exacerbation of psychological reactions through media coverage, but children represent a special case since they have not yet reached a complete cognitive maturation. The media is a powerful „vector through which terror spreads, using the model of epidemiology of infectious diseases (Butler et al, 2003). After Oklahoma City, children exposure to television has been associated with several symptoms of post-traumatic stress, at least in the short term (Pfefferbaum et al, 2001, p. 133-140).

Perceived danger and fear stimulate efforts to increase the attachment to different people in the immediate vicinity; people of all ages will seek contact to attachment figures, and this response will be more intense in young children (Bowlby, 1973). It is also mutual, so that, under conditions of extreme threat, parents will seek physical contact with young children. Older children can be reassured by contact with their mobile phone, but young children will need physical contact. Separation may be more stressful for children than the traumatic event itself (Masten et al, 1990, p. 425-444). Although less emphasized in the literature, it is important to



consider the threats impact on children compared to the stress level experienced by parents, whereas parents (or people with whom children constantly interact) offer adaptive management models of managing emotions.

Children refer to their parents as saviours. Fathers who joined the army are seen as superheroes.

2. Intervention child crisis situations

2.1. Psychological intervention in crisis situations

This constitutes the way to provide psychological support to people in crisis, to reduce the impact of the situation to which the person has been exposed, as well as to maintain the adequate functionality of the competence levels and adaptive operation (Everly and Mitchell, 2000, apud Vrasti, 2012).

Crisis interventions can focus on different systems of the child ecology or of the child itself:

- Cognitive processes (perception of the situation)
- Emotional level (emotion identification)
- Behavioural level (situation management, identification of values, resources, *strengths, and pleasant things*) (Glass, A. J., 1959, p. 222-225)

2.2. Methods of intervention in crisis situations

Among the most well-known methods of intervention in crisis situations to which children are exposed are the following:

- The game - the child can play, repetitively, the same game, if he needs to process fear.
- Tolerance of regressive behaviours - the child may ask to sleep with the parents, to be held in the arms, to be fed.
- The plush - a small toy held in the arms will give the child a feeling of safety.
- The game of emotions / the rainbow of emotions

The most serious threatening situations for children might involve complex processes, which take place over time with a cumulative impact. There is, however, a high degree of concern about the available research since they do not accurately capture key aspects of children's responses to threats in the form of war or other trauma. Current research generates incomplete conclusions about factors that predict particularly good or dysfunctional results. In addition, there are limitations in knowledge of the mechanisms behind the effects of widely recognized risk or protection factors (Leach, J., 1994).

Similarly, there are concerns about the possibility of harmful, slow-moving effects of the gradual but accumulative impact on the children's mental development. Therefore, in the final section of this case study, the storytelling method is analysed as an instrument of intervention in the war trauma.

2.3. Using stories in crisis situations intervention

Children and adults are, both, strongly attracted to the magic of the story.

Stories are awakening the imagination and stimulating the creativity, by opening unknown doors of our psyche, uniting us through their magic. In the vicinity of the story we forget about age and we manage to enjoy together with children the offered miracles" (Chendru, C. 2021, p.128)



Stories" exist from immemorial times "representing „efficient and favourite methods to communicate information, to teach values, and to share important life lessons." (Burns G. W., 2011, p. 37).

Since the antiquity, stories have been playing an important role in children education, by offering children symbolic stories. Marie-Louise von Franz states that „, the tradition of fairy tales returns three thousand years ago, and it is amazing that the adjacent reasons have not changed." (Marie-Louise von Franz, 2019, p. 19). The author explains this fact by analysing a fairytale pattern that appears since Antiquity and is still found today in Norway, Sweden, Russia, and other countries.

For children, we may consider storytelling as an appropriate method of pleasant learning, without pressure or any kind of coercion. This is the process of building useful notions and information for the entire educational process during the life of a teenager, but also of an adult. We all, children and adults need stories, techniques to tell stories, to communicate how we feel, what we want and thus to accumulate experiences and develop our imagination, our creativity, our vocabulary, our thinking, and our power to relate with those around us (Egan, K. 2008, p.23).

Oral stories have been used both for fun and for education and have been passed on as a cultural tradition. The oral story was the oldest way of communication, but now, there are many other, such as digital, visual, and written. According to research, storytelling is a tool that helps children to better understand the world and visualize themselves in narrator-like situations.

