

Guided Imagery and Music

Case Study

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Abstract:

This case study outlines the use of Guided Imagery and Music as the treatment modality with a single woman in her mid-fifties.

The client was referred by a psychiatrist after a month's hospitalisation, where her diagnosis was: "Acute anxiety – depression – suicidal ideation".

The client had a long history of anxiety and periodic depression episodes.

A background history of the client is presented, followed by a review of significant gains over a series of thirty G.I.M. sessions. The client's imagery experiences during one particular selection of music are traced through its use in several different sessions.

This case study illustrates that Guided Imagery and Music was therapeutic in helping this client achieve some of her personal goals.

Introduction

Winifred was a 56-year-old single woman who was referred for Guided Imagery and Music (G.I.M.) by her psychiatrist, four weeks after her discharge from a psychiatric hospital. She had been hospitalised because of an acute anxiety state accompanied by depression and suicidal ideation. She remained in hospital for one month, and was treated with psychotherapy, antidepressants and antianxiolytic drugs. She was prescribed an antidepressant (Prothiaden 125 mgs nocte) and an antianxiolytic (Xanax 1 mg nocte), and was taking these during the G.I.M. series described here.

Winifred began G.I.M. in October, 1990, and had regular sessions, mostly weekly, with some breaks due to holidays. This case study covers 30 sessions from October, 1990 to August, 1991.

Family Background

Winifred was the eldest of five siblings. Three brothers were born after her, and then a sister when she was seventeen years old. Three of her four siblings were married. Winifred described one of her brothers as an alcoholic. She was closest to her oldest brother. She and her sister had not had a close relationship. Her father was still living, was 81 years old and in good health. Her mother was 79 years old and still living at the commencement of the G.I.M. series, but died in June, 1991, following a period of hospitalisation for heart disease.

Winifred described her father as a bad-tempered, domineering man who had a hard life during the war and the depression, and who used to drink a lot, especially when the children were young and the family lived with in-laws. She said he was argumentative and talked endlessly. He disciplined the children with a leather strap. He remained a very independent man who still would not allow Winifred to prepare a meal or wash the dishes when she visited him. He lived alone after his wife's death in June of 1991.

Winifred was close to her mother. In her second G.I.M. session, she said: "We are good friends. The day she dies, I'll be lost." Whilst she described both her parents as worriers, she said her mother was more placid and adopted the policy: "anything for a quiet life." Shortly before the mother's death, Winifred asked her mother's advice regarding relating to her father. The mother replied: "Let him have his own way."

Whilst Winifred appreciated the warm relationship she had with her mother, she still said: "There are a million things I'd never tell her." Despite this statement, during the mother's last illness, Winifred took the opportunity of talking with her mother about their relationship and expressing her love, and being reassured of the mother's love for her.

Personal History

Winifred spent her childhood in inner suburban areas of a large city, and discontinued her schooling halfway through her Leaving Year (equivalent to Year 11). She did not wish to continue schooling. She stated that her mother got her first job for her as she herself was not motivated to do so. She held this secretarial position for 7½ years.

She then joined a religious congregation (the family were practising Catholics), and did her initial training, but left there after 2-3 years, before making a commitment. She returned to her previous secretarial position, but a couple of years later, re-entered the same religious congregation. She was required to undergo the Novitiate training again and found it quite strict. She was referred to a psychiatrist because of recurring anxieties, and was sent home after 6 years, and not permitted to make her permanent commitment to the congregation.

Winifred said that when she was told she would not be taking permanent vows, she was not permitted to discuss this with anyone, nor was she given any reason for this decision. She was kept another two months before being sent home. This dismissal was a bitter disappointment to her, and she felt that "her life, hopes and dreams were shattered". She was by then 35 years old.

She settled into secretarial work and held another position for 7½ years. A further secretarial position followed but after 4½ years, she was dismissed because of the introduction of computer services. She then took up a secretarial/accounting position, which she still held during this series, 8½ years later. Her 1990 hospitalisation occurred when she had been 7½ years employed by that organisation, and computer services were introduced. She expressed a lot of anxiety that the computer services would again be the cause of her dismissal. She described herself as reliable and conscientious in her work, but not a fast worker.

