

DIRECTIONS OF INTERVENTION IN THE THERAPY FOR MALTREATED CHILD

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Abstract:

This paper presents a series of suggestions for the realization of some therapeutic interventions when working with the maltreated child. The study reveals that the individual resources are integrated, as well as the relational ones, in the sense that they are interrelated, interfere and are linked from a causal point of view. Focusing on distinct factors or essential resources, seems to be more adequate for purposes of psychological, social or educational interventions. This paper highlights some directions of intervention determined by four individual factors: **positive relations of communication, auto-efficiency, creativity, coherence**. The author has chosen these factors because they might be considered essential characteristics of resilience and might represent possible pillars in the therapy of the maltreated child.

Keywords: resilience, therapy, coherence, risk

1. Resilience and protection factors

Child maltreatment, under all its forms, is a theme of actuality, treated by mass-media every week. Although this phenomenon always existed in the history of humanity, maltreatment has been “discovered” once with the urban industrialization, around the year 1875. Hardly in the following years, maltreatment started being approached as a social phenomenon. From this moment on, there started to appear organizations for preventing cruelty upon children. Therefore, among 48 of such institutions registered at the time, 33 were founded only in the United States of America (Gordo, I., 1985).

Resilience is a concept that describes the successful adaptation to the exposure to factors of biological risk and/or psychosocial and/or stressing events. Resilience is an individual characteristic where intervene individual and environment protection factors (Werner, E.E., 1995). The concept of resilience is taken from the technical field of materials resistance and is defined in *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (DEX)* as: “a characteristic unit of measurement for the behavior of materials to shock solicitations, equal to the proportion between the consumed mechanical work for the break to deformation, through shock, of a sample and the surface of the transversal section in which the respective break produced – from fr. *résilience*” (DEX, 1998).

Other autochthonous authors (Șerban Ionescu, 2001) explain resilience as the result of a positive development that takes place in the case of an unhappy situation. Resilience might be understood as a tendency of a child, adult or family to heal after stressing circumstances or events and to continue the usual activities. In other words, resilience means power of recovery.

Cyrułnik (1998) considers that resilience may be expressed through a suggestive metaphor: “Remain ourselves when the environment is everywhere and follow our human way, despite the events that faith reserves to us”.

Protection factors are characteristic to the persons who offer stress resistance. In the specialty literature (N. Garmezy, 1985) there are described three categories of protection factors:

1. biological, psychological and social-affective characteristics of the child (health, temperament, self-esteem);
2. characteristics of the parents, of the familial environment and of the interactions parent – child (discipline, support, etc);
3. characteristics of the social environment (available resources, social support, etc.).

For each category of protection factors, there are a series of specific indicators:

Child's characteristics:

- superior intellectual abilities (measured through an intelligence test or determined during a meeting with a specialist who knows very well the child);
- good social abilities (the child easily gets in touch with the others; able to maintain good social relations);
- positive self-esteem (high self confidence, safety in behavior).

Parents' characteristics:

- adequate educative structure (parents apply clear and appropriate rules for the age and child's capacities);
- positive interactions with the child (parents enjoy pleasant moments with the child by realizing together different activities);
- warm familial climate (pleasant ambiance).

Characteristics of the environment where the child lives:

- the presence of a rich network of children like him/her;
- significant adult in child's environment (the child regularly sees an adult, other than his/her parents; the child may count on this relation, which is useful for him/her);
- support given to parents for child's education (grandparents, relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues).

Not all the persons exposed to stress will develop affective-behavioral disorders, even if affected in a certain measure. The psychic trauma is not a simple consequence of stress exposure. It may be understood as a consequence of the way a person perceives a traumatic event (individual trauma experiences) associated with a number of individual characteristics (personal vulnerabilities).

Person's vulnerability, associated with psychic trauma includes a series of external and internal factors.

- external factors are found in person's environment and include ***familial factors and social resources***;
- internal factors are relatively stable and include ***mental health, the level of development/maturity, history of traumatic life***.

