

# AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF USING SANDTRAY IN COUPLES THERAPY

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## Abstract

Sandtray therapy is a form of expressive therapy that allows a person to construct their own microcosm using miniature toys and sand. The scene created acts as a reflection of the person's own life and allows them the opportunity to resolve conflicts, remove obstacles, and gain acceptance of self. This non-verbal method of therapy is often used with children, but can be applied to adults, teens, couples, families, and groups as well. Couples may find the sandtray a good way to let out feelings, share inner thoughts and fears, and work through conflict. When couples enter therapy together, it is often precisely because they are having difficulty communicating with one another. They may have feelings that they feel are not appropriate to share with their partner, or they may feel like they don't have the support from their partner to be safe when expressing their feelings. Primarily, sandtray therapy aids in communication. Because communication is a cornerstone of relationships, any therapy that can help people understand each other more clearly is beneficial to couples and other family relationships. This paper shares qualitative results from an exploratory investigation of the use of sandtray as an intervention within regular couples talk-therapy, and the experiences of three couples participating in the intervention. How sandtray was utilized within sessions is discussed as well as qualitative feedback from couples participating in the therapy over a 3-month period. Further research opportunities using sandtray with couples are also identified.

**Keywords:** *Sandtray, couples, relationships, communication, expressive therapy.*

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## 1. Introduction

Couples counseling can be a challenge, especially when there are engagement and communication barriers. It is common to have one or both partners nervous and reluctant to fully participate in the counseling process. By the time couples present for counseling, patterns of communication and metacommunication can be difficult to assess and process (Sweeney, 2002). Then counselors must seek out-of-the-box ways to assess relationship dynamics, and also to break through the couple's communication barriers. Experiential interventions, like sandtray therapy, that do not fully rely on verbal means of communication may offer one avenue counselors can take.

Sandtray therapy is an experiential, client-centered, psychodynamic method developed by Dora Kalff; and is rooted in Margaret Lowenfeld's world technique, Jung's analytical psychology, and Eastern contemplative practices (Kalff, 2020/1966). The core of sandtray therapy is that it makes the client's unconscious material accessible and provides a nonverbal and symbolic expression of a client's inner world (Kalff, 2007). Research in the past twenty years has primarily focused on outcomes of using sandtray in different settings and analysis of content. Few studies were found that focused on client experience. Those include exploring the experiences of individual clients including adolescents (Freedle et al., 2015), emerging adults (Freedle et al., 2020), and adults (Stanescu, 2021). Research focused on the experience of couples who had participated in sandtray is minimal. In a case study by Domenico and Schubach (2002) the use of sandtray in a couple's session transformed the ways in which the couple saw each other and the issues in their relationship. Carmichael, Echols, and Warren (1997) described using sandtray as a successful intervention in one session with a couple experiencing communication barriers and inability to negotiate issues.

Fishbane (2013) discussed encouraging couples to see multiple realities which can be challenging if confined to a cognitive, verbal level. Yet, the inability to see each other's realities, or point of view, is often the crux of couples therapy. Sandtray provides couples (in either individual or conjoint trays) a non-verbal way to express a visual depiction of their world or reality. This also gives the counselor an opportunity to assess the dynamics of the relationship, especially when verbal means of

expression has been a barrier. Additionally, and even more importantly, it gives the couples a novel way of viewing their relationship and communication dynamics. Since both partners are creating at the same time, this also gives an additional benefit of putting the focus on both partners instead of only one.

## **2. How Sandtray was used in session**

The couples in this exploratory study had all reached an impasse regarding their progress in counseling. Each couple had engaged in at least six consecutive weekly sessions where talk-therapy strategies had been applied. Although the couples did show improvement in practicing basic listening and communication skills, when it came to discussing conflicts which had initially brought them into therapy, they resorted to arguing and ineffective engagement patterns. Homeyer and Sweeney (2017) proposed guidelines for utilizing sandtray with couples which were followed in the sessions where this intervention was utilized. The focus during the initial stage of sandtray with the three couples was on intrapersonal and interpersonal discovery. Setting the tone for discovery, as opposed to direct conflict resolution, created a safer environment to pave the way for future work in communication and couples' issues.

The sandtray process was introduced to the couples as a novel way to create and share their personal worlds by choosing any miniatures they liked to place in the sand however they liked. Although there was some initial discomfort due to "feeling silly" as one participant stated, couples' overall response welcomed the intervention. Once begun, each couple showed a great deal of care when choosing their miniatures and placing them in the sand. Directions from the therapist can be either nondirected or directed, and partners can use conjoint or individual trays (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017). Each partner in this study initially used an individual tray in order to decrease any anxiety or conflict that collaborating on a conjoint tray may have caused. This served to allow each partner to be fully in control of their world picture. It is common for one or both partners to feel unheard in the relationship. Individual trays provide partners the opportunity to openly express their pain, fears, and hopes through the creation of the tray (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2017).

