

The Practitioners' Notebook / Bloc-notes des praticiens

Addressing Anger Using Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
Adressant la colère en utilisant la psychothérapie
sensorimoteur et la thérapie cognitivo-comportementale

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ABSTRACT

A young woman initiated counselling services at a community agency to address her explosive anger that was a remnant of childhood physical and emotional abuse. Sensorimotor Psychotherapy was used to help this client learn how to monitor and regulate her sensorimotor processes. In conjunction with this approach, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy was used to help this client process her traumatic experiences and reframe her core beliefs about herself as a victim. This client learned how to control her anger by tracking her physiological reactions in upsetting situations and implementing adaptive techniques to relax herself.

RÉSUMÉ

Une jeune femme a engagé des services de counseling chez une agence communautaire afin d'adresser sa colère explosive causée par l'abus physique et émotif subi pendant son enfance. La psychothérapie sensorimoteur a aidé la cliente à apprendre comment surveiller et contrôler ses processus sensorimoteurs. La thérapie cognitivo-comportementale a assisté cette cliente à traiter ses expériences traumatisantes et recadrer ses croyances de base de soi-même comme victime. La cliente a appris à contrôler sa colère en traçant ses réactions physiologiques dans des situations contrariantes et en exécutant des techniques adaptatives pour se calmer.

[Editor's Note: This contribution is published in the Practitioners' Notebook, a non-peer-reviewed section of the Canadian Journal of Counselling. Its intent is to provide practical information to readers. Client name(s) have been altered to protect confidentiality].

RELEVANT BACKGROUND HISTORY

Eva was a single 21-year-old African Canadian female who presented to counselling with the goal of controlling and reducing her explosive anger. Eva was a survivor of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her father. Eva experienced intense anger on a regular basis and would blow up at others (i.e., verbally or through a physical altercation) or destroy her property. This anger was typically directed toward her boyfriend, her mother, or others in her life. She was worried that she was becoming like her father.

PRESENTING ISSUE

Eva's presenting issue was explosive anger that was directed at close others.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES UTILIZED

The theoretical approaches used with this client were Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

INTERVENTIONS

At the outset, my intention with this client was to develop a healthy working alliance; our first few sessions were spent discussing Eva's developmental history and presenting concerns, as well as building trust with one another. I learned that this client had experienced extensive physical abuse and had an inability to modulate arousal (i.e., her anger), which is characteristic of many people experiencing a past trauma (Beck, 1999). This conceptualization informed my decision to explore Sensorimotor Psychotherapy in conjunction with CBT with Eva. There is evidence that a client's awareness and processing of sensorimotor reactions on the sensorimotor level will exert a positive influence on emotional and cognitive processing, and vice versa (Damasio, 1999).

The essential components of Sensorimotor Psychotherapy are (a) regulating affective and sensorimotor states through the therapeutic relationship, and (b) teaching the client to self-regulate by mindfully contacting, tracking, and articulating sensorimotor processes independently (Ogden & Minton, 2000). Typically, traumatized people, like Eva, have difficulty drawing on emotions as guides for action. Such emotions can lead to impulsive, conflicting, and irrational actions, such as lashing out physically or verbally, behaviour characteristic of Eva (Ogden & Minton, 2000).

I invited Eva to engage in sensorimotor processing by asking her to describe her traumatic experiences; she spoke of being kicked and beaten repeatedly, thrown down flights of stairs, physically restricted, and derided. As she spoke, I monitored Eva's arousal level, aiming to access sufficient traumatic material while avoiding hyper- or hypoarousal and risk dissociation. When Eva was optimally aroused, I asked her to temporarily disregard her feelings and thoughts and instead notice any physical sensations and movements in her body until these sensations settled. In doing so, I was regulating Eva's arousal level, while gradually allowing her to develop her own capacity to self-regulate (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006). Eva was learning how much information she could process at a given time and developing a greater capacity for self-regulation beyond her relationship with me (Ogden & Minton, 2000).

Eva returned to describing her abuse, and I asked her to stay mindful of her body sensations. I asked her, "Where do you feel the anger in your body? What is the anger telling you? What shape and color is your anger?" All the while, Eva was encouraged to allow her body to respond naturally and to track her sensations and

involuntary movements as they came (Ogden & Minton, 2000). During sensorimotor processing, Eva often described a hot feeling filling her body, beginning at her feet and progressing toward her head. I used this key sensation to transition into cognitive processing with Eva; we explored this sensation for meaning. Eva described this hot feeling as a warning that she was being disrespected. Through the CBT vertical descent technique (see Leahy, 2003), we discovered her core belief: "I should have stopped the abuse." We discussed this belief in terms of the alternative explanation that she was less powerful than her perpetrator and that she did all she could in the moment to protect herself (Leahy, 2003). Eva came to a more adaptive (and accurate) belief about her control in these situations, shifting the belief to "I did what I had to, to survive."

In subsequent sessions, I continued to use sensorimotor processing when physical sensations and movements occurred but also focused on processing some of Eva's negative automatic thoughts. The goal in engaging in cognitive processing with Eva was to challenge her inflexible maladaptive interpretations of the trauma and other life experiences. Negative, erroneous biases can often obscure traumatized individuals' interpretations of events (Ogden et al., 2006). Eva completed several detailed thought records (Leahy, 2003) to track her thoughts and emotions in upsetting situations in which she felt rage and anger. She was able to distinguish the underlying feelings in these situations (e.g., hurt, frustration) and decide what triggered her mood shift and how she felt threatened. In essence, she was able to pinpoint the events that trigger these negative automatic thoughts.

Eva and I also discussed techniques she could use in distressing situations such as relaxation techniques, experiencing the necessary rush of anger in a healthy way (i.e., punching a pillow and playing her guitar aggressively), as well as engaging in bilateral movement to calm the central nervous system. In combining Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and CBT, Eva learned to self-regulate her arousal and thus more accurately distinguish between cognitive and affective reactions (Ogden & Minton, 2000).

OUTCOMES

Following the intervention, Eva became better able to control her anger and she no longer felt at risk of harming someone or of continuing on a similar pathway as her father. She expressed great delight in having an array of techniques she could implement to control and then process her anger. Eva noted that she felt more in control of herself and was more in tune with her moods and what triggered a mood change.

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About the Author

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