Upon some authors¹ the factors of children vulnerability may reside in child's “interior” (temperamental factors, birth conditions, etc.) or “exterior” (poverty, familial conflicts, etc.). In fact, these factors do not act in isolation, but combined.

¹ Schaefer, C., Lewis, M., 1990, *Social behavior of maltreated children: A naturalistic study of a day care*. Research and Clinical Center for Child Development, pp. 79 – 117.

Lopez (2001) states that resilience is the opposite of vulnerability. It is a concept that allows explaining the fact that some individuals subjected to existential difficulties or to some traumatic events do not present psychological disorders.

The reactions of children who are in situations of maltreatment, considered traumatic events for them, vary in a great measure of:

- the type of maltreatment to which they are subjected;
- their age at the beginning of maltreatment;
- their capacity of understanding reality;
- the help they receive from the adults in their environment;
- characteristics of traumatic events (chronic violence would probably have more severe effects than the isolated violent acts);
- their characteristics of personality partly depend on their innate qualities of vulnerability or, on the contrary, on stress resistance.

2. Situation of maltreatment risk

The careful observation of the child, both in family and within other social systems of health and education, may be a good modality of identifying individual or medium characteristics that may determine risk situations of maltreatment for children.

The existent *temperamental differences* between the newly born may influence the reaction of the persons who take care of them. Temperament classification to newly born children started being studied in the middle of the 20th century (Middlemore, 1948, apud. Kari Killen, 1998). In these studies there are identified three categories of temperaments: “hypersensitive child”, “apathetic child” and “difficult child”. Each of these affects the relation mother-child. These categories may be encountered in ulterior studies, but under another formulation: “difficult child”, “child of whom one can hardly approach” and “quiet child”. Each category may determine some risk situations for the child, situations that might be avoided when the person who takes care of them correctly understands the way of manifestation of the child.

In certain cases, *innate disabilities*, both physical and emotional ones may be challenging factors of the abusive situations. Such disabilities may determine destructive interactions in which the child is rejected in a more or less opened way. For example, there might be retarded children with whom it is difficult to establish a relation. Also, children with cerebral disorders may have a different weeping which might be difficult to interpret and tolerate. Jaudes and Diamond (1985, apud Kari Killen, 1998) demonstrated, through specialty studies, that children who present disabilities are much more exposed to abuse and negligence.

3. Therapeutic intervention

Generally, specialty studies reveal that the individual resources, as well as the relational ones are integrated, in the sense that they connect, interact and are linked from a causal point of view.² Focusing on distinct factors or essential resources seems to be more adequate for the purposes of a psychological, social or educational intervention. In the present there are studies³ that highlight some directions of intervention determined by four individual factors: positive relations of communication, auto-efficiency, creativity, coherence. Authors have chosen these factors because they represent, in their vision, the essential characteristics of resilience.

² Cf. S.E. Hobfoll, 2002, *Social and psychological resources and adaptation*. Review of General Psychology, 6, pp. 307 – 324

³ T. Waaktaar, C. J. Helen, A.I.H. Borge & S. Torgersen, 2004, *How can young People's Resilience be enhanced? Experiences from a Clinical Intervention project*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, vol. 9 (2), pp. 167 – 183

3.1. Positive relations of communication

Positive relations of communication, characterized through social interaction, the acceptance of the other and the support offered to the respective person were selected as resources that reside at the basis of successful adaptation, especially during the adolescence (Compass, Hinden & Gerhardt, 1995; Criss, Pettit, Gogge & Lapp, 2002; Gazmerzy and others, 1983; Koko & Pulkkinen, 2000; Werner and Smith 1982). The social support is understood as a process determined by the healthy ability of a person of mobilizing and receiving help from the others, as well as the availability of receiving help during stress periods (Hobfoll, 2002). Concerning the positive relations of communication, it was thought that these contribute to empathy development and also consolidate and model the auto-regulation and the pro-social behavior (Einsberg, 1998). Recent studies reveal that the effect of adaptation of social support in early adolescence is related to the growth of self esteem in the fields oriented to communication (DuBois and collab., 2002).