To begin, each couple received the prompt to, "Create a picture of what your relationship was like when you first began, and a picture of how your relationship is now." There was no time limit imposed and talking was discouraged during the creation of their worlds. After the trays were completed, partners were invited to share the story of their world. The partner not actively sharing was encouraged to engage in active listening (a skill each had practiced in the previous weeks) and interruptions were not allowed. After each partner shared their world, the listening partner and the counselor were free to ask questions about the picture and story. Some partner's explanations of their world required no additional clarification, while others called for gentle open-ended questions or reflections to elicit further information. This was especially true when one or both partners had trouble expressing themselves verbally.

Eliciting further information also served to ease the sharer into the process of telling their story and modeled for the listener how to ask respectful questions about their partner's world. For example, "I see this figure is turned away. What could these figures be talking about? I see this figure buried deep in the sand. Is this figure leaning slightly towards the other? What might this gate or wall signify?" It was important, when eliciting further information, to not jump to conclusions or assumptions. After each partner had shared, it was also important for each to reflect on the process of sharing. This was prompted with the question, "What was it like for you to create your world and share it with us?" At the end of each sandtray session, a photo was taken of each tray. That way, if something further needed to be processed at the next session, the photo could be referred back to. The photos also served as a visual depiction of the journey and progress made through the experience.

The next sandtray created by each couple was prompted by asking them to create their picture for what they want their relationship to be going forward. These creations in particular served the purpose of instilling hope in the couple's successful future together. When the couple demonstrated movement towards more effective communication through discussing their own sandtray, they were given the direction to create a world using a conjoint tray. The prompt given was simply to construct a scene from the past week. The couple was then asked to jointly tell the story depicted in their tray. Again, the counselor asked clarifying questions and statements as needed to elicit further information. This was followed by processing how the joint creation and explanation felt for them as a couple. It was important to give each partner a chance to share equally. Other prompts given as sessions progressed included, "How would you like to be shown care/love from your partner? What are the hurdles that need to be overcome for the relationship to be happier? What is a great memory from the past?" It was evident as sessions progressed that each couple was experiencing increased skill in effective communication evidenced by their cooperative creations in the sand, and their conjoint story telling capability as they took turns describing their scenes and adding to their stories.

### 3. Methods

Research is limited on the viability of using sandtray as an intervention within regular talk-therapy sessions with couples, particularly on the experiences of participating couples. This interest was summarized into two research questions: What were couples' experiences with sandtray as part of their counseling sessions? Is sandtray a viable option as an intervention used during regular talk-therapy with couples?

This study was exploratory in nature, investigating using sandtray as an intervention during regular talk-therapy. Convenience sampling was used as all participants had previously participated in couples counseling with the investigator over a 5-month period. All couples identified as Caucasian, between the ages of 30-45, and completing some college or trade-school to advanced academic degrees. The sand-tray intervention was employed with each couple over a 3-month period between 5-7 times.

The phenomenological analysis used to explore the couples experience was derived from the guidelines of Moustakas (1994) and involved (a) audio recorded and transcribed interviews, (b) reading transcripts to gain a sense of the whole, (c) extracting significant statements, (d) eliminating irrelevant repetition, (e) identifying central themes, and (f) integrating meanings into a single description of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted approximately 6-months after sessions had terminated. It was explained to each couple that the purpose of the interview was to share their experience participating in sandtray and the impact, if any, on their relationship. Follow-up questions were asked to obtain more detail and to provide clarity, such as, "Tell me more about that?" or "Is there anything else you would like to say about that?" For each question, the interviewer sought responses from both partners to allow both parties to be heard. If only one partner responded to a question, the interviewer would ask for the other's input. The investigator also clarified non-verbal cues, such as, "You are nodding, could you say more about your thoughts?" or "You appeared to react when your partner said this, could you say more about what you are thinking?"

For the three participating couples, five distinct themes emerged in their responses: increased effective communication, new creative problem-solving, increased hope and engagement in the relationship, relief of tension, and increased emotional attunement.

### 4. Themes

*Increased effective communication:* Each couple demonstrated enthusiastic agreement that their communication was improved. This was shown by non-verbal body language such as head-nodding while the other partner was speaking on the subject, smiles, and physical leaning towards each other while discussing their increase in successful communication.

"We communicate much easier now because I think it increased our empathy for what each other is trying to say, instead of jumping to conclusions. We also ask questions differently now, like how we did when explaining our worlds in the sand; in a more non-judgmental way."

"We take the time to intentionally listen to each other which is something I think we definitely lacked before. I think we made a lot of assumptions and reactions before, instead of taking time to really listen and step into the other's worlds."

"We actually talk more often than we did before, and I think that using the sand really made a big impact on that. I don't know if we would have ever stopped to listen to each other; but when you see it visually it just makes a difference. It also made it easier for me to communicate how I was feeling and what I wanted because I don't always have the words which was frustrating. Now we also check in with each other which is brand new for us."

*New creative problem-solving:* Each couple discussed creative ways in which they communicate post-intervention that they believed would not have been discovered if they had not participated in sandtray. One couple even commented that they were gathering their own sandtray materials "in case they get stuck again".

"I know we are not experts at doing this, but we have been gathering small items to use in our own sand tray of sorts; something to help us when we are stuck with verbally communicating."

Another couple commented on exploring even more unique ways to foster communication in their relationship.

