

# **An Experiential Psychotherapeutic Approach to Children in Mourning**

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## ***Abstract***

*The trauma of losing a family member is experienced differently by children depending on their age and level of development. Although every mourning process is unique, all children go through 4 stages: denial, protest, hopelessness and solving the situation. Some children may remain trapped on any one of these levels. Many children prove to be resilient when an important family member dies. The protection factors can be either individual or coming from the family, and therapists must take them into account when assisting children who have suffered losses. The experiential therapeutic approach, in which we use creative expressive techniques as provocation, helps children blocked in the mourning process get closer to their blocked emotions in a non-threatening manner, express them and follow the natural path of integrating loss.*

*I will present three cases of children who suffered the loss of an important family member and who were assisted in their mourning process.*

***Keywords: children, mourning, experiential psychotherapeutic approach***

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## **I. Introduction**

The death of a family member is one of the most powerful traumas that can appear in a child's life. The reactions the child has when losing a family member depend on his age, stage of development, and emotional closeness to that person. Before starting the therapeutic process with children with unfinished mourning, it is important for the therapist to understand the aspects related to the loss and pain associated with it, as well as some general indicators regarding the therapeutic methods that can be applied.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1973) presented five stages that one experiences when a dear person passes away: denial and isolation, anger, negotiation, depression and acceptance. Most therapists expanded these stages to a series of loss cases. In her book "Too scared to cry" (1990), Lenore Terr discusses the theme of mourning process presented by John Bowlby in his 3 books, "Attachment, Separation and Loss", in the shape of 4 stages that children experience: denial, protest, hopelessness and solving the situation. She demonstrated that a child could remain trapped in any stage, and the therapist must not hurry or push the child to pass from one stage to another. Yet, as specific problems are solved, the child begins to move on by himself. Children in general have the ability to naturally pass through all stages of mourning, but it is sometimes possible that the messages, they receive about expressing their feelings and which they internalize, block their normal evolution. For instance, messages such as "It is not ok to cry. It is not ok to be angry about the loss you suffered", are inappropriate for mourning situations.

There are some matters that a therapist must take into account when working with a child who has suffered a loss. The child can be confused, can feel abandoned, can blame himself, can be fearful; he can feel betrayed, he can feel the need to take care of his parents, can have feelings of sadness, anger, shame or misunderstanding. The therapist should assess the case he is confronted with to the best of his ability, in order to focus the therapeutic process on these problems as well (V. Oaklander, 2000).

Many children prove to be resilient when an important family member dies. Lin and al. (2004) take into account a series of protection factors involved in this situation: (1) family factors (the warmth of the surviving parent, the availability to maintain discipline and lack of mental health problems); (b) individual factors related to the child (assessing negative events as being less threatening to his wellbeing, and on the other hand, considering oneself effective in his effort to face daily stress). Taking into account these factors of

protection, the individual work techniques with the child can be combined with family work techniques.

In Gestalt theory, Rinda Blom (2006) considers that the therapist's objectives in assisting children, who have experienced significant losses, are:

1. Accepting the reality of the loss and the new context

Initial shock reactions and disbelief are replaced over time by admitting the new reality. In general, after the age of 6, children can achieve an abstract level of understanding about the finality and irreversibility of the situation. Explanations must be given in a manner the child can understand. It may be necessary to repeat the explanations patiently.

2. The experience of pain connected to loss or the work on the emotional aspects of loss

A wide variety of emotions can be presented as normal reactions to loss. Painful feelings are present in children especially on a somatic and behavioral level. Children must be assisted in approaching this task one step at a time, as they do not master the ability to cope with these emotions yet.

3. The experienced feelings are the same as for adults.

Children manifest feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety and other emotions connected to loss. From a systemic view, it must be taken into account that the reactions of the adults influence the manner in which children cope with these emotions.

