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Deroling Activities

Drama therapists learn the importance of helping clients derole after improvisations, role-plays, or rehearsals as a matter of course in their training in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016; Cossa, 2006; Emunah, 1995; Holmwood & Stavrou, 2012; Jones, 2007; Rule, 1973; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). Taking home the persona of a role, played out in a therapy session, with its intense emotions can leave a client confused as to where their boundaries end and the role begins. Even if the role is one within the client's current role repertoire (as in the case of playing themselves or some aspect of themselves), getting "stuck" in a role means not being able to let go of that particular set of behaviors and access other roles or parts of the self that might be needed for responding to a new situation. A client stuck in anger, distrust, frustration, or defensiveness can act out negatively or project those residual feelings onto others, even if those feelings have no connection to the new, unrelated situation.

Deroling activities can focus on physical, cognitive, and/or emotional release, depending on how much the participant has taken on a role and the type of role they have been playing. When the connection between participant and role is underdistanced, the participant may need deroling assistance from the therapist. For instance, if a participant often gets stuck in anger in real life and they have just finished playing an angry warrior, they may need directed deroling because this is a familiar feeling. The drama therapist can help the participant create more distance between themselves and the role by using physical, emotional, and cognitive means to dislodge the character. The plus here is that the drama therapist can then point out to the participant that they can use this technique to let go of real anger at times when they get dysregulated.

The drama therapist can determine which technique or combination of techniques is used based on the needs of the participant in that moment. To that purpose, the types of deroling techniques presented in this document will be delineated by whether they are only physical, emotional, cognitive, or a combination.

Most participants require a physical component when deroling in order to shift out of a role. There is evidence established by Susana Bloch (Bloch & Angelin, 2017) through her research on emotion that our body position and facial expression, muscular tension, and breathing all contribute to creating the emotions we feel. This might mean something as simple as “shaking off the role” or as complex as a “step-out” (both described later).

An emotional technique allows the participants to identify the emotional differences between themselves and the role. A cognitive technique would involve using a costume or props as a metaphor for the character. The participant would give the representation of their character to the therapist, director, or put it into a container, then step or turn away imagining the role being left behind. Entrusting the accouterments of the role to a trusted someone shows respect for the role and what it has taught the participant, as well as leaving it in a safe, separate place.

Sometimes in the participant’s mind, the costume does not represent the totality of the role. By putting on the costume, the role seeps into the participant during the scene. In this case, just taking the costume off at the end does not distance the participant from the role. All of the role must be discarded. This requires the addition of physical and emotional aspects to deroling.

Box Breathing*

Type: Physical

Description:

Breathe into a count of 4 seconds, hold breath for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds, hold before breathing in for 4 seconds.

Adaptation:

If you have participants who have difficulty with abstract thinking, have them physically draw the box in front of them with their index finger. If they are not breathing at the same pace as others, they can watch and follow the leader.

***Warning:** If a participant has anxiety and/or sinus tachycardia, do not use this technique. Holding your breath can increase the heart rate.

Breathing in You/Breathing Out the Character

Type: Physical and Cognitive

Description:

Participants imagine their thoughts and feelings as they breathe in and imagine the thoughts and feelings of the character as they breathe out.

Breathing by the Numbers*

Type: Physical

Description:

Breathing by the numbers is similar to “box breathing”, except without the holding of the breath after the exhale. Also breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Pick one of the counts below:

- Breathe in for four counts – hold for seven counts – breathe out for eight counts
- Breathe in for five counts – hold for five counts – breathe out for seven counts
- Breathe in for four counts – hold for two counts – breathe out for four counts.

***Warning:** If a participant has anxiety and/or sinus tachycardia, do not use this technique. Holding your breath can increase the heart rate.

Breathing: Lion

Type: Physical

Description:

Kneel on the floor and sit back on heels with hands on knees. Breathe in through the nose. On the exhale, open your eyes as wide as possible, stick out the tongue, lean forward, and say “HA!” Hold for a complete exhale.

This can also be performed cross-legged, in a half-lotus, in a thunderbolt, in hero’s pose, or even in a chair.

Another option is to stand in a neutral stance and on the out breath raise arms into a “star” position.

