



"HENRI COANDA"
AIR FORCE ACADEMY
ROMANIA



"GENERAL M.R. STEFANIK"
ARMED FORCES ACADEMY
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DEATH IN THE ROMANIAN CULTURE

CASE STUDY PRESENTATION/ ADLERIAN APPROACH

Mihaela Alina STATE

Cabinet individual de psihologie IBV4243/TEL. 0770595825

Abstract: *"To live with death" can be considered a pun, but basically it constitutes a starting point for reflections upon death. In time, people everywhere have been preoccupied with questions regarding death, loss, immortality. Thoughts about death affect life in various ways. Some are threatening and scary, others are useful and inspiring. The thoughts about our own death or that of close ones cause sadness, anxiety. Death threatens everything that we know and appreciate. The meanings that we attribute to death and the reactions to these meanings are different for each individual. The perception of death is socially determined, with significant differences in different cultural areas. These differences appear as a result of some religious, cultural convictions, of the environment in which the man lives, of the family atmosphere, of the emotional climate. Attachment lies at the basis of any connection. A person who does not know how to become attached, will never know to separate either. If the relationship of attachment has been uncertain, then the separation phases are lived improperly and the mourning labor is not solved. There are people who do not get attached at all, for fear of separation, there are people who get too much attached, they are very adhesive and they experience separation in a very difficult way. In any relationship, there are four phases: attachment, connection, separation and mourning. If the mourning process is not accomplished, the person will not be able to get involved in another relationship and will not connect in an authentic manner, it will be just a substitute for the lost bonding. If mourning and grieving are not accomplished, the person will stay mentally blocked in the past. This shows the person's inability to integrate the loss and to move on, to adapt to a life without the deceased one. In this paper I will present the case of a patient I have worked with in psychotherapy from an Adlerian perspective, assisting her in grieving the loss of her son, offering therapy and support psychological assistance to allow her to adapt to a life without her son.*

I. CASE STUDY PRESENTATION

Case description:

For ethical and professional reasons, the patient will be called VICTORIA, this being just a literary nickname. Victoria came to the

office after being previously scheduled by phone by her best friend at the time. He asked me to see her telling me that Victoria really needed to talk to a psychologist, since her son brutally died in a traffic accident. The accident happened about a month before the meeting.

Socio-cultural aspects:

Victoria is a woman who raised her child on her own since he was six years old, forming together a single parent family. Her family was a modest family, living in the countryside, in a mountain area, accustomed to nature and destiny hardships. The family was Romanian, of Orthodox religion, with higher education. Now Victoria is living in a small town in the central part of Romania, she has established a business on her own, she has a medium- high socio-economical status, and she is 44.

Case conceptualization:

I received Victoria nervously. She came in awe, in true pain obvious from her whole being. She was not a person, but a source of tears and a pair of blue eyes around which a human being could be seen. I was shocked by her appearance, her speaking, the way she kept her son's photo and she was asking: „have you ever seen such a beautiful child?” ...

In an odd way, I felt, from her very first visit to my office, an extraordinary force which was hidden behind this huge pain. There was so much passion, so much real feeling, that I knew that together we would be able to redirect this vital force to the path of rediscovery and personal reconstruction.

Victoria spoke about her son, about the fact that he was the result of a failed marriage, that he meant her life, her reason for being, that all her efforts as a single mother were directed towards her son's shaping and development. Dan was an amazing child. Talented, sportive, poet, a good student, a good friend, very loved by his colleagues, an exceptional child. Victoria was tormented by feelings of guilt. She was sorry that due to her continuous work and her special efforts, she could not spend enough time with Dan lately. I asked her to tell me about her son's results.

She proudly showed me some of his lyrics. I asked her who was responsible for the evolution of this child? Who contributed to his raising and becoming? Who made sure that

this child became a beautiful, responsible character, with a social interest, generous and upright, appreciated and loved by all the people he met? Who supported him in his educational actions? Who ensured his participation in sport competitions? Who stood by him when he succeeded and when he failed?..... Victoria understands the idea. She knows that without her efforts, her maternal dedication, Dan could not have become what he was. For the first time she says, she manages to change perspective and the feeling of guilt is diminishing. I talk to her about the difference between being guilty and feeling guilty. But we are just starting the journey.....I need to state the fact that Victoria has begun psychotherapy and we started together searching and discovering personal, internal resources, without using medication.