If we help children cope with these emotions, they are provided with the opportunity to experience self-control. Experimenting with their feelings can be achieved through various expressive-creative means: drawing, molding, metaphoric stories, play and puppets." Expressive-creative methods are vehicles which bring the unconscious contents to the level of consciousness, through the use of symbols. This symbolic language is to be deciphered by the therapist. This is why it is of utmost importance how he manipulates this material. Explanation and interpretation are considered ungrounded if they are not directly perceived and felt by the child." (Vladislav, E. 2014).

4. Adjusting to the change of the environment

The fourth task in the process of regaining health is rearranging, restructuring and redefining the place and role of children regarding the absence of the deceased person. Adjustment is a process, and for children, it implies that they must be assisted in each stage of life, as they grow.

5. Reinvesting in life

The relation which existed before with the lost person must be emotionally redefined, given a place of its

own and integrated in the child's life. Briefly put, children must be helped to manage their own life and cope.

### **Case studies**

#### **Case 1. Raluca**

Raluca's father (Raluca is 7 years old) died 8 months ago in an accident in Africa. He had left there several months before with two friends in order to set up a business and talked with his family on Skype on a daily basis. Mother brought her daughter to therapy because she was worried about the fact that she did not cry for her father, except for the funeral. She avoided talking about her father and did not want strangers to know that her father was dead. Raluca was very close to her mother. They shared the same bed and she placed a big toy where her father used to sleep. She rearranged the photos of her father by the bedside. They had all their families and friends' support. Raluca was in her first school year and she adjusted well to school.

#### **Session 1**

Raluca was a smart, friendly child and established a good contact with the therapist. I noticed she was disturbed and saddened when her mother began crying while speaking about the loss of her husband. The girl showed a happy face and avoided talking about her father. She even said she had a daddy-replacement, his old friend Tom. She would play with him and his son. She said she sometimes thought her father had never even existed. She did not speak about him when she missed him. She thought he lived somewhere else now.

In the sentence completion test, she answered that she had forgotten what she had said to her father; she felt nothing about the separation and death, she was not interested in it. She stated she did not like to sleep and felt best when mother took her in her arms.

In contrast with her indifferent attitude towards her loss, the projective tests pointed to states of uncertainty and fear of abandonment. The house test showed isolation, avoidance of self-expression, and the fact that she did not allow others any access to her inner world. In the Duss fables test, anxiety, helplessness and fear of losing her parents were expressed. In CAT, there was fear of loneliness, of loss and the need to be supported by her mother, the need for physical contact, embraces.

*The hypothesis proposed was that Raluca was in the phase of denial of her father's loss. This was even more likely as her father's death was unexpected and violent, and she never saw her deceased father. Raluca was blocking her dysphoric feelings and avoided to admit her helplessness, sadness, by putting on a mask of power.*

In order to challenge her to express her place in the traumatic context, as well as her coping manner to external forces, I used the imaging method „The fight between the ship and the storm” (V. Oaklander 1988, page 16.) I asked her to imagine a small ship floating on the sea and then a storm wanting to sink the ship. She visualized in great detail the fight that the small ship had with the storm and chose an ending. “It would be normal for the ship to sink and the people on board, well if they can swim, they will swim. Such a small ship would never survive the storm. It would feel sad. It would have needed some help, people to pull it and put light on it from the lighthouse, so that it could sail somewhere with no storm.”

*Indirectly, through the metaphor suggested by this challenging exercise, Raluca made contact with her hidden emotions and expressed the need to be helped.*

#### **Session 2**

Raluca entered the office happily. She told me she had found another ending to the storm story. “It arrives in great speed where it desires, in Istanbul.” I noticed that her resistance surfaced again and that she wanted to show a strong Self.

I suggested to her the Family drawing through symbols technique. She had to think of all her family members and assign them another identity (animal, object, plant) suitable to them. I noticed that she chose to draw her father first. She drew him as a lion climbing a mountain in order to roar out loud. Her mother was a tigress, because she defended her, and taught her good things. Her grandfather was a flashlight, or a lamp, because he was funny. Grandmother was a dolphin, because she loved dolphins a lot. Her aunt was drawn like a tulip, because she liked tulips very much, and her uncle was an armchair because he had a big tummy and looked like an armchair. Raluca drew herself as a cozy bed. I then challenged her to give voice to the drawn characters saying that each should have a short conversation with the cozy bed. I emphasized the dialogue between the lion and the cozy bed. Thus, Raluca established a relation with the image of her father, in a non-threatening way.