Through stories, children can identify solutions to the problems they are facing. Children have not fully developed their language function to verbally capture the problem and verbalise it. Through its contents the story provides solutions to the child's non-verbal problems.

Fairy tales and stories from the people provide a rich material for working with children, giving them a lot of psychological significance. They „, spring from the depths of humanity and contain the struggles, conflicts, pains and joys that people have gone through the centuries". (Oaklander, V., 2013, p.124).

In the Jungian conception, fairy tales and stories are carrying the wisdom of the collective unconscious (C.G. Jung, 2016, p.23).

Stories heal. /.../ They have immense power. „They do not ask us to do, to be, to act - listen to them is enough. They have remedies to recover any lost psychic impulse. They arouse emotion, sadness, questions, understanding, nostalgia that spontaneously bring to the surface the archetype."(Estes,C.P. 2017, p. 28-29).

According to Bruno Bettelheim, through the fairy tale, we transmit to the children, that „, the battle against the cruel difficulties of life is inevitable, it is an intrinsic art of human existence. And if the person faces firmly the unexpected and often unjust difficulties, then he defeats the obstacles and finally comes out victorious." (B.Bethelheim, apud V.Oaklander, 2013, p.7).

Considering psychic plans, the action of the story takes place simultaneously at both conscious and unconscious level. Consciously, the child perceives the explicit content of the story, empathizes with the main hero, endure all adversities with him. And, even if he sometimes identifies with the main hero's problems, he considers that the action is not about him, it is only about the hero in the story. Meanwhile, the unconscious takes the message of the story, giving it meaning and credibility and triggers the necessary program of behavioural transformations



restructuring values, attitudes, and visions. (Tkach R., 2008, p. 8). This is how the preparation for change takes place.

The story also has a function of resignification. It changes „ reference frameworks, contexts, providing new meanings, provides a complete picture of the problem and the possibilities of reporting „ otherwise "to this" (Dafinoiu I., 2000, p. 170).

The story plays a key role in the intervention of emotional disorders. The story manages to best capture the person's condition, offering solutions to the problems troubling him, without directly attacking his ideas and values, „ suggesting a change of position, which, at the beginning, has more of the character of a game." (Peseschkian N., 2005, p.19.) This change will then „ allow the person to see their unilateral ideas in relation to others, to interpret and extend them "(Peseschkian N., 2005, p.19).

The scientific method used is the story therapy, whose purpose is to control aggression in children, to develop self-regulating emotional abilities and to relate appropriately to others. In achieving this goal, stories are mostly used, since they are accessible through the simplicity of their language and the interest they arouse in children. This process implies becoming familiar with the strengths of the child's personality, broadening the field of child's consciousness, identifying unexpected solutions to various problematic situations, as well as the unconditional acceptance of the child and communication with him on a level of equality through the story. (Kiseleva M.V., 2006, p. 43).

To this effect, the authors developed a range of techniques specific to the story therapy aiming for the story to be read, analysed, transcribed, told, drawn, dramatized.

An important aspect of a story is the happy ending, which conveys the child's sense of security. No matter what happens in the story - everything ends well in the end. The hero goes through a series of trials, but at the end he is rewarded. The supreme message that the story conveys, according to Kiseleva M.V., is the very message of life „ How you behave with the world, so will the world behave with you."

2.3.1. Objective of the case study and methodology

The story can be considered a method of intervention when we try to identify the hidden aspects of children's responses to threats such as war or other major events. The advantage of this method is that it is not establishing a topic to which to report the activity of children.

2.3.2. Applied samples and instruments

The method was applied in the psychological counselling workshops within the Constanța Civic Resources Centre, which were attended by 5 Ukrainian children, aged between 7 and 9 years.

During the intervention, the children created together a book –" the children's book". In a first stage, each child introduced a character in the form of a drawing, and we portrayed it in detail, insisting on its qualities. In the next stage, the children created a common story, where all characters were cooperating and going together through lots of experiences. At this stage, the highest goal of our undertaking was to involve all characters in a common approach, conveying the idea that no one is alone in his endeavour. This new, virtual but common reality favoured the development of their social and emotional skills, by emphasising the belief that, confronted with obstacles, we can count on the protection and support of others. Children's firm willingness to create one common story with characters helping each other out and triumphing over adversities stressed their need for mutual support and aid in face of difficulties.