Slowly, Victoria starts to reveal herself, the therapeutic alliance is built and widens more and more. Personally, I think that a good therapeutic alliance brings about the success of every therapy. From my chair, I gradually and deeply entered Victoria's life, and later on her lifestyle.

Thus, I found out that Victoria and her son fought Death long before this appeared. Six months before the accident, after some periodic control, Dan was under suspicion of leukemia. He was admitted to different hospitals, several meetings with well-known doctors, from the capital and even in the best medical centres, took place.

Blood tests were not conclusive, the medical approaches were confusing, they could not give a definite diagnosis. Victoria was struggling, searching, trying to find answers and she was praying. The last months of her existence, before the accident were tormenting and she kept running between hospitals, cities, churches. She was looking for solutions and she tried everything to save her son. Meanwhile, Dan got acquainted with the feeling of being caught in the claws of death....One way or the other, even before meeting actual Death.....Until one day, when a dedicated doctor, discovered that Dan's „illness” was in fact a lab mistake, given by a substance which was less used in medical labs.



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Therefore, back to life. Until the fatal day, when „the dark character” dashed into her life when she was not even thinking about it. And now in the psychotherapy office, she was confused, angry, lacking faith, without any existential purpose.

Together we followed a long and difficult road, with ups and downs, blockings and decodings, with understanding and question marks, but never giving up. Together we underwent the specific stages of grieving, I dealt with denial, I assisted and helped to honour her fear, to manage her protest, we stepped together towards acceptance and understanding, then the fight, the rediscovery of the self and the creation of a new meaning in life.

Then I followed the step of knowing Victoria starting with early childhood, since every person creates her/his own personality, lifestyle, starting with her/his birth. From the interaction with the environment in which he is brought up, the child observes and draws some conclusions. He learns what to do, how to do it, to feel, to think. He establishes purposes to be fulfilled. All these landmarks are created unawares, and then they shape the way we operate every day. In fact, our lifestyle reflects our personality. To understand her better, for her to know herself better, I tried to discover her lifestyle. What the parental figures meant to her, or any other adult representative figures from her childhood, family atmosphere, family constellation, birth order, gender relationship perceived as a child, convictions which were created at that time, but which interfered with her growth. All these aspects are lifestyle components, they speak about moving through life. Our conviction system represents the bone system for the body. That is support. Convictions help us be what we are, but some of them, shaped under the form of early experiences, tend to „be in

our way” at some point in life. Then we do not get along anymore, we do not find ourselves, we cannot get back the way we were and we cannot choose a direction in life. This is why it is important to discover these convictions that interfered with our growth and which do not match the actual life situation. Then I did research on how my patient approached life tasks, like intimacy, family, friends and social network, work. I was interested in her memories of her accomplishments and last but not least in her early memories. Our memory is selective and it is full of meanings. Not by accident, during some moments of our life we think of some memories and not others. Remembering is just a metaphor of the actual situation of our life, it shows the emotion present at that moment, the way towards which we are turning or what we are running from, it shows our qualities, resources, our strengths and sometimes even solutions to the problems we are facing. Victoria underwent a period during which she could not bring childhood memories into therapy. Her return to her own past was a very difficult task. A strong emotional blockage kept her still, not allowing her to go back in time. With the help of therapeutical stories, psychodramatic methods and „discussions with the inner child”, I found out that when she was 12, she had been abused by a family member. Another rage, another rebellion, other torments of the child who, from an early age, dealt with loss, learnt to live in suffering, assimilating it and impregnating it within the coordinates of her life. For her joy, trust, other people’s appreciation, other people’s good will, were unknown. And unawares, we turn to those people and situations that confirm and validate our convictions. Victoria understood this aspect of her life, and she understood the choices she made throughout her life. This pattern of thinking with the unconscious purpose of

suffering turned towards her ex-husband, that she separated from when Dan was 6. A man who validated her conviction about men and marriages which are „unhappy”. Then Victoria managed to unlock some memories, she spoke about meaningful dreams, all being entrance gates, access gates towards knowledge and self-understanding.