At the end of the session, she declared that it had been a funny game.

#### **Session 3**

I suggested to Raluca the six-part story method (Mooli Lahad, 2013) using dramatization with toys.

The hero she chose was a pony calf named Mara. She told me it was 7 years old, with bright hair, pink and violet, with blonde crest and many flowers on it. “Mara is very happy and she is a hero. Her mission is to save her mother, because she was attacked by a

dragon. She said she had no help. The daughter punched the dragon and it was settled. It was in a barren place where mother had gone to find her some fruits that could not be found any longer". As far as meeting the dragon was concerned: "it is a little hard for her because the dragon has 6 hands and 8 feet. She fights with all her power and she suddenly stops and says: Oh, I have forgotten, I have 18 hooves, I mean hands, 19 heads and 18 legs. She kept them hidden. The dragon was amazed, it froze." "It passed away when she punched it. In the end, Mara took her mother and returned home."

In this story, Raluca expressed the theme of the Savior. From a rather masculine stance, (although the image was very feminine), she protected her mother from outer dangers. She had to activate her hidden powers in order to protect her mother, who did not have enough resources anymore.

*The hypothesis that took shape was that Raluca was noticing the reactions of her mother to loss and that the insecurity caused by her mother's weakness led to the denial of her own emotions. She took over the partner's role, for her mother.*

#### **Session 4**

This was a session in which both Raluca and her mother took part. We spoke about the stages of the mourning process. Raluca spontaneously said she was in denial, then that she was in acceptance and that she had gone through all three very fast. Mother admitted that she had cried for her husband and that it was very hard without him. With Raluca's approval, I read the story from the previous session to her mother. We were thus able to approach the savior role Raluca had towards her mother, whom she perceived as helpless. Mother assured Raluca that, although she did go through a difficult period, she continued to be the one that Raluca could rely on and that there was no need for the girl to be concerned with making her feel better. Mother said that Raluca was very much like her father. "He was like that too: resourceful, active all the time, he easily made friends, travelled a lot. Raluca is physically a lot like him."

*In this session, the mother and the daughter were able to share feelings about the loss and redefine their roles.*

#### **Session 5**

Raluca was asked to pick a place where she felt safe and draw it. She chose the garden of her grandparents. After she had found a state of inner comfort, Raluca made up stories on the images from TEMAS test. She chose as pleasant the images where the characters were happy, without difficulties and troubles. The unpleasant images had as common thread

the fact that "people are scared and do all sorts of things, think or dream about bad thoughts. They are sad or they fight". The most unpleasant image was the one she said about:

"A little girl woke up in the morning and did not see her father and mother, even though her mother had told her that she would stay at home the next day. At school, the girl looked into the mirror and said to herself: I miss my mother and father. After that, mother and father came and she embraced them and that was the end."

The created stories helped Raluca access the feelings she usually repressed. She asked me why I was asking her about her father and which mourning stage did I think she was in. She then spoke about her feelings of sadness about her father's loss. She told me she did not like going to the cemetery, she was very scared and she felt very sad there. She thought her mother was in stage three, that of crying.

I could notice that in this session, Raluca was in a normal process of integrating her father's loss. She came out of the denial stage and was able to talk about him and her feelings of sadness.

#### **Session 6**

Raluca molded a figure in clay, representing her father, as she remembered him, and another figure, representing herself. A conversation between the two figures took place and Raluca was able to tell her father what she felt about his premature death, expressed both anger and pain, allowed herself to cry. She then remembered many pleasant moments she had spent with her father: games, trips. In the end, she was able to say goodbye to her father and transformed the figure of her father in the gift he had given her during his lifetime and which would always remain in her heart.

