

What is Psychodrama?

Notes on The Acting Cure

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The original form of group [psychotherapy](#) is psychodrama. [Jacob Levy Moreno](#), the man who developed psychodrama, also coined the phrases "group therapy" and "group psychotherapy." At its core psychodrama uses deep action methods to explore and correct issues that have been identified in the group. Often there a protagonist is chosen who's issue represents the main elements of the group. The protagonist brings forward their drama and the members of the group are brought in as auxiliaries to aid the dramatic enactment of the scene(s) brought forward by the protagonist.

As an example, supposing a person came into group and complained about how stressful the holiday meal was, and that as the extended family sat around the table various arguments and disagreements broke out. This triggered a [memory](#) of how holiday meals went in the past when she was a child: her [parents](#) always bickering, and her siblings fighting. The resulting distress in the current situation was enough to bring the issue into group.

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If there is sufficient support in the group for the protagonist to work it is likely that the current scene would be enacted as it happened, with an emphasis on the feelings evoked for the protagonist. Members of the group would be chosen to play the different roles, including people assigned to express the different feelings that had come up. Then the original dinner scene would be reenacted and those feelings examined and expressed. At that point the protagonist usually becomes aware that there was an unexpressed feeling in the original scene (when she was a child) and that scene gets reenacted and the feelings expressed through the role-playing.

Finally, the current scene is done again with alternate endings. Typically these endings would empower the protagonist or correct the scene in some way.

My fellow psychodramatists would probably cringe at the over simplification of this explanation, and they would (rightly) point out that the core element of psychodrama is the fact that dramas unfold in unpredictable ways, and something suggesting psychodrama is formulaic isn't a idealistic description. While this is true, it is also true that dramas unfold in ways that have patterns of recurrence. One major pattern is that previous events create scene memories that influence us. That is why the current issues frequently have their inception during childhood.

Psychodrama is an experiential form of therapy that allows for correction through the re-experiencing and then dynamic improvement through expression and role rehearsal. You can learn more about psychodrama

WHAT IS PSYCHODRAMA?

Developed by Psychiatrist Dr. J. L. Moreno (1889-1974) from the 1920s onwards, psychodrama was the first recognised method of group psychotherapy and is practised in more than 100 countries. Psychodrama is fully accredited as a psychotherapy by the United

Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). It has an extensive literature of more than 6,000 publications, plus many national and regional journals and associations around the world and has contributed ideas and techniques used in many other forms of psychotherapy. (See www.pdbib.org for a comprehensive international bibliography of psychodrama).

Psychodrama is a holistic, strengths-based method of psychotherapy in which people are helped to enact and explore situations from their own life - past, present and future. The scenes enacted may be based on specific events in a person's life, their current or past relationships, unresolved situations, desired roles or inner thoughts and conflicts. The method is typically used in group settings, with group members taking on the various roles in the drama as needed. Witnessing and participating in each other's personal stories can generate feelings of deep understanding and trust amongst group members. In its so-called 'classical' form, a psychodrama will often begin with a current problem or difficulty and trace it back to earlier life situations. Here, the participant may have the chance to experience what was missing but needed at that time. The enactment then returns to the present, where new learning can be integrated and put into practice.

Each psychodrama addresses the concerns of the person who is in focus. The range of issues may be wide. The person who shares their work is chosen sociometrically by the group, highlighting the group concern. Hence all members of the group also share in the work in a personal way.

Psychodrama can, for example, help people to better understand themselves and their history, resolve loss and trauma, overcome fears, improve their intimate and social relationships, express and integrate blocked thoughts and emotions, practise new skills or prepare for the future.

Psychodrama allows for the safe expression of strong feelings and, for those who need it, the practice of containing emotions. As participants move from 'talking about' into action, opportunities arise to heal the past, clarify the present and imagine the future. Psychodrama can offer a wider perspective on individual and social problems and an opportunity to try out new behaviours. Each psychodrama includes:

- a. The protagonist: The person whose story or issue is presented through guided dramatic action.
- b. The auxiliary egos: Group members who assume

the roles of significant others in the drama. This may include significant people, objects or even aspects of the self or a person's internal world, e.g. 'my optimistic self' or 'my internal critic.'

c. The audience: Group members who witness the drama and whom may become involved in auxiliary roles.

d. The stage: The physical space in which the drama is conducted.

e. The director: The trained psychodramatist who guides participants through each phase of the session.