My intervention plan took into consideration:

1. *The acceptance of the loss reality.*
2. *Working with suffering: going through the stages of mourning, assisted management of anger, working with aggressive energy, working with the self, emotional expression.*
3. *Adapting to a world from where the deceased person is missing.*
4. *Emotional re-focusing (going on with life).*
5. *Rediscovery of personal resources, qualities, internal strengths and their value.*
6. *Adjusting convictions which interfered with the person's growth and the understanding of mistaken purposes.*
7. *Lifestyle improvement and creating a new meaning in life.*
8. *Optimal approach of life tasks as a result of analysed lifestyle.*

In the psychotherapy approach of this case I had the following guidelines as principles of my interventions:

- *Pain is an individual process, each individual deals with loss in an original and unique way.*
- *Pain is an opportunity of inner development, as a result of limit-experiences we discover the richest inner resources.*
- *Pain can be manifested in an environment which provides safety for the grieving person*
- *Pain cannot erase an unwritten natural law: we are genetically programmed for life*

I will further present the summary of my patient's lifestyle, realised with the help of Adlerian methods and techniques. I used the lifestyle inventory, a working instrument that I used not only to collect data, but also as a possibility of psychotherapy

intervention. What is the lifestyle of a person and how does it help to know it in an psychotherapy approach? I further present some clarifications meant to facilitate the comprehension of the process:

“The lifestyle of every individual is a singular matrix of thought, feeling and action, which is unique and represents the context (*Zusammenhang*) in which all the specific manifestations must be considered.” (Shulman&Mosak, 1995). In time, Adler named it guideline, life plan and then lifestyle.

Lifestyle components:

1. about „what it is” (our individual self and the reality we deal with)
 - The self:

It comprises: sense of the body (what „I” is), identity (who I am), self-image (what I am), self-esteem (what quality I have), the self as an object (what affects me).
 - The image of the world or *Weltbild*:

It is a set of convictions about everything that is „external” to the self. It comprises:

 - convictions about life in general;
 - convictions about the social world – from culture and especially from personal convictions.
2. about the values and behaviours that we will follow to solve „what it is”
 - The ideal self (guide):
 - It is the ultimate purpose of that person's life;
 - „orientation point” for guiding the “movement line”;
 - the effort in this direction is endless;
 - Moral judgments:
 - the ideals judge what is important or not, good or desirable;
 - basic ethic attitudes are considered more or less an individual psychological matter rather than a result of mass propaganda or social systems.
 - Methods (how to be done)



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- there are methods used consistently during that person's life, as behavioural techniques for the effort to reach the main purpose;
- every main purpose can have one or more methods, and similar methods can be found associated with different purposes;

3. Lifestyle influences: Lifestyle influences are biological, psychological and social.

THE SUMMARY OF FAMILY CONSTELLATION – VICTORIA

A second child in a family of two children and psychologically the second born, the daring, rebel, impulsive Victoria was raised in the family trying to do everything to get what she wanted. Unlike her brother, S. arrogant and proud, hidden rebel, superficial and withdrawn, Victoria found her special place by being self-confident, creative and humorous, the artist in the family during childhood.

The atmosphere in the family was tense, conflictual and intimidating, and the family values were education and religion.

The male model offered by the father, M., was that of the dominant, powerful, handsome, but very tough, violent man with a strong justice sense and a great will to impose power and supremacy and to have them acknowledged.

The female model offered by the mother, B., was that of the complex, evolved mother, a mixture of contrasts, „fire and rock”, full of force, energy and though strong, very understanding and kind to the loved ones. She spread around much affection, was open to communication and her main concern was for her children to be well taken care of.

The female model was completed by the grandmother, a good and kind person who always had something put aside for Victoria. Later, a good and elegant teacher, charitable and understanding, she completes the feminine portrait in Victoria's life.

The gender relationship was a tense one, in which the man was violent, dominant, aggressive and hostile, provider and financial source for the family, and the woman took care of the house, children and did not allow to be criticised in society and give up an unhappy marriage. Her children were above all, and the woman puts up with everything for their sake.

THE SUMMARY of early recollections (interpretation)

I receive joy and silence in my life and special things come to me. The woman works, shares and brings peace and silence in my life. The woman works a lot, but not in vain.

I know that good things are kept somewhere, in a corner for me and I am happy to receive them in a special way..