#### **Session 7**

A month passed between the previous session and this one. Raluca showed up very happy. Mother said that Raluca did not avoid talking about her father anymore. They went together to the cemetery. Mother and daughter would share emotions about the loss they suffered in a direct manner, which led to the growth of trust within that relationship. Raluca no longer felt responsible for protecting her mother from negative emotions. They learned together to adjust to the new situations in their present life. The mourning process followed its natural course towards integrating the traumatizing experience.

#### **Comments**

When she was brought to therapy, Raluca was trapped in the defensive mechanism of denying the trauma connected to her father's death. The unacknowledged fear of losing her mother as well

(expressed only through the refusal of falling asleep) made her develop a protective role in relation to her mother. A mechanism of dissociation from negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, fear, was present in her, and she put on the external mask of a happy and powerful little girl. She was confused about her emotions and did not manage to express them. The metaphors she created by using expressive-creative techniques helped her get in touch with her blocked emotions and approach them in a non-threatening manner. Understanding the stages of the mourning process and sharing the experience of the suffered loss with her mother helped Raluca find a natural path to cope with the trauma of losing her father.

### **Case 2. Mihnea**

Mihnea (8 years old) lost his grandfather 5 months before. Death occurred suddenly. He felt sick during the night, the ambulance took him and he died in the hospital. When they buried him, Mihnea stayed with some friends. He was then wondering what took them so long, why they did not pick him up earlier. Since then, Mihnea began being afraid of staying alone, without his parents. He was afraid they would die and he would be left alone. He had an explanation for his fear: "My great grandmother had died a year before grandpa died. I said: who is next?" His parents were concerned that the boy had impulsive, irrational reactions when he was taken over by fear. For example, one day when grandmother went shopping, Mihnea got out of the house undressed (it was winter) to look for his grandmother, leaving the apartment door open.

### **Session 1**

Mihnea came with his father. He was worried and disturbed by the fact that Mihnea did not control these fears. He was also thinking about locking him inside the house when they are gone so that Mihnea could face his fears and try to overcome them.

I used an art-therapy technique – Draw a problem, in order to assess his ability to express disturbing emotions and coping strategies.

Mihnea drew Fear. He told me that fear came from his thoughts, such as something bad happening to his parents, like death. He drew it very big. He drew himself small and scared next to his fear. Mihnea's thoughts made it stronger. When fear became too big he thought that he would not stay alone for one minute. He became a dot in his drawing.

I dared him to find help to support him. Help was represented by the ambulance. He called 112 and the man in the ambulance was named Alin. Firefighters also showed up, but they could not put out his fear. Then some other help arrived: superhero Super-happy,

who told him: "You cannot change things. They will stay the same. If you trust yourself, you can overcome fear."

I asked him to note the thoughts given to him by Super-happy. These were: "Everything will be ok. Trust yourself. Be confident and spend more time with your parents. Trust that God will take care of your parents." For Mihnea, God is the main resource. He told me that God sent him the following message: "Think less about bad things and more about good ones. Cherish your family. Enjoy the time you spend with them."

### **Session 2**

This time, Mihnea came with his mother. The mother admitted that she had also cried for her lost father in secret. She said, feeling somewhat guilty, that there were photos of the deceased grandfather in their home. When I asked her how she felt during that period, the mother admitted she was angry that her father had left too soon and that they had not had time to talk more. She was disturbed by the fact that Mihnea would not stay for 5 minutes in the car or in the house when the parents got out. She would have liked him to get over it faster. She described Mihnea as an introvert child who found it hard to express feelings, although he was more open with her than he was with his father.

*I could notice how both parents valued emotional control, rationalization and how they tried to impose this model to the child as well. Mother did not allow herself to experience the phases of mourning; she forced herself to accept the loss. Yet the attitude of the parents regarding Mihnea's fear was different. Mother understood him more. Father would have liked to make him get over it faster. He thought Mihnea was overdoing it, that he was spoiled.*

When left alone with the therapist, Mihnea confessed, as if it were in reply to what his mother had said before, that he too used to hit the bed when he was alone, that he was angry that his grandfather was not there anymore. He said his fear had diminished a little, that he was not feeling that much restlessness when left alone.

