

MARATHON, ADLERIAN STYLE¹

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During the past few years the marathon as a means of group psychotherapy has been adopted increasingly. The present paper reports on an adaptation of this method which has been used in accordance with the Adlerian point of view.

A marathon session is simply an extended group psychotherapy meeting which may last without marked interruption for as long as "twenty-four to forty-eight hours with little or no time permitted for sleep" (1, p. 210).

The marathon technique herein described grew out of a practical necessity. Since 1968 I have been teaching counseling for the German Society of Individual Psychology, and conducting didactic psychotherapy with their trainees. Because my time for the German program was limited, it became necessary to substitute all-day therapy meetings for briefer sessions recurring over a longer time. And so it seemed advisable to use the framework of marathons of the California Human Potential Movement, most strongly represented by Esalen Institute, in a variation to suit our immediate purposes. Since then I have conducted many such marathons, both in Germany and in California.

METHOD

Procedure

Our marathon differs from those within other frameworks (7) with respect to duration, in that it lasts ten hours. We found that Sundays from 9 am to 7 pm worked out the best. As other marathons, ours begins with 10 to 15 people sitting informally in a circle, on chairs or on the floor. This requires comfortable and casual attire. An ever-brewing coffee pot, as well as some restrictions for smokers, are a necessity. Some participants bring snacks for the coffee breaks. Everyone brings his own bag lunch, if meal arrangements for all are not possible.

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In order to maintain the group as a unit, it is important to prevent formation of subgroups during break time. The general rule of no observers, only participants, also serves in maintaining the group as a functional unit.

We start the session by introducing the members to each other. This is followed by the request for confidentiality and a suggestion for honest expression of feelings and thoughts. The group is characterized as supportive, and not as an aggressive encounter group. We do place a responsibility for successful progress on the whole group, and encourage all members to feel free to interrupt any on-going process if frustrated, dissatisfied, angry, or bored.

As a distinctive feature of our marathons, each participant is then asked to put down on a paper which is then collected, what he expects to gain by participation. The stated expectations are then read to the group. These papers are handed back again 45 minutes before closing the session, and the group members are asked to write down what they feel they did gain from this marathon. These statements are then read to the group, followed by a final question period.

Group Composition

The group may consist entirely of counseling trainees, entirely of counsees or patients, or of a combination of these. A few participants already acquainted with Individual Psychology are of great advantage to the group. The leader decides whether an individual is ready for group experiences, and preferably meets new participants at least once before the marathon. Participants may be in individual therapy or counseling as well. Various neurotic problems may be combined. In our marathons single persons and couples do well together. The age range has been as great as from 17 to 70 years, and any generation gap was overcome easily. Likewise we have combined people with extremely diverse value systems, such as far-out Berkeley students, committed Mormons and Catholics, suburbanites, business men, and navy people. If a group is well conducted, there are advantages rather than disadvantages in diversity.

Leadership

The key to success of a marathon meeting is obviously the leader. His qualifications are largely similar to those of any psychotherapy-group leader. He should be warm and friendly, and have a sense of

humor. He is aware of group processes at all times and, in an indirect way, is in control of the group. His attention focuses simultaneously on the individual discussed, on the other individuals in the group, and on the general group dynamics. His leadership is as unobtrusive as possible, and, discreetly, he stimulates the group to find solutions instead of offering them himself. The awareness of power struggles generating between himself and the group, or within the group, is of vital importance. His main function is guiding the group toward understanding life styles and uncovering hidden goals.

One distinguishing function of the marathon-group leader is that unlike the traditional group leader, he does play a dual role: He is a participating member of the group as well as its leader. However, he will not offer his own problems for discussion unless specifically requested to do so by the group, and then will be as brief as possible.

ADVANTAGES

The goals of the marathon are much the same as in other psychotherapy groups: to work out ways for changing the individuals' life styles, which includes changing their attitudes and motivations, i.e. setting more realistic and more useful goals. Participants should obtain clarification of individual dynamics and group processes; realize that others have problems, too; and acquire consensual validation by asking group members' opinions about themselves, about values and goals in general. This the group setup enables by supplying a here-and-now situation in which members can solve conflicts by striving for more open and harmonious human relationships. They thus head for greater personal productivity and creativity, toward a more joyful life, all of which is a part of increasing respect and genuine kindness toward other human beings, a general increase of social and communal feeling. Helene Papanek (3, p. 47) and Danica Deutsch (2, p. 57) have dealt in some detail with specific aspects relating to the above.

If disclosing, understanding, and changing psychological dynamics are the goals of group psychotherapy generally, what are the advantages of the marathon over shorter group sessions? (a) Expediency presents itself as one of the main advantages. Instead of repeated warm-up periods, only one is needed. (b) The fatigue generated in a marathon may help break down resistance, as described by Bach (1). (c) Especially in the case of family units, when

these participate in a marathon, a prolonged session may serve to open up communication within this unit and thus may break the impasse that may have blocked other family therapy (6). (d) Marathons allow group members to remain in touch long enough for occasional extreme reactions of stirred-up members to be dealt with. (e) Longer sessions bring about more genuine commitments for life-style changes. And finally, (f) by the end of a ten-hour session, skepticism and suspicion have usually given way to a feeling of contact, purpose, and relatedness to a larger degree than in multiple shorter group sessions. Extended togetherness creates a climate of belongingness and social feeling.

ENCOUNTER VERSUS THERAPY MARATHONS

Group therapy at present seems to fall into two categories: the more traditional therapy groups which confine their interaction to verbal communication, for the most part; and the encounter groups, such as "T" groups, sensitivity groups, Synanon, Gestalt, and others which utilize sensory awareness techniques and physical contact (4). Some encounter groups seem to help their participants to overcome the feeling of isolation in modern society. But there are also reports of negative results, as the following: "Dr. Irvin D. Yalom of the department of psychiatry at the Stanford University Medical School conducted a study that included 18 different groups and 204 patients. Of the 169 members (all Stanford undergraduates) who attended the entire group experience, 17 suffered significant psychological damage as a direct result of their group experience" (5).

Because of such casualty figures it seems important that a clear line of demarcation be drawn between encounter-group marathons and group-psychotherapy or counseling marathons. Irvin Yalom brings out the difference between the two categories in the following statement: "At present, groups, self-disclosure, interpersonal closeness, touching are 'in,' yet the medium is *not* the message. Group therapy is not primarily a vehicle for closeness and human contact. It is a method for effecting therapeutic change in individuals" (8, p. 85).

Obviously, the marathons carried out from the Individual Psychology approach belong to the category of the extended traditional therapy groups. No encounter games are played. Verbal communication, observation of body language, and occasional psychodrama or role-playing are the techniques. Understanding and change of

goals in the direction of increased social feeling are the purpose. We stress in our marathons concern, understanding, and encouragement to change, just as is done in the other Adlerian forms of individual and group psychotherapy.

SUMMARY

There are certain advantages of expediency and dynamics which marathons have over repeated shorter psychotherapy sessions. The present paper described an adaptation of this method to the Adlerian approach.

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