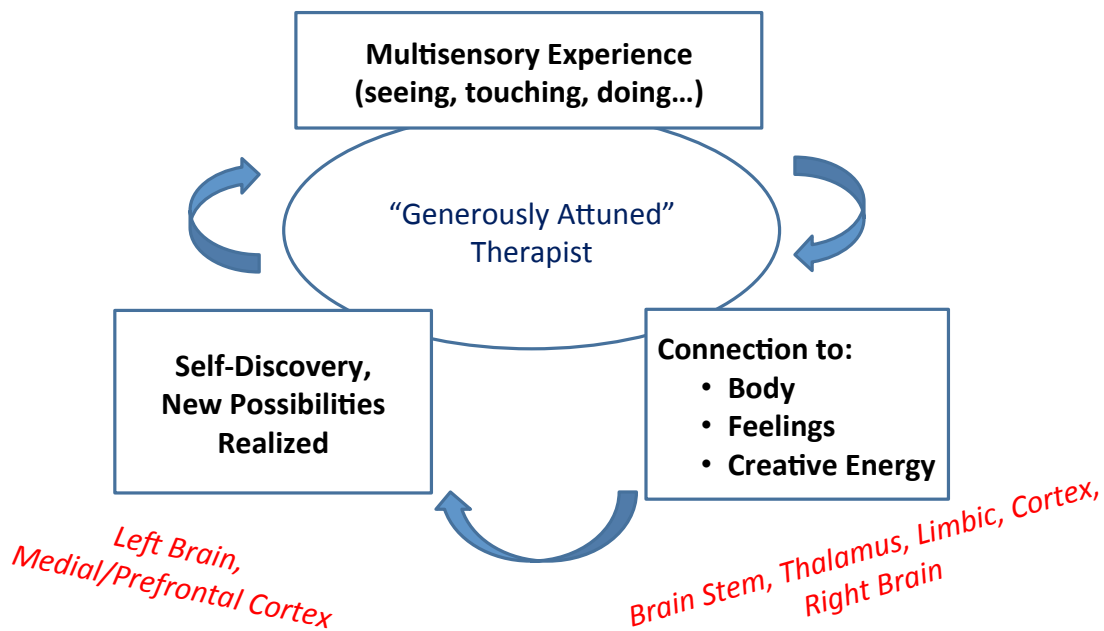


Sandplay's Neurosensory Feedback Loop and The Seven Phases of Sandplay Therapy: A Brief Tutorial

A continuous pattern emerged through research (Freedle, 2006, 2007) indicating that the multi-sensory aspect of sandplay therapy in the safe presence of the therapist provides an underlying mechanism for healing trauma in brain-injured adults and others. With "generous attunement" from the therapist and through somatosensory pathways, multiple neural networks were activated for healing and transformation (Freedle, 2017, 2019).

Sandplay's **Neuro-Sensory** Feedback Loop

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Here's how it works:

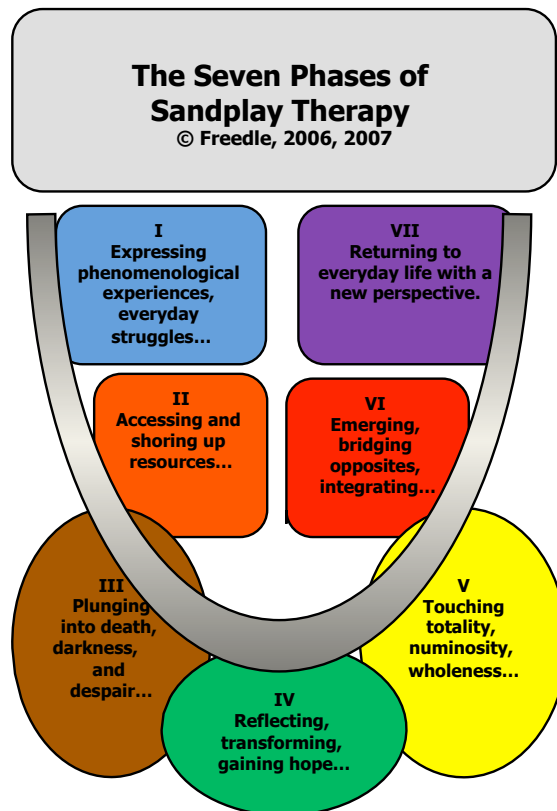
- By experiencing the sand and symbols through one's senses in sandplay therapy, participants became connected to bodily sensations, feelings and creative energies.
- They described bodily sensations such as activation and calming, had highly emotive experiences such as sobbing or joy, and tapped into creative energies.
- Subsequently, they described experiences with self-discovery and new possibilities for their lives.