We then spoke about the stages of the mourning process, anger being one of them.

I used the making up of stories based on two images of CAT test as a challenging technique. He identified himself in the story from image 5: "There was once a baboon family made up of a father and a child. The child had nightmares every night, he dreamt he would remain by himself. Father tried to help him but he could not. They went to a doctor to have an X-ray of his mind, to see how great his fear was. When he looked and saw his fear was that big, he told him

there was nothing he could do. After a while, the child understood and the fear vanished. From that moment on, he never had a bad thought. What had he understood? That he could not change things.”

After making connections between the story and his real life, Mihnea told me he thought fear would pass when he would accept that he could not change things. I was impressed with the depth of this remark coming from an eight-year old child.

We talked about the fact that what scared him the most was the sudden manner in which his grandfather disappeared, and that he understood that he could not control what was going on.

### **Session 3**

By using the empty chair technique, Mihnea was able to tell his grandfather what he wanted to say, but did not have the time to do it because of the sudden death. He expressed his emotions, especially his sadness and fear and he was able to say goodbye. In this session, Mihnea got closer to accepting the death of his grandfather.

### **Session 4**

Mihnea and both his parents participated in this session. They had the chance to share feelings about the loss of the grandfather.

His parents understood that they needed to take their time and have patience both with Mihnea and themselves, in order to go through the natural stages of mourning. They understood that Mihnea needed to receive verbal encouragements and hugs from them, whenever his fears appeared. Mihnea understood that fear would diminish if he focused more on positive thoughts.

### **Session 5**

After a month and a half, they all came back happy to the meeting. I found out that Mihnea had gone to the mountains with his parents. During that trip Mihnea went to the hotel room by himself at night. When the parents came into the room at night, he was already sleeping. His parents were proud of him. And Mihnea said his fear had decreased.

### **Comments**

Mihnea was a child with a cognitive development level above average, with a very good ability of understanding and expressing inner feelings. He was focused on finding solutions and had a negotiating attitude on a relational level.

His fear of losing his parents was considered to be a normal reaction to the trauma of losing his grandfather. Mihnea went through a typical mourning process for children. His parents wanted to hurry up this process, as they were rational persons repressing their feelings. Mihnea used inner coping strategies (faith in God and logical thinking, emotional control)

and needed emotional support and understanding from his parents.

### **Case 3. Cristina**

Cristina (aged 6) and her parents came to the psychotherapy office as the latter were worried about the changes in the girl's behavior after the death of her sister, two years ago. She was not a loving person with her parents anymore, sometimes seemed to be absent-minded, detached from them, and she would often cry apparently for no reason. She would sometimes manifest defiant behavior and she was very disorganized (she did not want to wash and wear the clothes her parents gave her).

The accident of her sister affected the entire family life. The mother was depressed and she focused all her energy on taking revenge (through courts) against those who had killed her daughter, and she sometimes had the tendency to reject Cristina and compare her to her older sister, who was more gentle and obedient. Even in the interview I had with the mother, she admitted the fact that she sometimes wished that Cristina had died instead of her sister. She was worried about the fact that the little girl would not cope with school, as she was so disorganized and stubborn.

The father, on the other hand, expressed affection towards the girl and they spent beautiful times together while playing.

*The little girl was going through a reactive post-traumatic state and they all needed support. I set out to help the parents overcome the moment of the accident, so that they could adequately involve in the relationship with their little girl, and, on the other hand, to help Cristina express those feelings that were not so easy to put into words.*

### **Session 1**

Cristina was defensive; she looked at me suspiciously, with a sad expression on her face. She knew why she had been brought to my office, but she was not ready yet to reveal her private feelings and thoughts about the accident of her sister and the present situation of her family. I started to talk to her, in order to secure her in our relationship and show her that I understood her.

I started by telling her that I believed she felt sad and alone without her sister and that she must have been very scared at the time of the accident. I assured her that, when her parents compared her to her sister, they were doing it because they missed her a lot and felt her absence. I told her I was sure they loved her very much as well, and that was why they were worried about her situation and wanted me to help her feel

better and have a better relationship with them.

