



TRAUMA IN THE
FIELD?

OPTIONS TO SOOTHE, CALM AND CONTAIN
DURING A CONSTELLATION SESSION

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“Just as someone who suffers from depression tends to see the world as dangerous with a tendency to interpret a friendly act as unfriendly or neutral, I believe that our pain and suffering can also dull and diminish any beauty and love in our lives...it may be time to spend some time finding that beauty and love as well and acknowledge that as well and even grow it, one molecule at a time.” —

Rosalba Stocco

When I think I know a lot about trauma, I realize that I am also learning more every day — from my life, my clients, my trusted mentors, my colleagues, my ancestors.

Too often we want to jump into talking about trauma and then jumping in to heal it. Right now. As helpers, we may feel the urgency of “doing something” about it to help our clients.

Many times we act too early.

People may not be adequately resourced and strengthened so the talking, telling and seeing can be re-traumatizing, even with the best intentions.

From my perspective, we need to remember that the approach of systemic constellations has been born from a person, Bert Hellinger, who himself is a trauma survivor. Surviving the chaos of Nazi Germany, being drafted into the German army during World War II and becoming a prisoner of war -- these are great traumas, and there may be more in his ancestry that we don't know about.

Agreed, Hellinger is brilliant and intuitive and has synthesized a number of therapies and philosophies into a unique and wonderful approach — but it can be both. He can be both brilliant and wonderful — and a survivor of trauma.

I think it's important that we, as constellation facilitators and trainers, are having thoughtful conversations about trauma and safety. I hope that we have more so we can all share and learn, me included.

Here are some ways that I've learned to keep the space safe for survivors of trauma:

Use warm-up activities that allow people to get to know one another in good and connected ways. In the world of psychodrama, this is the branch called sociometry. There are literally thousands of sociometric warm ups and we can pick

from warm-ups, or create them, that build positive connection and strengths. This builds the container in such a way that people are connected, rather than isolated, and see each other as actual people, not as simple fodder for representation.

When people are seen as the humans they are, it's more easy to see them as stepping IN TO and OUT OF a representation and they too are more likely to feel themselves as multi-dimensional, also with the mobility that of stepping in and out.

They also may be more likely process an uncomfortable representation, or experience with another group member after a constellation session because they'll likely feel more ease in sharing with others.

I don't presume that the invited representative is accepting the representation task for healthy reasons. We may ask, "Do you want to take this representation?" And they may say "Yes" for lots of reasons that are trauma based – desire to please, difficulty saying no, feeling important and high status about being selected, lack of ability or awareness to care for personal needs and the like.

It may be good for the facilitator to say, "So and so has been picked so many times – let's give him a rest and chose a person who is your second choice." Or more generally, "Let's make sure we pick some people that haven't been selected lately."

Zerka Moreno, the co-developer of psychodrama, taught us "Moments of Joy," in which we identify an **authentic moment of joy** that took place at some time in our lives.

Then we find a way to dramatize it, concretize it, constellate it. I've adapted this structure for constellations sessions, where we place the pertinent people and/or objects in the field and then take a tour of the scene.

We look at it, we breathe with it, take it in. I also may



"In practical terms, Bert taught us: never allow the one who is showing signs of agitation to keep the eyes closed. That advice has never failed me." — **Max Dauskardt**



“After a trauma the psyche splits into the three entities, the original healthy part of ourselves, the split-off traumatized part of ourselves, and a new ‘self’, the survival self. The relationship between these different entities is complex and constantly changing depending on the circumstances in which we are at any time. It is never fixed, and we are never completely in one part... it is always a question of degrees, which is the dominant part at any one moment.” — Vivian Broughton

switch back and forth between constellation work and psychodrama in a single session, especially when it’s apparent that the constellation may be too much, too overwhelming for the person.

Heinz Stark taught us about tapping (bilateral stimulation) the client lightly on the shoulders (from the back) when the client is watching the scene and seeming to space out, dissociate, get distracted. I’ve found this helpful for the client to ground, focus and be present if the client gives permission to touch.

Barry Krost, a bodyworker who is also a constellation facilitator, taught me about touching a point on the upper center of the back, in between the shoulder blades, with the client as a calming intervention. I’ve used this also, again with the client’s permission to touch.

If the group is large, directing a well-grounded group member — or intern or assistant — to sit next to the client, as a physical support if the client is agitated or dissociating,

I have used the **Containing Double**, a psychodramatic intervention from Kate Hudgins’ Therapeutic Spiral Model. This three-part intervention involves speaking in a structured way to stabilize the client. The Containing Double is a good option when the client does not want to be touched.

When laughter comes up, I go with it. Sometimes we too often consider laughter as defensive or distracting from the “painful” stuff. In my view, laughter can be a great release and positive to laugh together as a connected group. One of my trainers once told me long ago that “silliness” was one of my best traits, so I will use it when appropriate.