Several theoretical models have emerged linking research in neuroscience to sandplay therapy. Consistent with the findings of Freedle (2006, 2007) these models describe how sandplay promotes neural integration through subcortical-limbic-cortical neural

circuitry, particularly motivated by the multi-sensory aspects of sandplay and the therapeutic relationship (Kalff, M., in press; Freedle, 2017, 2019; and Balfour, 2013).

Badenoch (2008) describes a process remarkably similar to *Sandplay's Neurosensory Feedback Loop* when she reports that when the sandplayer touches the sand in the presence of an empathic therapist, "There is an immediate connection between body, feeling, and (sometimes) thought" (p. 221). She states that seeing and touching the sand activates "a confluence of sensory streams... and the whole experience encourages vertical brain integration, linking body, limbic region and cortex in the right hemisphere" (2008, p. 221). She goes on to theorize that both hemispheres become engaged when the symbolic world unfolds into words and meaning making (Badenoch, 2008).

By way of *Sandplay's Neurosensory Feedback Loop*, participants ultimately progressed through Seven Phases of Sandplay Therapy (Freedle, 2006, 2007).



The Seven Phases of Sandplay Therapy

A research study identified seven phases of psychological development that emerged from the sandplay processes of adults with traumatic brain injury (Freedle, 2006, 2007). Findings suggested that psychological development is stimulated by the multisensory aspects of sandplay in the presence of the attuned sandplay therapist and progresses through seven phases:

- I. Expressing phenomenological experiences and everyday struggles
 - Personal stories, presenting problems, obstacles and possible solutions are expressed in the sand
- II. Accessing and shoring up resources
 - Inner resources are expressed in the sand and positive energies may come alive as client develops some ego strength for the journey and trust in the therapeutic relationship
- III. Plunging into death, darkness, and despair
 - Shadow themes, war, barriers to resources, and/or inertia may be expressed as client descends into internal struggles and complexes
- IV. Reflecting, transforming, gaining hope
 - Self-reflective, hopeful and centering trays appear in this phase
- V. Touching totality, numinosity, wholeness
 - A profound unifying moment, constellation of Self and its transforming energies are experienced by the client and the therapist, sense of wholeness, oneness, and presence of the divine
- VI. Emerging, bridging opposites, integrating
 - Client enters the “return road of trials” of the hero’s journey, themes of emergence and integration of opposites, relativization of the ego
- VII. Returning to everyday life with a new perspective
 - Toward the end of process or final tray, client shows new perspective or attitude related to everyday life, returns “home” to oneself, reborn ego

The seven phases of sandplay therapy:

- were generally sequential, but not linear
- involved one or several trays per phase, and sometimes elements of multiple phases were bridged in a single tray
- involved some overlap and revisiting of phases before movement to the next phase.

Campbell's Hero's Journey

The seven phases of sandplay therapy resembled the archetypal hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell wherein a hero answers the call of adventure, departs from everyday life, experiences protective power, goes through the trials of initiation, touches the energy source of life, and eventually returns with the freedom to experience life as it *is*.

Jung's Theory of Individuation

The seven phase of sandplay therapy were consistent with Jung's theory of individuation wherein individuals experience successive encounters with unconscious material, confront the shadow, expand consciousness, encounter the Self, reconcile opposites, and assimilate experiences to bring forth wholeness of personality. Jung emphasized the *process* of development inherent in this universal journey of the spirit over an endpoint.

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