During this time, Cristina watched me with interest, said nothing, but I knew she understood me and my words had a positive effect on her. Children always need to be talked to and offered explanations, they have a great ability to understand things, a much greater one than parents imagine. As Cristina was on the level of magical thinking at the time of her sister's death, it was possible she felt responsible for that.

I then engaged her in a talk about differences among people. Through various examples, we both concluded that there weren't any two people alike and that it would be boring if it were so. I was then able to make an analogy between her and her sister explaining the fact that, if she had other qualities, that did not mean she was inferior to her, she was just different and that they were equally cherished by her parents. At the end of this discussion, Cristina was more relaxed and accepted the idea to draw together. I used the cooperation technique (each person drew a line, the other completed it and in the end it resulted in a meaningful drawing).

Based on her drawing, Cristina made up a story: "Ana went to walk her dog and met the Tree. Granny came (it was her house) and asked the Tree where her grandchildren were because she had come to take them to lunch. The next day, the children met the sea. They made a boat trip and then a trip to the mountains. The third day they met the sun, who advised them not to sunbathe for too long."

Here are some important aspects revealed in the story: the attachment towards the grandmother, the desire to have contact with her parents (the sea and the mountain) and the magical-imaginative resources (the talking, living Tree).

In the discussion I had with her mother in the end, I helped her understand that the girl needed greatly to feel her affection and that she should not fear words, she could tell her daughter she loved her. There is a hypothesis according to which the girl resorted to this defiant behavior in order to draw the attention of her parents, as a cry for help: "I am alive, I am here and I am different from my sister." Mother understood and set the goal to change her behavior towards the child.

### **Session 2**

Mother told me that ever since she changed her way of relating to the child, Cristina was more loving to her. Cristina happily came to the office. I started a drawing through the cooperation technique. This time, I indirectly led the drawing to a house, two girls (Ana and Maria), a bent tree and clouds with thunders and rain. My intention was to direct her to

express feelings and thoughts about her sister and the accident (symbolized by the storm).

The title of the drawing is "Sisters" and together we created the following story:

**Cristina:** "Once upon a time there were two sisters. Ana, the elder sister, took the dog out for a walk."

**Therapist:** "It was evening."

**Cristina:** "There were thunders and lightning."

**Therapist:** "A strong wind began to blow."

**Cristina:** "Ana started crying."

**Therapist:** "She called for Maria."

**Cristina:** "Ana got home. Maria was standing in the rain crying."

**Therapist:** "Maria was lost in the forest."

**Cristina:** "She had met an apple tree."

**Therapist:** "The apple tree asked her why she was crying."

**Cristina:** "Maria said she got lost."

**Therapist:** "She said she was afraid."

**Cristina:** "The apple tree advised her to go home. Ana came and helped her."

**Therapist:** "But it was very dark and Ana got lost as well."

**Cristina:** "And then grandpa and grandma shouted for Ana and Maria. The girls found one another and they were happy."

**Therapist:** "Let's suppose it was only Maria who returned home, without Ana. What was Maria doing by herself?"

**Cristina:** "She told her grandparents what had happened. Maria saw Ana and shouted for her, but she did not see her because she was very far away. Maria was not crying any longer, only Ana was, because she did not find her sister. Ana arrived home too."

**Therapist:** "Let's suppose Ana did not return home. What happened to Maria?"

**Cristina:** "The next day, the sun began to shine and Ana was happy to see where she was going and she finally arrived home."

The fact that she often said "I don't want to", "I can't tell stories" and the message of the story: sisters finding one another and being happy together, made me understand that she did not want to talk about the loss of her sister. I had tried to propose something she was not ready for.

Therefore, I gave up this lead in order to direct myself towards the bent tree (symbol of her relation to the traumatizing factor) and I suggested to her that we should role play: she should be the tree and I should be nature.

**Therapist:** "Sit like a tree... It is now starting

to rain, to thunder and lighten, and there is a strong wind blowing". I made suggestive sounds. "What is the little tree doing?"

