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Through the Back Door: Utilizing Dream Work for Insight During Psychotherapy

Jake Clemen, Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Description of the Intervention

- Centers on in-session discussion of subjective client recall of dreams that occur during various stages of sleep
 - Clients are encouraged to keep a dream journal so they may more accurately capture content of dreams
- Intervention requires shared appreciation between client and therapist for content and manner of client's dreams
 - When either of these conditions is absent, intervention is inappropriate
- Exact nature of the intervention depends upon the operating theoretical orientation(s) of the clinician
 - Dream Work has approaches grounded in Psychodynamic, Psychoanalytic, Adlerian, Jungian Analytical, and Gestalt therapies
 - Techniques involved include: free association, defense analysis, association amplifications, active imagination, dream incubation, explication, role-playing, reliving, and dialogue facilitation
- Overall goal for dream work is to facilitate greater awareness and insight about problems client may be experiencing
- Ultimately, insight gained is meant to inform adaptive actions in client's waking life such that they make progress in addressing clinical problems

Brief Review of the Research

- Dreams and dream frequency can provide improved insight and emotional regulation (Edwards, Ruby, Malinowski, Bennett, & Blagrove, 2013)
- Clinical use of dreams has been shown to enhance client insight, self-understanding, and self-awareness (Elliott et al., 1994; Hill, 2004)
- Dreams can provide quick access to the most salient issues of a client (Widen, 2000)
- When compared to non-dream therapy sessions, sessions focused on dreams yield improved depth, working alliance, and action-related betterment (Hill et al., 2003)
- Dream incubation results in reduced problem distress, and reduced anxious and depressed moods (White & Taytroe, 2003)
- Dream Work as an intervention is hindered by a lack of large empirical studies without methodological problems (Givrad, 2016; Pesant & Zadra, 2004)
- Recent work has begun to abate this, with Fogli, Maria Aiello, & Quercia (2020) having designed a replicable means of quantifying dream reports on a large scale

Clinical Problem Addressed

- 22yo, full-time University of Rhode Island Doctor of Pharmacy and Master of Business Administration dual degree student, Caucasian, Male, heterosexual, American Baptist
- Client presented with high distress due to recent breakup with romantic partner
- Additional distress associated with anxiety, sleep, neurotic character organization, and interpersonal process
- Diagnosis after intake:
 - Generalized Anxiety Disorder
 - Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Conceptualization of the Intervention

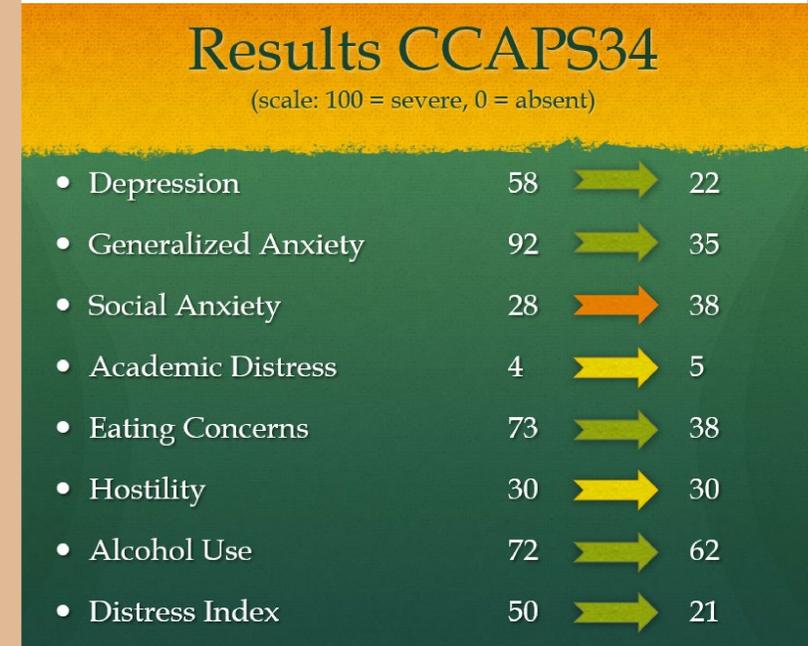
- Dream work intervention was included among numerous other interventions utilized with this client, including trauma-informed cognitive restructuring, affect restructuring, motivational interviewing, behavior activation, and defense restructuring
- Focused dream work primarily from an Adlerian orientation
 - This orientation conceptualizes dreams as manifestations of client's lifestyle and reflect their attitude towards life with concomitant unsettled waking life concerns and problems
- Dream work supported trauma-informed therapeutic efforts to avert client's fear of losing control when discussing past harm
 - Dreams create a figurative backdoor for us to discuss issues also occurring in client's waking life

Implementation

- Sessions 1-2:
 - Established therapeutic rapport; focused on goal-setting, emotional expression, affect restructuring
 - Clear presence of constructive, normative big brother–little brother transference-countertransference that strengthened rapport
- Session 3:
 - Client offhandedly mentioned sudden recollection of vivid dreams, despite never recalling dreams prior to now
 - I gauged client's interest in exploring dreams further
 - Client responded positively, indicating that he found dreams to be "cool"
 - Client began keeping dream journal with salient emotions, thoughts, and actions occurring before, during, and after dreams
- Sessions 4-25
 - Discussion of content client wanted to discuss from dream journal
 - Techniques utilized: active imagination, explication, reliving, free association, defense analysis, active imagination

Evaluation and Outcome

- Primary assessment measure was Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms (CCAPS34), a widely used counseling center instrument
- CCAPS34 pre and post measurements for therapy:



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