Winifred returned to live with her parents after her dismissal from the convent and it was not until eight years later (at the age of 43), that she began to live alone. She described this as a very significant move – to be living on her own and coping.

Winifred enjoyed reading, walking, photography, travelling and autoharp playing, and had a wide knowledge of classical music. She had an interest in art and was taught painting by a friend for a few years. The friend died of a brain tumour, and Winifred had not painted again. She had three or four close friends, and she maintained a strong link with her local Catholic parish community.

Her physical health was good. However, she complained of a constant tiredness and said she couldn't remember when this began – at least since she was 21. She said: "I go to bed exhausted and wake up tired." She had been aware of "scruples" (anxieties regarding moral issues) since the age of 18, especially in the areas of sexuality and honesty. She stated she had been "plagued with scruples" all her life. When she had suicidal thoughts, she worried about whether this, too, was sinful. Winifred said that she used to cry a lot, but learnt to bottle her feelings, and described her family as a "stiff upper lip" family. She said she did not have a lot of memories of childhood, and no memory of being held or hugged by her parents as a child.

Initial Evaluation and Assessment

Winifred initially presented as an anxious, troubled woman who was feeling very fragile emotionally after a month's hospitalisation. She described the events leading to her hospitalisation as worries related to her work. She had sought referral to a psychiatrist and had four consultations with him. A mistake in her work and a new "boss" made her afraid of losing her job. She described herself as "worried about everything" and said she "went to pieces". "I wish God would let me die – there'd be no more worrying."

At the time of this initial interview, her worries were mainly about being able to get back to her job and be self-supporting.

Initial Assessment: A middle-aged woman with a chronic anxiety disorder, and a recent acute exacerbation of symptoms, accompanied by depression and suicidal ideation, requiring hospitalisation and medication. She appeared as a person of good intelligence and capable of insight. She had a deep love of music. The psychiatrist's own introductory experience of G.I.M. prompted his referral.

Goals and Objectives

After an initial introductory G.I.M. session, Winifred decided she would like to continue with G.I.M., and the following goals were set:

1. To help her live more happily and easily with her worries;
2. If possible, to get to the source of her anxieties.

A contract was negotiated to do ten weekly sessions, and then review progress. After that review, the contract was extended to another twenty sessions, and the goals were clearer:

1. To get to the bottom of her anxieties and worries;
2. To begin to enjoy life.

Her issues that were evident initially, or became evident during the series of thirty sessions were as follows: poor self image, lack of nurturance, deep-seated fear and insecurity, difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, the need to achieve autonomy, acceptance of sexuality, difficulties with trust, unresolved grief, possible childhood sexual abuse, and the need for creative fulfilling outlets.

Progress Through the Series

A general outline of progress through the series will be given. For convenience, the series has been divided into roughly three sections, according to the main thrust of the work in those sections:

1. Sessions 1-13 exploring and awareness of self
2. Sessions 14-20 sexuality and emotional expression
3. Sessions 21-29 working towards autonomy.

Section I

During the first few sessions, Winifred's imagery was largely to do with dark clouds, fog, deep dark water, being "bogged down", "stuck in clouds", "stuck in mud or concrete", feeling pressures all over, tightness in the head, "under something black and heavy". Occasionally she was able in her imagery to break through this "stuckness" and glide freely above the clouds, seeing herself as a bird, specifically Jonathon Livingston Seagull. In Session 4, she experienced a shiver through her body (this was physically visible), and this image of cold shivers recurred in eleven of her thirty sessions.

In Session 9, she had the image of herself in a long, dark tube or tunnel in which she felt restricted. She freed her upper body but remained "stuck in the tube from the waist down". (She later checked with her mother about her birth and found it had been a difficult birth and a forceps delivery.)

In Session 12, Winifred had an image of a pointy glass tower (which had appeared briefly in Session 1). She described this tower as representing her material security, hopes and dreams. It was threatened by a wrecker's ball. Eventually she released the wrecker's ball which fell into a big excavation pit and was smashed.

