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**Practitioners Corner**

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## **After the Psychodrama: The Importance & Process of Integration**

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Psychodrama is becoming increasingly recognized for its profound impact on individuals' cognitive and emotional processes. However, without a period of intentional integration following the sharing phase of a psychodrama, participants may not apply learnings from the psychodrama to their lives. This article offers practical strategies to promote effective integration, helping to ensure the transformative benefits of psychodrama are sustained and reinforced over time. The integration practices offered here address the whole person, including body-based strategies for nervous system recalibration, and suggestions for cognitive-linear and intuitive-symbolic processing. In addition, we highlight the use of mandalas that incorporate both text and images, offering a holistic strategy for integration following a psychodrama. By implementing these integration strategies after the psychodrama, practitioners and trainers can enhance the overall efficacy of psychodrama and support participants in achieving more long-lasting psychological growth and well-being.

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**KEYWORDS:** Psychodrama; integration; cognitive processing; emotional processing; mandala-making

### **INTRODUCTION**

Psychodrama is becoming increasingly recognized for its profound impact on individuals' cognitive and emotional processes (Durost and Hudgins 2022; Giacomucci 2021; Giacomucci 2023). However, without a period of intentional integration following the sharing phase of a psychodrama, participants may not apply learnings from the psychodrama to their lives. This article offers practical strategies to promote effective integration, helping to ensure the transformative benefits of psychodrama are sustained and reinforced over time. The integration practices offered here address the whole person, including body-based strategies

for nervous system recalibration, and suggestions for cognitive-linear and intuitive-symbolic processing. In addition, we highlight the use of mandalas that incorporate both text and images, offering a holistic strategy for integration following a psychodrama. By implementing these integration strategies after psychodrama, practitioners and trainers can enhance the overall efficacy of psychodrama and support participants in achieving more long-lasting psychological growth and well-being.

Psychodrama sessions typically involve three phases: the warm-up, action, and sharing. During the warm-up, participants prepare physically, mentally, and emotionally for the session. The action is where the actual enactment takes place, with participants exploring significant life events, emotions, and relationships through specialized dramatic techniques. The sharing phase allows participants to reflect on the relationship of their life stories to the enactment and share their vicarious learning from the psychodrama. The process of integration occurs after the sharing phase of a psychodrama so that protagonist and group members can experience the full benefits of hearing from their peers as they begin to make meaning of their experience (Beck & Haigh, 2014; Maslow, 1943). Moreover, whereas other authors, such as Kellerman (1992) and Giacomucci (2021), have written about integration as a process taking place during a psychodrama session, we are explicitly discussing the integration that takes place *after* a psychodrama session.

Although the psychodrama session itself can be transformative, an intentional process of *integration* following the sharing portion is crucial for ensuring that insights and experiences gained are effectively applied to the participant's life (Beck & Haigh, 2014). Based on the primary author's extensive clinical and teaching experience, integration is defined as follows: Integration is the "the process of assimilating the insights, emotions, and changes in roles experienced during the psychodrama session into one's ongoing life experience."

Without this crucial step, the benefits of the session may be fleeting, and participants might struggle to apply new understandings and behaviors to their real-world contexts. This article describes various modes of integration and offers examples of practices that can support participants in clinical or training groups to maximize their learning from psychodrama. The overall aim of integration practices is to support participants in applying new insights, perspectives, behaviors, and roles in their

During a psychodrama, insights and other lessons are often grasped in an intuitive, body-based manner instead of through direct cognitive processing. Through intentional integration, body-based assimilation helps participants regain nervous system equilibrium and cultivate new neural connections through the process of savoring. *Savoring*, as defined by Hanson (2024), is a form of self-directed neuroplasticity that trains the brain to take in novel experiences. It is an intentional process of directing attention to the sensations and thoughts associated with new and positive experiences. Novel experiences can also be "anchored in" by using the twin functions of consciousness—*cognitive linear thinking* and *symbolic and intuitive processing* (Siegel, 2012; Stricker 1994). Thus,

a holistic approach that addresses body, mind, and emotions is especially helpful in integration following a psychodrama session or workshop.

### **NERVOUS SYSTEM/BODY-BASED PROCESSING**

With its incorporation of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and creative modes at once, psychodrama stimulates the senses and can call forth strong somatic and emotional reactions and responses. Even when the psychodramatist exerts care to avoid causing nervous system arousal outside participant's window of tolerance (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006), psychodrama can activate the body, mind, and emotions into states of hyper- or hypo arousal. If the participant has experienced states outside their window of tolerance during or immediately following the psychodrama, their higher cortical functions required for thinking may not be accessible (Ogden et al., 2006). Therefore, taking time to recalibrate to one's optimal zone of arousal becomes the first task in integration.