“Since this (using sand tray) went so well for us, we are interested to explore what other experiential techniques might be useful in our relationship as well.”

One couple spoke about their ongoing use of words and phrases from the sandtray sessions.

“We find ourselves using the words or metaphors that we used when describing our sand trays in session, like- I am feeling like my words are getting buried in the sand again. This seems to really help us understand each other in that moment and get on the same page again.”

*Increased hope and engagement in the relationship:* Hope for the future and continued engagement with each other was apparent in each couple’s description of their current life together. One couple, who during the intervention buried a pair of lips in the sand depicting their suffocated voices, discussed finding their voices again.

“It made me realize that I do have thoughts, and that verbalizing them was just a barrier for me in sharing them. So, this helped me to get engaged again rather than giving up on sharing my thoughts.”

Couples shared their renewed hope that even in the tough times, they can keep communicating; something they reported that they had given up on before.

“It gave us hope that we can communicate, and that we can keep getting even better at it. I think we needed the door unstuck by engaging in something non-verbal, talking in a different way, so that we could be receptive to learning how to communicate effectively again.”

“It definitely made us feel more motivated to make changes for the better in our relationship. We were so stuck and really needed to feel a success, and that we were on the same page again. Even though we might have hesitated about using the sandtray at first, I really think it broke down a wall for us. We don’t want to lose that again.”

*Relief of tension:* All couples discussed the relief they felt after successfully participating in the intervention and the breakthrough experienced when having their stories genuinely heard. This relief was also evident in couples’ body language as several partners audibly sighed and relaxed their bodies when discussing.

“I am so so relieved that there was a different way to share and work through things that were difficult to talk about. The tension that had built up between us was nearly unbearable. A huge weight has been lifted off of this relationship.”

“I think we were both pretty nervous coming into counseling because you’re taught growing up to handle things within the family. I know I was nervous about how to even begin talking about things or sharing feelings- like that it would feel awkward. And I won’t lie, when sand tray was introduced, I was pretty hesitant because it might have felt silly. But it turned out to be a pretty amazing tool that broke through the barriers when I am not sure just talking would have gotten to where we needed to go. Just talking does not seem like it would have worked as effectively anyway. There was too much tension already built up.”

“The fighting had just gotten to a point where we could not really talk about anything anymore. There was so much resentment and negative energy. It was like we could breathe again when we could finally get talking; like a huge sigh of relief that opened those doors between us again. This really happened for me when I saw him (husband) really listening to me explain my world after creating the tray.”

*Increased emotional attunement:* All couples alluded to diminishing closeness and compassion with their partners due to built up hostility and negative feelings. Couples reported a lack of being understood and emotional connection prior to therapy. Gottman defines emotional attunement as the desire and the ability to understand and respect your partner's inner world (Gottman, 2011). When couples discussed how their initial feelings changed as a result of the sandtray intervention, all partners demonstrated increased connection and renewed interest in their partners. They leaned towards each other, touched their partners affectionately, and two couples paused to share a kiss. One couple got tearful when discussing the new perspective they now share.

“It is like I can see him more clearly now. It helped me get a new perspective on what he is thinking and feeling. I don’t think I really even believed that he put any time into considering us at all in the past. After him explaining his sand tray- his vision of our relationship now and what he would like it to be- I have a totally different viewpoint.”

“Having to stop and visually see a representation of what your partner feels is so much more impactful than just hearing the words, I think. It really made me understand where she is coming from in a whole different way. I see her now. I don’t know if we would have gotten there using just words since words weren’t getting us too far up until that point.”

“Somehow playing in the sand, and communicating that way, helped us connect with each other’s inner child if you will. And that helped us see each other in a new way and filled with more tenderness and love; like falling in love again- remembering.”

## 5. Discussion

Regular talk-therapy is not always the most effective option when couples are stuck in ineffective communication patterns. Counselors working with couples must seek creative methods to engage couples in therapy. Breaking through communication barriers and helping couples enter the reality of their partners is a crucial element of successful outcomes. This exploratory study demonstrates that sandtray therapy may be a creative and viable intervention counselors can employ to meet this need. The limitations of this study should be considered. Qualitative analysis lends itself to subjective interpretation by the interviewer. This subjectivity is enhanced when there is only one interviewer without the benefit of the checks and balances made possible by more interviewers. This study also had a small number of participants, three couples, so results cannot be generalized to the larger population. The interviewer also worked directly with the couples in counseling, so there may have been a desire to please the interviewer with answers confirming the helpfulness of the sandtray intervention. However, as this is an initial exploration of the couples’ experience with this intervention these limitations do not weigh as heavily as with a larger scale, more formalized investigation. It appears clear that sandtray is a viable and promising option to use in couples counseling, especially where one or both members are stuck in their communication styles or when there is a lack of verbal comfort and/or ability. Therefore, larger scale investigations into using sand tray with diverse populations would be beneficial to the field going forward. It would also be beneficial to use quantitative measures to explore the impact on communication, intimacy, hopefulness, cohesion, cooperation, etc. Also, of interest would be interviewing participants at various points in time after therapy concludes to determine the effectiveness of the intervention long-term.

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