**Cristina:** "It is bending."

**Therapist:** "Show me how you bend, little tree. How are you standing?"

**Cristina:** She bent to the left; her arms and body were in a position suggesting pressure, depression, hopelessness, resignation. As she bent to her left side, it made me think about her relation to her mother.

**Therapist:** "How are you feeling there?"

**Cristina:** "It is hard, my body aches."

**Therapist:** "Now here comes the sun" (image of healing) "what is happening to you, little tree? The storm is ending and the sun begins to cast light and warmth upon you. What are you doing now?"

**Cristina:** "I am staying in the same position."

**Therapist:** "Very well. Stay in the same position."

**Cristina:** (after several minutes): "But it is too hard. I'd better come to my place. I do not want to remain like this... Now it is better."

**Therapist:** "How is your little tree feeling now?"

**Cristina:** "It is happy. It feels all right."

Thus, through metaphor and bodily involvement, we walked the path from trauma to healing. It could be noticed that Cristina had a tense experience of her relations with her mother, which was expressed through embarrassment in the left side of her body, and the father's intervention, symbolized by the sun – paternal, restorative principle, triggers change. These are the elements I would emphasize further on when counseling the parents. It is time for the father to spend more time with the child.

Given that I noticed Cristina said "I don't want to" a lot, I used a metaphoric story called "The little girl who held "I don't want to" in her arms". When creating this story, I took into account the information received from her parents, her preferences, making an indirect parallel to her real life situations.

**Therapist:** "Once upon a time there was a little girl who took *I don't want to* in her arms. ... Show me how she kept it in her arms! There, very well! Tighter... One morning, when she woke up, her mother told her to go wash herself. The little girl said *I don't want to*. Then mother called her to breakfast. What did the little girl say? *I don't want to!* The mother could not do anything else. Her father, seeing that she didn't wash or dress up, told her to go change her clothes and to brush her hair. But the little girl was holding *I don't want to* in her arms, so she did not do

what her father had told her to do, and replied to him... What? *I don't want to, I don't want to!* Then, her parents left for work. The little girl was left alone with *I don't want to* in her arms. When her mother came home from work, she called the little girl to dinner. But she said: *I don't want to!* because she was holding *I don't want to* tightly in her arms. Her father arrived as well, and, because it was her birthday, he brought her a beautiful dress as a gift. But she did not want to wear the dress because she was holding *I don't want to* in her arms.

Who do you think rang at the door? Grandma. She brought the little girl a big bag of sweets and fruits. What sweets do you like?... There were plenty of such sweets in the bag. And what fruits do you prefer?... Yes, there were some of those, too. It was a big full bag, and when the girl reached out her hand to take it, what do you think happened? Yes, indeed, she dropped *I don't want to* from her arms and forgot all about it; it rolled over on the floor and it was gone. The little girl ate a lot of sweets and fruits from the bag she received from grandma. Her father, seeing how happy she was, brought the dress again. The little girl, to everyone's surprise, put it on. The mother called everybody to dinner. The little girl said: "*I want to come, too.*" Mother was surprised, because the little girl would usually say *I don't want to*. Only grandma was laughing secretly because she knew what had happened to the little girl. And ever since then, the little girl has not answered anymore with *I don't want to* in response to her parents' requests, because she had lost *I don't want to*, and now they are all happy."

After listening carefully and involving herself in the story, Cristina confessed that she too had taken *I don't want to* in her arms, several years before, and that she could not get rid of it because she clung to it.

I asked her to look into the mirror when she said "I don't want to" and then "I want to", to repeat the sentences several times and to tell me when she thought she was more beautiful. She found out that she liked herself more when she was in the second situation. We ended the session in a relaxed manner and I suggested to Cristina that she should watch herself in the mirror when she says "I don't want to" and tell it differently if she disliked how she looked (suggesting the change in behavior, by introducing the idea of beauty).

#### Comments

This was one of the most prolific therapeutic sessions, taking into account the impact the metaphoric story had on Cristina. She created a bridge between herself and the elements within the story, without feeling in any danger to do so, as it could have



happened in a more direct approach.