*Some methods for this recalibration include the following:*

- Soothing rhythm breathing and other gentle breathing techniques (Fay, 2017; Neff, 2015)
- Grounding and centering with trauma-sensitive yoga practices (Emerson, 2015)
- Qigong, dance/movement, and other body-based approaches (Payne & Crane-Gordeau, 2013; Pylvänäinen, 2018)
- Quiet and contemplative time in nature (Brown, Baron, & Gladwell, 2013)
- Mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro & Carlson, 2017)
- Engaging in prayer or meditation (Koenig, 2012; Schaefer et al., 2013)

Because each person's nervous system responds differently to such practices, it is helpful to offer a menu of practices while encouraging participants to find their own unique ways of quieting the body and nervous system. It is equally important to remind participants to practice these skills after the psychodrama session.

### **COGNITIVE/LINEAR PROCESSING**

Cognitive processing is essential for transforming spontaneous realizations (action insights) into coherent and actionable knowledge (Holmes, 2007). During a psychodrama session, participants often gain new perspectives and insights about themselves and their relationships. However, these insights need to be consciously acknowledged and understood to effect lasting changes. Cognitive/linear processing as part of integration following a psychodrama session involves reflecting on new insights and perspectives gained through the psychodrama and considering how these can be applied to everyday situations. Not to be confused with the cognitive processing therapy, an evidence-based treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Resick, 2016), the term "cognitive processing" is used here to describe "the acquisition, storage, interpretation, manipulation, transformation, and use of knowledge" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). Working with the cognitive, linear functions of

consciousness enables participants to use language to identify and reinforce new knowledge (The Peak Performance Center, n.d.). Working with the cognitive, linear functions of consciousness enables participants to use language to identify and reinforce new knowledge. When individuals intentionally name or label an experience, they literally make sense of it. With this type of cognitive processing, participants can clarify and elaborate vague understandings, make sense of inchoate experiences, and register new learning in a way that makes the material available for later retrieval and use.

### **Ways to Practice Cognitive Processing**

- Journal in response to provocative questions or prompts
- Share personal reflections with a trusted person, such as a therapist, partner, friend, or colleague-in-learning. (Be sure to remind participants about the confidentiality norm: share about your responses and experiences without naming or otherwise identifying the protagonist or other group members.)

Examples of integration questions or prompts to assist in cognitive-linear integration can be organized around four domains of adult learning developed by the primary author—*ideas or theory*, *skills development*, *personal growth*, and *professional or life application*.

The following are some examples:

#### ***Ideas/theory***

- (a) For clients and students
  - One idea or concept I want to remember is ...
  - One lingering question I have is ...
  - A new connection I am making is ...
  - Something new I learned is ...
  - A significant idea or concept the session reinforced and/or elaborated is ...

#### ***Skills development***

- (a) For clients and students
  - One thing I did well as a group member is ...
  - A growing edge for me as a group member is ...
- (b) For students
  - One thing I did well as a director, auxiliary, or audience member is ...
  - One specific psychodrama skill I want to further refine or cultivate is ...

#### ***Personal growth***

- (a) For clients and students
  - One thing I discovered about myself is ...
  - A strength I put into action during the session is ...
  - One thing that surprised me about myself is ...
  - An area of healing, growth, or development the session put me in touch with is ...

***Professional/life application***

- (a) For clients
  - One idea or insight I am going to apply in my life is ...
  - The value this will bring to my life is ...
  - The supports I need to successfully apply it are ...
- (b) For students
  - One concept or technique/intervention I am going to apply in my work is ...
  - The value this will bring to those I serve (psychotherapy or coaching clients, mentees, supervisees, students) is ...
  - One potential barrier to successfully transferring my learning of a new concept or technique is ...
  - The supports I need to successfully apply the concept or technique are ...

Responding to prompts such as these typically require less time than required to complete an art project such as the mandalas described later in this article. However, when time following sharing is limited, verbal prompts shared in dyads and briefly summarized in the full group can be an efficient and effective way to encourage cognitive integration.

**SYMBOLIC/INTUITIVE PROCESSING**

To work with the brain functions that process through symbol and intuition, participants can manipulate images, shapes, drawings, doodles, and art supplies, such as clay or paints, to create an art project or other artifact. Durost and Hudgins (2022) have described the use of various art projects for integration as part of the Therapeutic Spiral Model® of psychodrama, and other psychodrama trainers often introduce visual art projects as part of a psychodrama session. We have observed that while engaged in creating the visual artifact, participants often enter a state of mindfulness, focusing their attention on the process of creating the mandala. Later, they view their creation from outside, at a distance, for further reflection and processing.