Identify an ancestor, a person who completely loved the client, and spend time with that person – in the field, or just sitting together. If a loving ancestor cannot be identified, select a representative who can be the healthy ancestor from the time when the family was happy, healthy, connected and prosperous.

Titrate the medicine – get a sense of how much the person can tolerate at a given moment. Get a feel when the group is feeling anxious and overwhelmed and select an activity that is more calming, centering, stabilizing for the group at large, or work with one person in a piece of work where the theme is calming that involves the group.

I like to bring in a representative for “love,” which always seems to help forward things in a calm way.

Release energy with drumming, dancing, stomping feet, yoga postures, energy postures (some of them drawn from the work of energy workers Donna Eden and Barbara Brennan), as well as drawing, scribbling, etc.

I regularly use and teach elements from the Therapeutic Spiral Model, a psychodramatic model developed by my friend and colleague Kate Hudgins, Ph.D., TEP.

The model is much too complicated to discuss in depth here; however, a key point is to concretize strengths and have the client interact and experience them.

One of the key action structures is what we call **Circle of Strengths**, where we use scarves to represent personal, relational and spiritual strengths at the beginning of group.

This Circle of Strengths has ritual aspects. The scarves are selected and announced to the group, as we breathe after each introduction and announcement of strengths. One by one, the scarves are placed in a large circle on the floor. In psychodrama, it becomes the “stage,” in constellation work it becomes the “field.”

The action then takes place within the circle, and the group members and leader(s) take notice when the circle is “broken,” and reconnect the scarves.



“The earlier a shock took place, the less it is integrated, the bigger the challenge for the facilitator. Since clients fall back into the frozen state of the shock very easily, often not even noticed, this can re-traumatize them. Therefore facilitators need to know more about trauma.” — Bertold Ulsamer.



“We are affected by the seven generations that come before us and affect the seven generations that will follow.” — Francesca Mason Boring, constellation trainer and Shoshone elder. Francesca is a keynote speaker and workshop presenter at the 2015 conference.

Through the years, various psychodramatists have adapted this structure using all kinds of objects – stones, bandanas, sand tray items, and cards — that are placed in or around the field, walls and stay there for the duration of the workshop.

For those interested in additional resources on the Therapeutic Spiral Model, Kate Hudgins’ newest book is “Healing World Trauma with the Therapeutic Spiral Model: Psychodramatic Stories from the Frontlines” where I and my former student have a chapter on working with domestic violence survivors and perpetrators. (<http://www.jkp.com/healing-world-trauma-with-the-therapeutic-spiral-model.html>).

Kate has pioneered the idea of “restorative dramas,” where focus is that the traumatized client is restored to connection of what has been lost with the trauma. You may find more information at her web site www.drkatehudgins.com.

Many psychodramatists who have been trained in this model, me included, have worked through the years to adapt these additional themes in our own settings.

I’ve written about some adaptations in my “Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods: Beyond the Silence and the Fury,” which I co-authored with Linda Ciotola. (<http://www.jkp.com/healing-eating-disorders-with-psychodrama-and-other-action-methods.html>)

Resources

Therapeutic Spiral Model: Psychodramatic Stories from the Frontlines, edited by Kate Hudgins and Francesca Toscani (Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods: Beyond the Silence and the Fury by Karen Carnabucci and Linda Ciotola (Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

Show and Tell Psychodrama: Skills for Therapists, Coaches, Teachers, Leaders by Karen Carnabucci (Nusanto Publishing).



About the author

Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW, TEP, is a psychotherapist, consultant, author and educator who employs traditional, contemporary and alternative models to work with people to solve problems, make decisions, expand creativity and find inner peace.

She is a licensed clinical social worker, a board-certified trainer, educator and practitioner of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy and is a certified constellation facilitator.

She has worked with people with depression, anxiety, trauma, addictions and eating disorders and body dissatisfaction since 1989 using a variety of non-traditional methods, including psychodrama, systemic constellation work, the Tarot, sand tray, guided imagery and energy postures.

She is the co-author of **Integrating Psychodrama and Systemic Constellation Work: New Directions for Action Methods, Mind-Body Therapies and Energy Healing** and **Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods**.

She is also the author of the new **Show and Tell Psychodrama: Skills for Therapists, Coaches, Teachers, Leaders**.

She is based in Racine, Wis., and offers trainings, programs and classes as well as face-to-face and Skype supervision and consultation.

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“When clients are over activated, their brain and bodies will not be able to fully process the constellation.” — Dyrrian Benz and JoAnne Chartrand-Benz

They are workshop presenters at the 2015 conference. Their workshop is **Body, Trauma and Relational Constellations: Accessing Strength to Heal The Love Trauma Of Our Hearts**.