Some of the core techniques in psychodrama include role reversal, role taking and role play, the double, the mirror technique, surplus reality, the empty chair, scene-setting and enactment.

Psychodrama, developed by [Jacob L. Moreno](#), strives to explore a client's individual issues through the use of dramatic activities. By implementing group dynamics, role playing, and various other experiential techniques, this form of therapy offers a client the ability to gain a better perspective on their inner emotional experiences and conflicts. Psychodrama helps a client develop emotional and physical well-being and builds and strengthens the cognitive, behavioral and affective skills through active movement. This type of therapy can be applied in group or individual settings and focuses on helping a client achieve maximum personal enlightenment and healing.

- [Goals and Purpose of Psychodrama](#)
- [What is Psychodrama Therapy Like?](#)
- [Resources Related to Psychodrama](#)

Goals and Purpose of Psychodrama

The primary goal of psychodrama is to increase the impulsivity of our own emotions in a highly organized, yet creative and productive manner. It is intended to give an open forum for the discovery and exploration of internal and external conflicts and dysfunctions through dramatic play. Most sessions will last for up to two hours and revolve around the primary character, the protagonist. By engaging other characters, the protagonist can learn a great deal about their own interpersonal skills and formulate the proper techniques to construct positive and effective behavioral changes. This method of therapy challenges the client, and all of the characters involved, in a new and exciting way that expands their boundaries of experience.

What is Psychodrama Therapy Like?

In this form of therapy, clients will often play out multiple scenarios that depict specific life events, fantasies, dreams, or mental states. These dramatic presentations represent a client's perception of a situation or are creations of their emotional processing mechanism. The therapist may encourage the client to take on other roles or assign identities to objects to expand the scene. Psychodrama is a very effective tool when applied in a group setting. When psychodrama is conducted in front of an audience, the participation is sensory and reactive. The protagonist may even invite the audience to participate further through verbal or physical actions, therefore creating a larger field through which the therapeutic process can exist.

Conceived and developed by Jacob L. Moreno, MD, Psychodrama employs guided dramatic action to examine problems or issues raised by an individual. Using experiential methods, sociometry, role theory, and group dynamics, Psychodrama facilitates insight, personal growth, and integration on cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels. It clarifies issues, increases physical and emotional well being, enhances learning and develops new skills.

The word 'Psychodrama' is often used as a generic term when talking about the range of action methods that J L Moreno developed.

Action Methods are used to enable past, present and future life events to be explored. Issues or problems and their possible solutions are enacted rather than just talked about. Psychodrama offers the opportunity to practise new roles safely, see oneself from outside, gain insight and change. There is a director, an action area and group members. The director supports groups to explore new solutions to old problems, group members participate in the drama as significant others and share how they personally relate to and can learn from the presenting issue at the end of the session.

Whether we are seen as stereotypes or as individuals depends upon our language and perspective. The art of psychodrama includes the recognition of a person's private and metaphorical language and the use of multiple perspectives to elicit the subjective experiences of the protagonist, the director and the group members.



Psychodrama can be used in a group or individually for therapy and personal growth. It can also be applied to family and couples therapy.

Psychodrama is practised and taught extensively through the world.

Who is Psychodrama for?

Psychodrama is for everyone and anyone who would like to experience the spontaneity and 'magic' of working with action methods. Whether your focus is personal, professional, therapy or training, if you're interested in the creative exploration of yourself, your relationships and your life using action as well as words, then you might value and enjoy the psychodramatic method and the personal liberations, self expression and insights that it elicits.

In Psychiatry and Psychotherapy

The vast majority of conditions in psychiatry and therapy are accessible to psychodrama. Common examples are affective disorder (including drug resistant depression), phobias, post-traumatic stress, eating disorders, self harm, alcohol and substance abuse. Long term problems in life-styles or relationships, including marital and family stress, can be addressed through psychodrama whether or not they have resulted in mental illness.

Any person in therapeutic care may benefit from psychodrama, provided that there is an ability and willingness for presentation of self-shown by stepping onto the stage area.