Everything shines when I win, I know to be special and to reach the top and be above all.

THE MAIN PURPOSE (not aware of) :

I try to be different and to do things in a special way; I know how to run when I identify danger.

The others are against me, they are aggressive towards me and they use me. Life is tough and hostile, a battlefield, a maze through which the woman has to find a way out.

Therefore I try to push away those who come in my way, I have learnt to fight bare-handed, to run and to defend myself, to work a lot to earn my safe place in the world, somewhere „above the others”.

IDEAS WHICH INTERFERE WITH GROWING:

1. V. thinks that the man must be proud of what the woman does.
2. V. thinks that men must be dominant to be strong.
3. V. thinks that the woman must be „petrified” to resist in life.
4. V. thinks that the woman must not give up when confronted with some difficulty, she is built and meant to fight.
5. V. thinks that you can measure your force by provoking fight or inviting to fight.
6. V. thinks that the others are unfair, use her and abuse her.
7. V. thinks that marriages are unhappy.
8. V. thinks that the woman is meant to work very much and at any cost, it is the only way to reap success and to enjoy it.
9. V. thinks that you must do everything to be above all, **only than you can be safe.**

THE MOST MEMORABLE OBSERVATION:

The family is a place in which the man is bad, tough, violent and he brings a lot of sadness and unhappiness.

QUALITIES AND STRENGTHS:

1. V. is brave and tenacious, she is a true fighter.
2. V. is intelligent and she has the right strategies at hand at all times, she finds the right solutions to the problems she deals with.
3. V. is not defeated by anything, she fights all the way, she is a warrior.
4. V. is a dreamer, creative and with a high aesthetic sense.
5. V. has leader qualities, she is a good organiser, she always knows what she has to do.
6. V. is ambitious, perseverent, tends to reach her aims.
7. V. has a sense of humour, is flexible and open to new horizons.
8. V. is feminine and beautiful, she knows how to glow in front of the others when she wants it.
9. V. is adventurous, willing to explore and to know.

10. V is generous and honest.
11. V. can create projections, making her own comfortable world and isolated from the hardships of the world.

The implications of the psychotherapy approach/ Conclusions

An important aspect for V. was to understand the mistaken position that she had adopted towards the world, through her experiences in early childhood. Giving up hostility, she learned to receive and not just to offer out of the fear of being rejected, she considerably improved her social relationships, she approaches the task of friendship in a more confident way, and she has built a real support network. Surprisingly, using her qualities and internal strengths („no one saw me like this” she says with tears in her eyes), she re-balances her self-esteem and she has the courage to imprint a new direction to her professional life. Today she is studying psychology, a totally different field as compared to her professional activity, she is a second year student and she has very good results and she has passed all exams with flying colours. To commemorate her son, she chose to do something useful for the living ones. She organises and sponsors every year a sport championship for gifted children in the county teams, who play professional football, like Dan did. The sport championship offers a honorary cup bearing her son’s name, and thus, every year, Dan is present among those children, who play in his memory. The event is already well-established, filmed, awaited and every year Victoria manages to give happy moments, honour, trust and courage to the children participating in this competition. It is a method of true commemoration of the son beyond old rituals, customs or preconceptions, it is a method of much interest and social utility, that Victoria thought of when she discovered her resources and internal strengths, creativity and generosity. Adjusting wrong convictions, self, life, world-conceptions helped her redefine her femininity, accepting her position towards the world and towards the man. This woman’s evolution in life was governed by rebirth despite multiple losses. Of course, there are moments of breakdown, severe sadness, mourning, especially around



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important dates in the calendar, during the winter holidays, but these are her sacred, intimate, isolation and praying moments, that she manages today with trust and a lot of courage. Her choice is called LIFE and PRESENCE.

Adlerian psychotherapy is a psychotherapy of encouragement, of respecting the man's individuality and approaching it in a holistic way. Just like in medicine Hippocrates said that „there is no disease, there is a sick person”, a concept of uniqueness is necessary in the psychotherapy approach. Individual suffering remains unique, the suffering of a mother who lost her child is comprised in a development of the unnatural. Everything that contradicts normality is difficult to understand, to accept, and I think that this idea is to be found irrespective of the culture, religious aspects, dogma and rituals of a community.

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