In Session 13, Winifred explored her glass tower, danced around its corridors and claimed it as her own. Her comment after the session was: "Last week I smashed the wrecker's ball – this week I've taken possession of the tower." This session marked a turning point for Winifred, and she never appeared quite as fragile again.

During these 13 sessions, Winifred had returned to her job, part-time at first and then full-time, and was coping reasonably well – even with the computer. She still experienced periods of acute anxiety and sometimes panic, and often entertained suicidal thoughts and death wishes. But she was beginning to be a little more assertive, and her general outlook was more positive.

Section II

During Sessions 14–20, Winifred began to explore the area of sexuality, and began to express more emotions. Two recurring images that were experienced were tightness in the chest (like a clenched fist) or in the head, and heavy legs. She said: "My legs are often like lead, and feel like ice."

In Session 15, she returned to the image of being stuck in the tube (the image from Session 9), and saw herself enclosed in a big stocking. She tore the stocking away with her hands and thus freed herself, but her legs remained leaden. In other sessions, she had memories of embarrassment as a child when her father saw her naked in the bath, and years of feeling embarrassed about her body. She described this as "feeling uncomfortable with myself", especially with any sexual feelings.

She had a clear image of a dark passageway at the billiards room she had to pass on her way home from school as a child, and remembered this place as "spooky and different to other places."

In our pre-session talks, she talked about the lack of sex education and her lack of understanding of the changes occurring in her body during adolescence. She said she didn't fully know the facts of life until she went to a psychiatrist at the age of thirty. She described herself as "always timid", and said: "Over the years, I've wondered if I was interfered with as a child. I seem to be different." During some of these sessions, she was able to cry freely, and the whole of Session 19 was spent expressing a lot of anger at a male authority figure whom she perceived as being ruthless and lacking compassion.

During this period, Winifred had been gaining some confidence in her work, had lost weight and received a lot of compliments from colleagues and friends, and the periods of anxiety seemed less severe and less debilitating. She was due for four weeks' holidays at this point.

Section III

Whilst Winifred was on holidays, her mother became ill and was hospitalised. She died about six weeks later.

During Sessions 21-29, Winifred's imagery was related to these events. In the first few sessions, she expressed a lot of grief and loneliness as she faced the inevitable separation from her mother. She sometimes heard the music as calling her mother from this life, and in Session 23, had an image of a door opening on a bright new world which represented hope.

In Session 24, she imaged herself as an American Bald Eagle – big, strong and black – flying slowly and strongly up and up, as a “bird that is free”. She stated that she no longer felt angry or upset – just sad. Her mother died four days after this session.

In Session 25, the first after the mother's death, the eagle image returned as a symbol of strength.

In Session 26, her anxiety level was high and she felt exhausted. She was unable to express her grief openly, but had an image of herself as a big oak tree with its branches cut off on one side. She described it as “tall and strong – a bit misshapen but surviving”, and said of herself as the oak tree: “I don't like having branches cut off – cutting off one side makes the tree the wrong shape.” She felt her tears choked off at her throat.

She came to Session 27 feeling very angry at her father, and having had an argument with him, stating that “he tries to shoot me down in flames”. She expressed a lot of anger physically by pounding with her fists and her feet on the mat for about ten minutes. Her comment at the end of this session was: “It started with a war and ended having fun!” She described it as exhilarating.

At the beginning of Session 28, Winifred felt totally exhausted and said: “I don't care. I can't move. I've just flopped. My body feels like lead. There's no go in me at all. I've been crying inside, but can't express it.” In her imagery, she was in a coffin with the lid open, down in a grave. She felt paralysed, rigid, heavy, like a lump of lead. Eventually the music brought life and movement back to her body and she stated: “I'm coming back to life. It's good. I can move.”

In Session 29, she began to deal with her dismissal from the religious congregation some twenty years earlier and expressed feelings of oppression, anger and rejection associated with being sent away. During this time, Winifred had shown a lot of strength in coping with her mother's illness and death, and helping the family. This had been commented on by her family, and even her father had complimented and thanked her. She had acted assertively with her father on several occasions, and was beginning to do the same at work with her immediate boss, whom she likened at times to her father. She had bought herself a keyboard and booked herself an interstate holiday for the next year. She and her sister were closer, and her sister had commented: “I lost a mother, but I found a sister.” Her anxiety level fluctuated and her suicidal thoughts were still present sometimes. She was allowing herself more rest and relaxation.