**Ways to Integrate Using Intuitive/Symbolic Functions**

- (a) For clients or students
  - Create a collage that captures important parts of your experience.
  - Color pictures that resonate to your experience.
  - Create an “altered book”—take an existing book and transforming it into a new work of art by changing its appearance and meaning through various alterations.
  - Make any visual arts project that helps concretize what you have experienced and want to hold onto (e.g., painting, sculpture, or mural).
  - Create a PowerPoint slide deck with images that capture important aspects of your experience during the psychodrama.
  - Create a poem or song that captures something important about your experience.

- Create a dance or a movement sequence that incorporates important elements of your experience.

## MANDALAS FOR MEANING-MAKING AND INTEGRATION

The application of visual arts to promote physical and psychological healing is discussed widely (e.g., Du et al., 2024; Heijman, Wouters, Schouten, & Haeyen, 2024; Malchiodi, 2020). Visual arts-based integration projects as part of the Therapeutic Spiral Model® (TSM) of psychodrama are described in some detail by Durost and Hudgins (2022). Although like the TSM art projects of integration, the mandala-making process recommended here differs in at least two significant ways. TSM art projects are based on a clearly defined conceptual framework that we (the authors) do not follow. Moreover, whereas TSM projects of integration may take many different forms, we typically use the creation of mandalas, as described here, as the process and product for integration following the sharing phases of a psychodrama.

There is a long tradition of using mandalas for integration. Jung (1968) was noted for painting mandalas as symbols of wholeness, integrating the personal and collective unconscious in image and symbolic representation. Kellogg (1997), art therapist at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in the 1970s, incorporated drawing mandalas as part of the integration portion of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD)-assisted psychotherapy sessions conducted with cancer patients and people with alcoholism. Kellogg (1997) developed a comprehensive system of mandala-making and interpretation called the Mandala Assessment Research Instrument (2022), or MARI.

Arranging drawings, colors, symbols, and images in the shape of a mandala serves as a psychological and energetic “container” (safe holding space) for material from the conscious and unconscious that has emerged during the session. In contrast to a traditional mandala, which uses images only, mandalas used for integration of a psychodrama can incorporate both *images* (related to intuitive/symbolic processing functions of the brain) and *language* (related to cognitive brain functions) to bring together new learning in a coherent and integrated manner.

In our practice, we allocate time for participants to create their mandalas during and/or at the end of a session, workshop, or longer psychodrama intensive. Templates are provided (paper plates in various sizes) for participants to use in creating the round mandala shape on colored paper. We provide ready-cut images in various sizes for participants’ use, and organize the images into categories for ease of access. Some of the categories we usually include are: people engaging in healthy activities (yoga, meditation, Tai Chi, people receiving massage, etc.); healthy and nutritious foods; infants, children, adults, couples, families; trauma-related images; celestial images; leisure activities (music, gardening, sports, playing games, etc.); animals; nature-related images; and symbols of different religions and faith/spiritual traditions. Art-making materials, such as glue sticks, glitter, crayons, markers, pastels, and decorative ribbons, are also provided.

We provide an array of affirmations, quotations, and other uplifting text messages, which we prepare for easy access and application to participants' mandalas. We type the statements in a font small enough to fit onto a mandala (10-point font usually works well), print the statements on different colored paper, and cut them out with crafting scissors (scissors that create cut-outs with scalloped edges). We leave some blank cutouts for participants to write their own words, phrases, or sentences, often significant messages that emerged during the psychodrama.

Obviously, this pre-work takes considerable time and effort, with the requirement to select, cut out, and organize an array of image and quotes. However, we have found that after an initial labor-intensive effort, images can be stored by category, and quotes kept in files for easy retrieval for future sessions and workshops. Another time-intensive task is finding images that represent the participants' multiple and diverse identities. It is important to gather images that reflect a range of races, ethnicities, ages, physical abilities, romantic partnerships, faith communities, gender expressions, and other identities. Similarly, it is important to gather a wide range of quotes, statements, and affirmations that represent diverse authors and perspectives. By putting in this time and effort initially, participants can find images and statements to which they can relate. The images and quotes can be kept in files for easy retrieval for future sessions and workshops.

Participants are encouraged to use their own creativity in constructing a mandala that seems pleasing and meaningful to them. Guidance offered is phrased in a way that emphasizes participants' choice in determining what is important to them. We invite participants to release self-criticism to the greatest extent possible, and to enjoy the mandala-making process. We encourage creating the mandala in a quiet and contemplative environment. We sometimes play gentle music, and at other times offer silence. We provide written instructions, and we also talk participants through the process at the beginning of the time allocated for creating their mandalas.