Car Wash

AKA Character Washing Machine

Type: Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive

Description:

Group members line up facing each other in two lines to create the walls of the character washing machine and engage in “cleaning” actions and sounds like those found in a car wash. Each participant takes a turn going through the machine to have their character washed off. Entering the machine, the participant is in character, and by the time they leave the machine, the character is gone. As participants leave the machine and return to themselves, they can substitute for different people in the machine so all can go through and get their character “washed off.”

Seeing Your Role as a Friend

Type: Emotional and Cognitive

Description:

If the participants are creating characters for a play, ask them to begin seeing their character as a friend they are getting to know. Have them go carefully through the character's history and slowly begin to develop a relationship – finding out what parts of the character are similar to and what parts are different from themselves. By the time they are ready for performance, tell the participants that they get to embody their character for a couple of hours and then they will go back to being themselves. They will know their character is there and is their friend, but it is not coming home with them, and they are not adopting it in their soul. To get into character each night, have them consciously put on their character's makeup, costume, and wig, reminding themselves that they are taking on the embodiment of their friend to allow their friend to experience life for several hours on the stage. Then after the show, the process reverses. When the performance ends, they have to take off their character and take the time to consciously and methodically transform back into themselves. They can literally say “Goodbye” to their character until the next performance (A. Urban, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

Dancing Off the Role

Type: Physical and Emotional

Description:

At the end of a scene that is very intense or at the end of a rehearsal, the drama therapist can put on some fun dance music that has a different emotion than the scene or the play. Everyone dances to the music and allows their mood to change and their character to leave them.

Drawing within Circles

Type: Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive

Description:

Give each participant a piece of white paper with a large, empty circle drawn on it. Provide colored markers so they can draw within the circle any pictures or designs that express their feelings at the moment or the feelings that their character expressed in the session. This type of artwork is very useful for nonverbally processing and expressing unconscious feelings. Drawing one after an intense scene or rehearsal allows those feelings to be brought up from the unconscious and to be consciously expressed and released. The participants should leave their

drawings in the therapy/rehearsal space and not take them home (S. Garretson, personal communication, February 1, 2007).

❖ **Helpful Hint:** If you have participants who are very attached to their artwork it may be better not to use this as a deroling technique as the therapist wants the participants to separate themselves from the role.

Variation: Draw 2

Draw one circle to express the feelings of the role/character to release them from the body and mind. Draw a second one to get back in touch with the self.

Dress Shop

Type: Physical and/or Emotional and/or Cognitive (depending on how directions are given)

Description:

After a rehearsal or a scene in class, the therapist talks about the figurative costume of the character and has everyone literally pantomime taking it off. In this way, the participants shift from the character's space to their own personal space. The "taking off" process should be specific and individualized to the role the participant has taken on.

Variation: In Vivo Dress Shop

If actors are wearing costumes, have them mindfully take off every aspect of their costume as they shift from the character's space to their personal space. For example, if the participant was playing a very, very angry character and everything about the role was tightened (i.e., hair pulled back into a very tight bun, clothing very tight), the participant might take their hair down and brush it out to its fullest – not just taking the bun out and dropping their hair, but literally taking a big large brush, flipping their hair upside down, and brushing it out so it is completely free and full of air. The clothes they change into after the rehearsal or performance could be really baggy and loose, so there is no way the participant could take any part of the character home with them.

Five-Four-Three-Two-One (Mindful Version) AKA Grounding

Type: Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive

Description:

Participants find a comfortable position and begin by focusing on their breathing. Find five things they can see, four things they can hear, three things they can touch, two things they can smell, and one thing they can taste. Allow enough time

for them to really get in touch with each thing and their senses. Then tell them to focus again on their breath before ending.

Five-Four-Three-Two-One (Shake Version)

Type: Physical

Description:

Shake the right arm five times, then the left arm five times, then the right leg five times, and the left leg five times. Repeat the sequence with four shakes, three shakes, two shakes, and one shake.

I Am Statements to Reclaim Your Identity

Type: Emotional and Cognitive

Description:

Participants can reclaim their name at the end of an intervention, rehearsal, or at the end of a show. For instance, they can say, “I am no longer [*name of the character*]. I am [*their personal name*]!” To make it more effective the participants can throw the character off while saying, “I am taking off [*name of the character*] and leaving them here! I am now back to being myself! I am [*their personal name*]!”