Suggestions for a program of intervention

- focusing on a group of work with persons of the same age, sustaining interactions of social order, of acceptance and tolerance;
- encouraging behaviors of offering help and solving conflicts; promoting some activities and events through which the young and group leaders may actively participate and might bring a positive contribution; using each occasion for modelling and re-consolidating the interactions that might be useful, of a real support and which shall contribute to constructive solutions of the conflicts;
- discussing the necessary rules of group so that all the individuals feel comfortable within the group, as well as reasonable consequences of breaking rules; projecting some sessions with a certain structure of communication so that there might be offered experiences regarding the concentrated and respectful attention;
- preparation for each session and adjusting themes according to the needs of the group; establishing some group tasks in compliance with individual qualities; offering some responsibilities and leading possibilities;
- promoting and sustaining co-operations instead of individual solutions obtained after solving the given tasks; offering time for interactions of normal intensity, time for individual work, pauses for relaxation or free games;
- positive usage within the group of the individual difficulties and stressing experiences from the past; encouraging the adolescents who suffered a form of maltreatment to share the previous disturbing experiences while they continue knowing each other. Very useful is recognizing the unique competence of the participants in resisting to stressing situations and increasing the support feedback from the group's part, empathy and suggestions for similar situations; positive reflection of the confessions without being considered guilty for that.

3.2. Auto-efficiency

Auto-efficiency has been defined as the possibility/competence of reaching the desired objectives through own actions. Auto-efficiency relates both to psychical and emotional structures and has been related to stress resistance, both upon minor difficulties and catastrophic situations (Bandura, 1997). The anterior experience with regard to personal efficiency determines a person to have a particular look on specific challenges. Recently, the term has been used in a broader sense, referring to the control upon own processes of thought and affective, auto-disciplinary states, in order to reach some particular objectives, in the sense of exercising the control upon the social environment (Bandura, 1991; Hobfoll, 2002). The concepts related to the field of research of resilience are: internal control, active adaptation, the competence of planning and authority.

Suggestions for a program of intervention

- organizing the group of work with focus on the activities upon which the participants are motivated to learn more and the assistance in the process of reaching the specific objectives, both in group and individually;
- offering some positive experiences of learning in taking decisions, in planning and reaching objectives, stimulating motivations by offering realistic, immediate and concrete objectives; giving some tasks for each member according to personal characteristics and talents; continuous monitoring of the evolution of the members and re-consolidating group and individual objectives during the process of counselling;
- assisting participants in the process of coping with the limitations and frustrations accumulated during working; promoting some positive personal images within the directed strategies to changing the cognitive schemes and adolescents' faith; offering opportunities for practicing some new positive scenarios of life; highlight tasks for the different members of the group that led to some realizations; exploitation of some strategies for tolerance increasing to frustration and concentration.

3.3. Creativity

In specialty literature there are references to remarkable persons who succeeded despite a traumatic and stressing past (Coatsworth, 1998). These people are often artists such as Mozart, H.C. Andersen, M. Gorky, etc. Their biography shows that they often fought with a subjective attitude and closed relations. This illustrates the general difficulty of conceptualizing the resilience as a global characteristic and not as a relative one, the annex of the field. However, recent studies upon creativity confirm the impression that psychological weakness and non-conventionality may be transformed in a functional form through new creative meanings. A common characteristic for Art, Music, Science, Sport – fields in which adolescents typically prove their talent seems to reside in the potential of symbols processing. While some symbols (colors, movements, tones) offer a subjective presentation of the world, other symbols (words, ideas, numbers) represent objects that are detached of the original context, this one allowing to be processed in a rational way. The creative activities have as effect the interior recompense of enriching and auto-healing. This is retrieved in their potential for a symbolic perception and for processing both positive and negative experiences. Developing a talent may imply prizes of extrinsic nature such as the positive attention on the others' part and opportunities for a future career. Although talent is perceived as an innate gift, developing the talent is much more dependent of an adequate environment, training these skills and practicing them in a deliberate way.⁴