Participants are usually given at least two examples of criteria they might use when creating their mandala, with the criteria broad enough to relate thematically to most psychodrama sessions. We also invite participants to create their mandalas without reference to any criteria we provide. Examples of mandalas created by previous workshop participants are displayed, and are especially chosen to include elaborate and highly aesthetically pleasing ones, as well as more basic and simple mandalas (for examples, see Appendix).

## **Two Examples of Criteria and Instructions for Participants to Create Their Mandalas**

### **Example 1: Your present, past, and future**

*Your present.* After tracing the circle template for your mandala, add drawings, doodles, and shapes, and/or affix images to your mandala. Be sure to add text, such as quotes, affirmations, messages to self, or any other statements that seem meaningful. The images and text you put on your mandala represent,

symbolize, or otherwise convey important elements that make up your current life. Important elements might include themes, patterns, roles, people, objects, animals, values, strengths, and resources—anything significant that is a part of your current psyche and life-space.

*Your past.* After identifying elements in your present, add images and text to represent significant elements of your past. These might relate to past experiences enacted during the psychodrama or any others that seem significant to you. Define the timeframe in the past as you choose—the recent or distant past, or a combination of past periods, or an abstraction of your past. You may choose to place images, words, colors, shapes, or symbols that represent your wounds, hurts, and injuries as well as the resilience you demonstrated and the life lessons you acquired.

*Your future.* As you move toward completing your mandala, consider your desired future. Imagine a time close to the present or far into the future, whichever you decide is meaningful. Add elements to your mandala that represent your desired future. What are your hopes, dreams, goals, and expectations? What resources do you have or will you cultivate to manifest the vision of your “best life” or your “best version of yourself?” How do you see yourself in relation to family, friends, peers, community? How do you see yourself in relation to your vocation, values, and spirituality? What actions will you take to bring your future projection into reality? Use words, images, colors, shapes, abstract designs, and so forth to bring the mandala to a close for now. You can always add more at another time.

### **Example 2: A sorrow, a joy, and a lesson learned**

Consider the universal life experiences of sorrow and joy, and the important life lessons that you acquired from either or both. First, put items on your mandala to represent *a time of sorrow*. This could be any time you experienced sadness, anguish, psychological pain, trauma, or challenging emotions. Use both images and words to convey the pain and sorrow of the experience.

Next, put images and words to represent *a time of joy*. Think of a time you were filled with happiness, contentment, or any other positive emotion related to a specific time or event. Let your mandala reflect the positive thoughts, feelings, and emotions you experienced at that time. Include statements, messages, and quotes along with images, colors, shapes, and symbols.

Finally, add words and images to represent *a life lesson* from either a sorrowful experience, joyful experience, or both. What has life asked of and taught you on your journey so far? What important insights are you taking forward?

There is no way to do this wrong other than to overthink it. The instruction Joan Kellogg offers is: “Surprise yourself!” (Liyanage, 2022). We believe that is a great direction for approaching the mandala with lightness and grace.

## **CONCLUSION**

Integration is a vital process to anchor important learnings from a psychodrama session. An intentional process of integration after the sharing phase of



a psychodrama helps to ensure that the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes initiated during the session are sustained and translated into meaningful real-life improvements.

A variety of techniques are useful in promoting integration. To promote *cognitive or linear integration*, guided journaling with prompts and/or responding to provocative discussion questions with a partner or therapist can be beneficial. *Emotional or intuitive processing* can be facilitated through creating art, collages, altered books, and similar arts-based products that visually showcase participants' learning.

Creating mandalas is recommended as an especially powerful way to promote integration. As symbols of unity, mandalas can promote integration of fragmented aspects of experience into a balanced and harmonious whole. Mandalas can also serve as containers for powerful emotions experienced during a psychodrama, thereby providing a safe and secure space for emotional expression. Incorporating both images and words, mandala creation as recommended here can help participants structure and solidify body-based learning, intuitive understanding, and action insights so that they can carry significant learning into their lives.

Mandalas can be "free-form" or designed according to a criterion or set of criteria, as described in this paper: a three-part mandala based on *past*, *present*, and *future* can help to structure participants' learning from a psychodrama by providing a chronological order to insights and understandings. A mandala depicting *a sorrow*, *a joy*, and *a lesson learned* can be beneficial in helping participants integrate their learning from a psychodrama in an art/language narrative that provides order and structure. By facilitating intentional emotional processing, enhancing cognitive understanding, and promoting behavioral change, integration helps participants fully benefit from the transformative potential of psychodrama.

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APPENDIX  
Participants' mandalas for integration.