The book took shape during 5 sessions and, from one meeting to another, the children have been highly interested in the progress of the story.

2.3.3. Case study results

The children were invited to draw an image, a souvenir, or happening of its own. After completing the drawing, each child has told what he had drawn.

Most children initially drew their quiet and happy lives with pets, their reliable friends (turtle, parrot) or imaginary friends (Mavka fairy, forest fairy).



R, along with his best friend, the parrot, are fishing together. The boy was having a fishing rod, and the parrot was sitting next to the boy, on a chair, because the grass was wet, and he didn't want to freeze his kennels. As the parrot was sitting in the chair and watching, R caught a blue fish. After catching the fish, R had been considering how to prepare it, but he was uncertain. How was the parrot preferring to eat fish? Fried or raw?



R's friend, T, remembered his turtle, the one he always felt good and relaxed with.

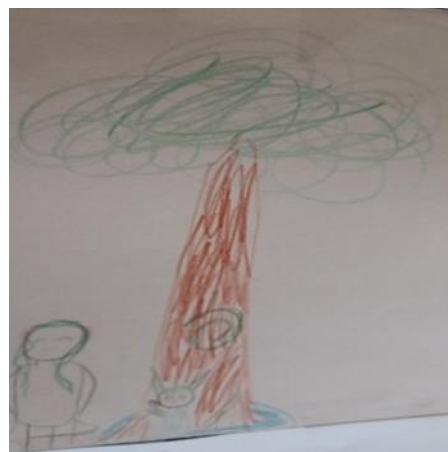
Some of the children, especially the boys, drew meteorites that are coming and destroying the houses. Animals, the children's companions, are the ones who, in the story, are predicting the fall of meteorites and try to warn their friends. As soon as the children hear this news, they are rushing to their own homes to hide. Only nature can stop the avalanche of



meteorites, through the rain that calms the fiery meteorites, so that everyone can regain his freedom.



A meteorite is heading for the ground! R, together with the parrot run to get home, where they will be able to hide, fearing that the meteorite will destroy everything and will stop only when the rain comes! R. and the parrot feel safe from now on, because the meteorite can no longer harm them. The Ukrainian flag appears also, the flag of liberation, and the parrot can fly free again.



Miss M, the new member of the friends group, told how she had met, one day, the fairy Mavka who has invited her to go together to the enchanted forest. There, the fairy showed the girl the tree of youth and the tree of energy, telling her that anyone who approaches the tree of energy is filled with healing energy. At a certain point, at the energy tree arrive a baby lynx and his mother. As soon as she saw the little lynx, Miss M. is very happy because he smiles at her and is happy.

The Mavka fairy, present in the girl's drawing, is the one who in the middle of the forest, shows to the people, the tree of life that can heal any wound once it is touched. The tree of life drawn by our little girl has, inside, a spiral. According to C.G. Jung (2016), the spiral, one of



the great representatives of the non-Freudian theories of personality, is the path to self. It is a path of the paradox and the deep uncertainty, of the return to the same point, to the same experience, the same joys, the same crises, but encompassing amazing perspectives and magical views (Jung, 2016).

Conclusions

Children's drawings contain an entire symbology of war traumas, traumas carried by generations, and which can be accessed from the collective unconscious of the human psychic structure. It is also through the collective unconscious, that we manage to find the key to our own recovery.

Children's connection to physical nature (through the communication with non-speaking beings) and, even more importantly, to abstract nature, with all that the collective unconscious of humanity has managed to store, from the beginning of human existence and the ancestral teachings about the path to healing is surprisingly obvious in their stories. Great pedagogues of the world, such as J.A. Comenius (1670), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1773) are talking about these connections that the human being is fully capable to establish.

Curiously, no parent shows in their drawing in children's book. Children can seek peace and emotional balance outside the family or, by detaching parents/people in the immediate vicinity, with whom they constantly interact. It is possible that, unconsciously, children reject their parents due to the negative loading they send. Their inability to manage their own emotions influences children's capacity to an emotionally self-regulation.

Considering the observations previously mentioned, one of the proposed solutions is working with parents on stress management techniques. This program addressed issues such as managing stressful situations, identifying personal resources, implementing plans, creating a support network.

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