Suggestions for a program of intervention

- facility of exploration through games and individual symbolic expressions within the chosen activities;
- creating an atmosphere of creation, curiosity and ludic dynamism; encouraging and modeling the ludic, the humor and the exploitation of creative possibilities, both in relation and in the work material; approaching the tasks in a different way, spontaneous and inventive; engaging the group in the process of brainstorming for ideas generation; appreciation of suggestive ideas, mistakes and failed attempts as important steps from now on;

⁴ In the work *Grupul creativ de formare* (2001), Mariana Caluschi describes a series of experiments and programs that also highlight the psychotherapeutic dimension of the creativity techniques and exercises. The author proposes a "personal formula", the one of the *creative group of formation*, understood as a small group made up of 6 – 12 persons that has as objective stimulation, disinhibition, increasing and manifesting the creative potential through acquiring the methodology of creativity during group activities.

- releasing the mechanisms of inspiration; preparing the land that may lead to fantasies, ideas and exploration; this may mean introducing a new and challenging material that may be explored, designation of some opened tasks, proving some different techniques, walking in trips;
- using the therapeutic potential of the creative activities, in order to process, in a symbolic way, both positive and negative experiences; sensitivity to relevant topics from real life that might appear in the creative products. If there are identified traumatic and stressing aspects, there is necessary an investigation upon the modality in which the young are available to explore variations of a repetitive and destructive content, being open, in the same time, for distancing and future changes; encouraging symbolic exploration (painting, film, role game) of stress management and the process of effective adaptation.

3.4. Coherence

The way in which people evaluate themselves from a cognitive and emotional point of view seems to be crucial for the way in which people deal with stressing experiences. A relevant concept with regard to this aspect is the “meaning of coherence”, concept that has been introduced by Antonovsky (1987). This contains three components: perceiving life as being controllable (whether through individual control or through some benevolent external forces, as it is, for example, God or faith: the ability of seeing internal and external stimuli significant from an emotional point of view and having positive expectations for the future. Several studies revealed that all the components, as well as the entire psychological structure, are associated with the increased stress resistance (Bonanno, 2002). The concept “sense of coherence” has been criticized, considered to be imprecise, because the relative importance of each element is not taken into consideration. Nevertheless, it is not decided on the way different styles of cognitive processes affect the consequences of adversity. However, helping the adolescents to find a coherent signification of the past, present and future in their life through a positive thought, accepting the reality of their negative experiences, avoiding self-accusing for uncontrollable circumstances and finding the steps of adaptation in order to be able to continue is recommended as a significant preoccupation in therapeutic intervention (Davis, 1998).

Suggestions for a program of intervention

- encourages the assistance of the participants in their attempt of realizing significant and beneficial connections between different aspects of their previous, present and future life;
- offering some experiences of expected, coherent and consistent behavior concerning the relations within the group and within several aspects of life; practicing long-term intervention, maintaining a fix number of members, rituals of group, structure, planned meetings and preparations for the separation; offering some models of responsible, expected and intelligible behavior; facilitating some relations between what happens within the group and what happens in the sphere of real life of the participants; pair souls are included in the meetings of counselling; using existent local resources and facilities in solving group tasks with the intention of opening possibilities for future contacts between participants, after finishing group meetings;
- creating a positive signification from their previous and present experience; encouraging exploration and understanding actions, thoughts, own and others’ emotions; looking for some realistic answers of the type “why did these things happen”, maximizing the feeling of safety and avoiding self-accusing;
- encouraging future planning based on individual qualities of the adolescent and on his individual situation; cultivating the continuing hope of exploration related to positive individual and contextual conditions in the participants’ future.

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