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Considerations in Assessing Sand Trays

**Most Important factor is relationship, and experience, of being with client!*

Many books and teachers reference absolutes outside of context. Rules like, "If less than 50 items, then depression or dissociated".

We have NO idea what the meaning is based on checklists. Far too many factors to consider.

It makes therapists feel safe to "know" and this is dangerous stance.

Trust process and relationship

Creation Process of Tray

How interested or resistant is the client to the process?

Does builder interact with sand? Shaping or simply placing objects?

How are miniatures chosen & placed? Is builder decisive in choices & placement, Do they move things around? Do they select items & then put them back? Fast process or slow?

Does the picture seem to come to a conclusion or is it dynamic?

Are there mood variations? (In tray, in client?)

What verbal comments are made during process or after session?

Content of Tray

Use of space – full space, contained, restricted

Number of miniatures, how they are placed, direction of placement, comparison of how items compare to previous trays.

How do objects reflect themes of therapy observed in other processes?

Symbolic meaning of objects – for client, "common" interpretations

Incongruence in any way

Submersion of items, parts coming out

Literal or elusive meaning. Is client creating a specific scene or working more in the symbolic/ unconscious level

Overall impression

Feeling you get from scene

Is it empty, full, barriers, organized or chaotic, balance or not, oddities, depiction of calm or peace.

Do you have sense that this is representational or a wishful image?

Development of a Series of Trays

Evolution of the trays, regression or progression

Sense of moving out of unconscious and into consciousness – are connections being made

Movement versus static

Moving toward healing? What would that look like?

Change in placement of central object.

Theme and symbols change & develop (new themes, transformation, disappearance/ resolution).

Persistent Qualities?

Story that Accompanies Process

Stories may come spontaneously from the client or the therapist might ask if there is a story (*theoretical differences*). Understanding when/ how to ask about a story requires advanced training. Do not use as a 'go to' technique.

What are themes, emotions, symbolic content that give clues to client's internal process.

Feeling Responses of Therapist and Client

Some trays elicit strong feelings for client and/ or the therapist. This is very helpful information. The initial emotional impression is significant

Sitting in the unknowing or discomfort of what has been created is powerful without any interpretation or conversation needed.

Feelings can be clues – for example if what the client has generated seems superficial, what might this say about larger issues of engagement, wish fulfillment, denial, etc.

Additional Comments:

Usually the client intuitively knows when they are done, or when things aren't "right" with the tray. Trust their process.

The therapist stance is supportive, neutral. An attentive presence, a silent & compassionate witness

The therapist can ask if there is anything the client would like to say, and then follows the client's lead. The associations amplify the experience but aren't necessary

Sand Tray work in and of itself is healing, sometimes the meaning making isn't evident or necessary. In fact, bringing things from unconscious into cognitive awareness can be dangerous. Trust the right brain to do its work!

Sometimes client will need to let the meaning simmer between sessions. Sometimes there is little or no interaction with what has been created or the process that has transpired. Many, many individual and clinical reasons for this.