

transitional objects and their superpowers

Meet the author

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At the recent Bushcraft Professional Practice Group Conference, one of my colleagues gave me a gift because she knew I'd been through a difficult period. Among the items were a coffee cup which joined my collection of odd mugs, a birch-bark bird now dangling from a mirror in the living room and a felted acorn which adorns one of the cupboard handles in my kitchen.

The thing that's really struck me since bringing my treasures home, along with the whittled flowers and other items that we made over the course of the weekend, has been the lingering impact of an object that represents a positive experience.

What are transitional objects?

Donald Winnicott described transitional objects (or comfort objects as they became known in childcare circles) as items which provide comfort and reduce anxiety, allow for creative living, the experience of omnipotence and develop symbolic thinking and self-experience. While Winnicott primarily considered the importance of such objects for children during their formative years, further research confirmed these findings into adulthood (1) and many therapists use transitional objects between sessions in therapy (2) to provide comfort and a tangible link to the therapeutic relationship.

For those of us working with people in the outdoors, such objects can become powerful memory anchors that attach valuable meaning gained in their sessions to the objects themselves and transport that meaning back to the participant's everyday life.



What is the benefit of a transitional object?

How many times have you gone to a camp, youth club or church or any other type of event and walked away feeling re-fuelled and connected in an almost tribal manner? We carry a mixture of peace and excitement away...until we hit the first motorway services and realise that the world isn't in sync with the slow community we've cultivated over the previous few days.

Many of our participants experience this too, but their opportunities for holding on to the moments where they felt acceptance are far fewer. For many of the young people we work with in alternative provision or the adults we work with in outdoor therapy, their daily lives aren't filled with positive words, encouragement, self-esteem building experiences or the inherent belief that they can. The messages they receive from their peers, their home or their daily environment aren't based around a growth-mindset or the steady reassurance that they are capable. This is where transitional objects find their place.

Many people will have transitional items they're not even aware of: a clay sculpture their teacher called good; a picture mum left on the fridge until the corners curled; a bead bracelet your best friend at school made for you. These objects can be a tangible reminder that reactivates the emotional state associated with it (3). For example, the wonky stool that a young man builds over several sessions may remind him of the supportive male community he became a part of during the process.

Research on emotional memory and associative learning shows that cues associated with emotionally meaningful experiences are more likely to trigger the emotional states linked to those experiences later on. So, every time the person sees the object the nervous system may re-experience the, for example, safety and warmth of the moment. If a person re-experiences these precious moments again and again, it can over time cause a positive impact on their inner narrative and self-belief (4). This small object can become a quiet counter-story to a harsh inner voice.



How to make it matter

Placing your transitional object somewhere you can see it can provide little hits of validation; of 'you can do this', 'you've got this', 'we've got you'. These little reminders are tools that take our session in the woods and bring them into the participants' everyday lives, where those affirmations might not be so forthcoming. They can draw us back into a place of peace and calm (5), especially if we've introduced this idea to the participant by attaching an intention, a statement – not a judgement – to it.

“Whenever you see this object, let it remind you how capable and proud you felt when you made it”

A word of caution

Some thought is necessary here to make sure that we're sharing positive habits, not reinforcing negative ones. For example, in mindfulness sessions participants are often instructed to wander around and find an object that they think represents themselves. It's important to be mindful of the language we use.

One young person I worked with was incredibly tough to read. I sent the group off to find an object that represented themselves and watched this nine-year-old boy pick a leaf from a tree, grind it under his foot, dunk it in dirty water and sprinkle dirt over it. He brought back the leaf that showed how he felt about himself. We spent several weeks working on activities that built his self-esteem and sense of self-worth and the change in him over just eight weeks was phenomenal. Each week he took his made items back to school and his teacher – whom I'd shared this with – displayed it in the classroom. She was able to use his ability in the woodland to encourage his ability in the classroom. Imagine, however, if I'd missed what he was doing and he simply walked away with his abused leaf, carrying with him a broken and bruised representation of himself.

“I don't want it”

Sometimes participants don't want to take home something they've found or made. Don't force them. A teenage girl engaged in everything we did during the sessions. She was pretty good at knife skills and enjoyed doing it, but she never took anything home. On investigation I found that she had a pretty dysfunctional home life and anything of value that went home would be sold or traded for drugs and alcohol. Anything that her parents didn't see value in would be ridiculed, derided, criticised or intentionally ruined. She had learnt not to attach value to objects at all – for her, the benefit was in the making of the item and the affirmation of her ability that she could carry with her.

Conclusion

Remember that while being outdoors might be what we do for a living, the same principles apply to us. Place your successes in prominent places. Make obvious the reminders of your community, the colleagues and friends that support you and the things that bring you joy, strength or inspiration. Next time you send a group of students, participants or clients away, suggest to them that they put their made or found objects somewhere visible to remind them of today. Ask them to attach a statement to it. Give them the tools – the gift – of carrying today's self-discovery into the weeks and months ahead with them △

References

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