### **Session 3**

We started the discussion based on the story of the little girl who had taken *I don't want to* in her arms and we made associations with situations from her real life. She told me that, at home, she started saying more "I want to" instead of "I don't want to". When she looked into the mirror, she noticed she was prettier when saying "I want to".

In her turn, her mother said she had noticed some changes in the girl's behavior. She was more flexible, more caring and less defiant.

I suggested that we should continue the game in which she was the tree and I was the cloud, but this time, only through drawing.

Together we made a series of 6 drawings and for each of them, Cristina created adequate stories.

Drawing 1: The little tree was tired because the sun overheated it. It was asleep, dreaming about the rain coming down to cool it. The cloud covered the sun a little bit in order to shelter the little tree.

Drawing 2: The cloud brought rain and a baby, a little girl. The little tree had a baby. The rain was cooling the two little trees.

Drawing 3: A big cloud showed up. The sky was almost black and the sun could barely be seen. There was hail and lightning. Some branches of the tree were torn apart. It could not face the storm. It bent down to the ground.

Drawing 4: The rain slowed down. The sun came out again. The cloud helped the little tree rise from the ground. The tree felt pain where the branches had been broken during the storm. A lot of grass sprung from the earth.

Drawing 5: The sun was shining in the sky. It was still dripping down a little. The little tree was healing in the light of the sun. The grass was green.

Drawing 6: The little tree grew and became strong. It was green. It was very close to the cloud because it wanted to thank it.

### **Comments**

By using the dripping clouds, the storm, the sun – I created various challenging situations that forced Cristina, who identified herself with the tree, to find solutions in order to resist the stressful events. I wanted to understand what her recovery possibilities and her resources were. On the other hand, I wanted to metaphorically suggest to her the idea of healing the wounds created by trauma. The girl reacted very well in all these situations, and her messages were very suggestive.

Her sister had a discreet apparition in drawing 2, and then vanished in drawing 3, when the storm was very intense. In this dramatic situation, a tree had vanished; the other remained, but was put to the ground (an image of her

negative, depressive state). In the following drawing, the tree rose (as it integrated the experience from the last session, although it still carried the scars of the past wounds), the grass grew (symbol of life). This time, rain and sun nourished life (the wish to live shows up).

The joy of living seemed stronger in drawing 5, where the grass was colored in green and the tree was healed. That tree was bigger; the emotional state was positive.

The last drawing was the statement of her generative power: the tree was big, healed and full of life and color. I noticed the nice gesture of gratitude of the tree towards the cloud (proof of a good therapeutic relationship).

### **Final comments**

The therapeutic process lasted for only 3 sessions, in which Cristina indirectly managed, through drawing and metaphorical stories, to express her depression and then to find resources for healing. In this intervention, creativity worked as a primary language for achieving insights and healing. Her parents also understood the girl's wish for unconditional love and protection, so they changed their attitude towards Cristina. Thus, the girl did not have to keep her defiant behavior any longer.

We saw each other again after 10 months. I noticed great changes in Cristina's look. She was more coquettish, she gave importance to the way she dressed. Meanwhile, Cristina had started school, with very good results. She stopped crying that easily and had warm relationships to her parents. She told her mother the story of the little girl who had taken *I don't want to* in her arms and every time she said *I don't want to*, her mother made sure to point it out to her, to both their amusement.

Following Cristina's wish, we had a series of 6 more sessions in which we dealt with different situations from her life through drawing, puppet play and molding: her relationship with the classmates, what it meant to be a good friend, how to get along better with her parents. I especially aimed to discover better ways to solve different problematic situations and stimulate creativity, expressivity and the growth of self-confidence.

During one of these meetings, she spoke indirectly about her sister, through puppet play (it was for the first time that she was doing it willingly), by telling different stories about their time together (games, gifts they had received from their parents etc). Cristina felt free to keep and share these pleasant memories about her sister as such, and these memories will never die. It was a sign that she had surpassed the traumatizing moment of her sister's death.

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