Variation: Have the participants think of a number of ways they are different from the character they are playing. For instance, “The character is an alcoholic – I only drink on special occasions. The character is very dependent on other people – I am independent and do things on my own! The character is passive, and I am dynamic!”

Variation: To add movement and differentiate space, participants stand in a circle and one by one take turns deroling. When the participant is speaking about the character, they turn toward the inside of the circle. When the participant is speaking about themselves, they turn toward the outside of the circle. At the end of the ritual, all of the participants can say “Goodbye [*name of the character*],” turn toward the outside of the circle, and stride away with energy. The therapist can end the ritual by saying, “Good night, actors! See you tomorrow!”

Identifying Emotional Differences between Self and Role

Type: Emotional and Cognitive

Description:

Tell the participants to think of three things their character feels about the situation in the scene or play. Then have them think about how they personally would

react differently to the same situation. If the character is similar to them, ask them to identify emotions and aspects of their character that highlight the difference between them and the character.

Narrated Clean-Up

Type: Physical and Cognitive

Description:

As the participants are cleaning up (putting props and costumes away, moving chairs around, etc.) after a scene or at the end of a session, tell them to speak out loud about what they are doing as they are doing it. The narration can include reminders to the self that this item does not carry the emotional quality it had during the scene. This provides distance when the items they are cleaning up have a lot of emotional investment in them, because it reminds them that these items are neutral tools, not connected to the scene. For instance, “This pen does not carry the hatred in it that the character had when writing the angry letter.”

Rag Doll Stretching

Type: Physical

Description:

Start with participants raising their arms over their heads and allowing their body to flop over from each joint as if the part moving down is heavy. Finally flop over from the waist and allow the top of the body to gently dangle. Imagine that the character is being gently shaken out of the body. Participants can also stretch out to each side and allow themselves to dangle while imagining that the emotions are leaving their bodies.

Rituals: Beginning and Ending

Type: Physical and/or Emotional and/or Cognitive

Description:

There are several common rituals that drama therapists use to begin and end groups. One example is the “magic curtain/box.” At the beginning of a group, everyone stands in a circle and together says, “Bring down (or hum down) the drama therapy curtain (or box),” as they reach up toward the ceiling and pull an imaginary curtain (box) down to the floor. Then everyone steps inside the imaginary curtain to enter the play space. If a box is pulled down, everyone reaches into the box and pulls out an imaginary costume or imaginary prop. At the end of the group, everyone stands in a circle again and says in unison, “Pull up (hum

up) the drama therapy curtain,” as they pantomime pulling the drawstrings of a curtain. If using a magic box, the group pantomimes putting their costumes and props into the box and then pushing the box up into the ceiling. They are putting their roles and imaginations away until the next time.

◆Note: It is very easy to remove “therapy” from the statement and just say, “Bring down the drama curtain (or the curtain of imagination)” and “Pull up the drama box (or the box of imagination).” This creates a very clear demarcation between being involved in the real world and being in the world of dramatic imagination.

Variation: At the beginning of the group (or intervention) participants can put anything into the magic box that they would like to leave outside of the play space. At the end of the group (or intervention) they can take out something they have learned or would like to take with them outside of the play space.

Saying Goodbye to the Role in the Mirror While Taking Off Makeup

Type: Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive

Description:

This activity can be done while actually taking off makeup after a performance or it can be done as a metaphorical pantomime. The participant looks in the mirror and as they take off each part of their makeup – eyelashes, eyebrows, lipstick, base makeup, etc. – consciously think about wiping the character away. If it is actual makeup and they wear makeup themselves, continue the ritual as they put their everyday makeup back on while consciously thinking about re-embodiment themselves.

Shaking Off the Role

Type: Physical

Description:

At the end of the scene, remind the participants to shake off the role/character that they have just played. Ask them to imagine the role is leaving their body and being shaken out on the floor in front of where they are standing or being thrown into the middle of the circle.

Variation: **Shaking Off the Role with Vocalization.**

Type: Physical, Emotional

Shake off the role while vocalizing with an open sound. This loosens the muscles, changes the posture, and physically makes a break from the physicality of the

character. Once the muscles change – especially if they loosen and relax – the emotions will automatically change.

