The Therapeutic Possibilities of Tabletop Roleplaying Games

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The "Talking Cure," originally postulated by Breuer and Freud, is the theory that therapist and patient explore emotional and psychological issues by talking through them (American Psychological Association, 2024d). Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG), like Dungeons & Dragons, are narrative based cooperative games where players explore in-depth worlds, complete group objectives, while being guided by a game master (GM). Therapy and tabletop roleplaying games both have guided narration and social interaction. The narrative and social aspects of tabletop roleplaying games provide therapists with a unique tool for psychological treatment.

In TTRPGs, the GM facilitates the rules and acts as narrator for the players, creating vivid descriptions of the world and acting as the non-player characters (Davis & Johns, n.d.). The game is usually played in person around a table but in recent years has expanded to online formats. TTRPGs use inexpensive tools like rule books, polyhedral dice, paper, and pencils making it accessible to use in therapy sessions (Slaughter & Orth, 2023). Due to their popularity, TTRPGs over the last decade have had an increase in research to determine the health and psychological effects on patients (Varrette et al., 2023).

TTRPGs are a relaxing social gaming environment where players are allowed to act out fantasies with a group in a creative safe space. This type of relaxation can be used to reduce stress. Stress has been linked to numerous physical and psychological diseases like hypertension, addiction, anxiety, and depression (American Psychological Association, 2024c). The American Psychological Association (2024c) recommends several ways to help reduce the body's stress like exercise, getting enough sleep, and connecting with others socially. TTRPGs provide a social activity that meets the requirements of relieving stress (Merrick et al., 2024). On the other hand, there is the possibility that games can induce stress or anxiety in players by interacting with triggering material (Kilmer et al., 2024). To prevent this, the GM running the game will need to discuss possible triggers and stressors to avoid in the first session

(Yuliawati et al., 2024). This way they can promote a safe gaming environment for everyone. TTRPGs are an effective tool to manage stress and can also be used to develop critical life skills.

Skills like communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork are core to TTRPGs (Yuliawati et al., 2024). Using these skills in a safe positive environment allows players to develop them while having fun. Therapists utilizing TTRPGs as a means of therapy will need to make sure a supportive engaging environment is maintained to ensure development of these skills (Yuliawati et al., 2024). To create this, the therapist/GM has to establish a positive and supportive environment at the beginning, encouraging everyone to participate and prevent or mediate possible negativity from the players. Kilmer et al. (2024) discovered that this supportive environment could be achieved with children who had been negatively affected during the COVID-19 lockdown. Even though it was an online setting, the children who participated along with their guardians reported positive changes in socializing, communication and critical thinking skills (Kilmer et al., 2024). This nurturing environment led to fostering growth in self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy theory is the theory that an individual can affect the outcome of one's goals and tasks. In short, it is their confidence in their skills and abilities leading to success (American Psychological Association, 2024e). In a clinical study Slaughter and Orth (2023) describe the success of a session that focused on developing communication skills of an inpatient psychiatric group. In the clinical setting the GM had to tailor the sessions to meet the specific therapeutic goals of the group to aid with treatment (Slaughter & Orth, 2023). Patients felt that they improved their interpersonal communication skills and liked the smaller group format (Slaughter & Orth, 2023). In both studies the researchers found that patients had a positive increase in social skills and self-efficacy. Development of self-efficacy also helps patients with anxiety.

The American Psychological Association (2024a) defines anxiety as an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. This is

different than fear. Anxiety is a long-lived response to a threat in the future (American Psychological Association, 2024a). There are various life skills that can help manage anxiety along with therapy and medication. With TTRPGs, skills like assertiveness, self-esteem, problem solving, exposure therapy and a support group can be formed (Merrick et al., 2024). To ensure skill development, the GM provides guidance in a group setting to ensure that all players are allowed to practice and grow together (Slaughter & Orth, 2023). People don't learn and grow at the same pace, unlike their character counterparts in the game. To help maintain this balance the GM should cultivate a supportive group of players.

When looking at using TTRPGs for exposure therapy to treat anxiety, a supportive group structure will be critical. The goal of exposure narratives is to introduce players to a particular issue they are dealing with. To aid with this the therapist can ensure that the group of individuals all suffer from similar anxiety issues, like social anxiety (Varrette et al., 2023). It is important to create safety tools in case an uncomfortable topic is encountered in a session. This can be as simple as a player raising their hand or showing the GM a paper with a red X on it. The group should establish a signal with the GM in their first session and discuss what topics will come up (Varrette et al., 2023). Having a group debriefing at the end of a session will help also by discussing topics that came up and how they were handled (Yuliawati et al., 2024). The use of TTRPGs to build life skills can help treat anxiety, they can also be used with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to aid in treating anxiety.

CBT is a type of psychotherapy where the patient challenges negative thoughts about themselves and the world to change unwanted behavior patterns (Varrette et al., 2023). This type of therapy could be integrated with TTRPG sessions. The GM would develop the session, integrating situations the players could react to, focusing on specific behaviors the patients are working on. Slaughter and Orth (2023) discovered that TTRPG group therapy sessions provided opportunities for players to work on regulating emotions, positive interactions with peers, and improving frustration

tolerances all which translate to the real world. CBT could be done in one-on-one sessions or large group settings. The normal format of roleplaying game sessions would need to be modified to accommodate this type of therapy. Normal sessions include a recap of the previous session at the beginning but don't usually include a session debrief. A session debrief would be critical to add so that explanation and discussion can occur around the behavior that is being practiced (Yuliawati et al., 2024). This also allows the GM to confirm that players are learning and to reaffirm the behaviors the group is working on. Although it isn't common in the TTRPG environment, it could be important to interrupt the narrative to review the behaviors being worked on at that point in the scenario. Though CBT can be useful to help treat behavioral, anxiety, and mood disorders it can also be used to help treat depression (Yuliawati et al., 2024).

Depression as defined by the American Psychological Association (2024b) is an extreme sadness or despair that can last for days which interferes with daily life. It can manifest symptoms like pain, weight loss or gain, sleeping disruptions, and lack of energy (American Psychological Association, 2024b). Continual therapy and medication management between prescribing physician and therapist is recommended. As the patient continues to manage their depression, social interaction and maintaining a regular routine is advised. The social and epic story telling of TTRPGs provide a regular social engagement for someone managing depression (Merrick et al., 2024). Due to the length of story arcs, there is potential for players with depression to encounter possible triggers that could affect their depression. To help mitigate this, the GM at group formation discusses any topics that may bother the players, and they decide on a safety method to stop a narrative if a player becomes uncomfortable (Yuliawati et al., 2024). This helps maintain a safe gaming environment for all players. The regular routine and social nature of TTRPGs is a unique tool therapists can use to provide individual or group therapy.

Tabletop role-playing games provide an escape from the realities of everyday life. The stories created allow players to unwind and relax from stress. As players explore the narratives, they become

more assertive and learn new problem-solving skills improving their self-esteem. As the player's self-esteem grows, they become more confident in their skills and abilities, increasing self-efficacy. If a narrative is tailored properly, it can be used for exposure therapy and CBT for players with anxiety. The group social aspect and routine of regular sessions can help those manage depression. The narrative and cooperative social experience of tabletop role-playing games allow therapists to provide treatment in a unique engaging way.

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