Shifting Spaces

Type: Physical and Cognitive

Description:

It is important to make sure the performance space is always separated from the audience space physically and figuratively. If the group is rehearsing in a theatre, when the participants are in character, they are onstage, but when the therapist wants to give notes, or have a discussion, the participants need to go back to themselves sitting in the audience area or going into another room. This makes the stage space the only place where the participants are in character. When the participants are on stage, the therapist can address them by the character's name, but when the participants are off stage, the therapist should use the participants' names. Be clear when discussing work to refer to the character's emotions and motivations as belonging to the character, not the participant. It can be easy to blur the two as the participants are using their own bodies and emotions to bring the character to life. This creates a clear separation for the participants between "being in character" and "being me." When the group is in a room, the therapist needs to keep the performance space and audience space separate as well.

❖ Helpful Hint: For young children, tape can be put down on the floor to designate the acting area. Have them practice crossing the line. On one side you are yourself; on the other side you are your character.

❖ Helpful Hint: If participants are struggling with dividing the space when there is no clear delineation in the room, the therapist can ask, "Are you in the character's space or are you in your personal space?" or "Are you in the stage space or are you in the audience space?" or "Are you in the onstage space or the offstage space?"

Showering Off the Role

Type: Physical, Emotional, and Cognitive

Description:

Participants pretend they are in a hot shower and "wash off" the role in pantomime: washing their hair, scrubbing their skin, and imagining the feeling of the warm water. They can imagine that the soap and water are taking the character and emotions off their body and carrying them down the drain. If participants are in a play and there are actual showers in the dressing room, they can use the same conscious images as they are taking a shower.

Singing Off a Role

Type: Physical and Emotional

Description:

Gather all the participants together and sing a song with a mood different from that of the scene and emotions that just finished. It could be a happy song, a spiritual song, or a song with harmonies that bring the group together and allow them to release emotions.

Spraying Off the Role with an Imaginary Hose*

Type: Physical, Cognitive

Description:

The therapist either pantomimes a big fire hose or uses a prop like a pool noodle to represent the hose and “sprays” the role off of the participants. They react as if they are being hit with a spray of water while imagining that the emotions of the role are being washed away.

❖ Helpful Hint: If a participant is having a difficult time “taking off” the role, the therapist can mirror the participant, taking the character’s physical posture, and then start to change it until the character is completely gone. The participant can then mirror this change process.

***Warning:** This technique is not appropriate to use with marginalized individuals given the violent history of using fire hoses by police as a method of control.

Step-Out (Bloch & Angelin, 2017)

Type: Physical

Description:

The Step-Out consists of a series of slow, deep breaths synchronized with sweeping arm motions that are begun from a forward bend position with arms above the head, hands clasped, to above and behind the head, and then forward again. Participants breathe in as they stand and bend backward, then breathe out as they bend forward. This takes participants back to a neutral emotional and physical state. A visual of this technique can be found on YouTube.

Symbolic Props and Costumes (Cossa, 2006)

Type: Cognitive

Description:

Choose a prop or costume piece that has a strong emotional attachment to the character as a surrogate and endow it with the role *for* the participant. For example,

the participant could hold a scarf used in the play and say, “I leave the role of Antigone with this scarf.” Then they would hand the scarf to the therapist/director, who takes it away from the group and shakes the role out. This ritual deroles the participant and the object at the same time.

Taking Off the Role*

Type: Physical and Cognitive

Description:

Participants imagine there is a giant zipper from the top of their head to the bottom of their toes. They unzip the character, and step out of it. Be sure to kick the character’s body away – or carefully fold it up and put it away in an imaginary box.

❖ Helpful Hint: Do not put the character’s imaginary body into a pocket. Leave it in the theater or classroom space. This is where it is supposed to be until it is brought to life in the next intervention, rehearsal, or performance.

Variation: Participants can pantomime peeling the character off each other. The helpers can make this peeling action as simple or difficult as they want, depending on how much they sense the participant needs in order to feel deroled and released from the character.

***Warning:** If any participant has a trauma history or boundary issues, this activity would not be appropriate.

Wipe Off the Role with a Scarf*

Type: Physical and Cognitive

Description:

With a big scarf, one participant can “wipe the character” off another participant as if they were drying them off. The participant being wiped imagines all the emotions and thoughts of the character going away with each stroke of the scarf.

***Warning:** If any participant has a trauma history or boundary issues, this activity would not be appropriate.

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