Session 30 was a Review Session and will be referred to in the Summary and Conclusion Section.

Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor (J. S. Bach)

This music is the first piece on one of the G.I.M. tapes, and along with the remainder of that particular tape is considered a strong “working tape”. The Passacaglia and Fugue is fourteen minutes long. The bass line is grounding and supportive. It is structured and predictable music, giving the client a sense of security. There is a range of instrumentation, allowing for structured work on various levels. This music allows for deep work or higher, spiritual work. It was used on eight occasions during this series with Winifred. This piece was found to be of particular significance for Winifred in that it

allowed her to engage deeply with her imagery. Some of the imagery evoked by this music will now be traced through the series.

In Session 7, Winifred began with an image of a ball being tossed from one instrument to another. The bass music felt threatening, but the higher strings made it lighter. Then she described a feeling of pressure all over her – when the music was strong. She experienced a tightness like an iron bar over the left side of her head, and felt a struggle in the music as to who dominates as the music came to a close.

Session 13 – the Passacaglia and Fugue was introduced mid-session, as Winifred was about to explore a tower and needed the structured music to help her do so. It was played twice. As the music began, she was going down the staircase leading to the tower – the stairs were feeling safe. She saw a corridor on her right, and on her left, a way down into the depths. She chose the corridor, which was very long and didn't seem to have an end. She felt very small and the place was awesome. As the Passacaglia and Fugue began a second time, she was at the bottom of the inside of the tower, looking up and then floating up into its heights. The tower was glass and circular. She saw rooms with glass on interior as well as exterior walls. She wanted to look inside one of the glass rooms. As the music finished, she was coming to the door and about to open it.

Session 15 – Winifred was inside the tube (the image from Session 9) – feeling enveloped in a big stocking. Her arms were moving, but she wondered why her legs weren't moving. They felt heavy. She took the music into her legs and moved them around, but they still felt heavy. She ripped an opening in the stocking with her hands, and described it as feeling like “a lily opening”.

Session 17 – Winifred was recalling her father being very angry – the Passacaglia and Fugue was then introduced mid-session. She said she was scared. She cried and felt relieved. She recalled a memory of herself as an 11- or 12-year-old in the bath and her father coming into the bathroom. She felt embarrassed and tried to cover herself. The father said: “Don't worry, I know what you look like.” She wanted to hide and shrink away. She said that for years she never went without a cardigan, embarrassed about her shape. She felt agitated and described a feeling of a mixture of tightness, pain and exposure around her pelvic area.

Session 26 – Winifred saw herself as an old oak tree in the backyard of her father's house. A year before her brother had cut off some branches and it looked misshapen. “The tree suits the bass music and is strong, while the treble is flitting around. Like me, plodding along – enjoyable things are out of reach.” The tree had a big girth and numerous branches. She saw a blue sky, but said lately it was cloudy and rainy and the wind was strong. “I can stand up to it because I'm the tree and have my feet in rich brown soil. I don't like having branches cut off – cutting off one side makes the tree the wrong shape.” (This session was four weeks after her mother's death.)

Session 28 – Winifred was in a coffin in a grave, feeling paralysed, rigid and unable to help herself. She looked pale and her breathing was shallow. The Passacaglia and Fugue was introduced. Immediately she saw blue waves of colour and began to sigh, move her hands and feet and lift up her back. She said: “I'm coming back to life. It's good. I can move. That music usually gets me moving. There's too much movement in it to be paralysed.”

She said it was as though the music was insisting, saying: “Take great strides,” and she replied “if you give me the energy, I'll do it.” Asked, could she take energy from the music, she replied: “The fact that it got me moving says I've got some of it.”

Summary and Conclusion

Session 30 was a review session. Following are the gains Winifred herself identified over the series:

1. Coped with losing her mother.
2. Working again with reasonable ability.
3. Improved confidence in a lot of areas.
4. Had a fight with her father and it "wasn't the end of the world".
5. Learning to say no.
6. Becoming independent.

The areas she identified as needing to be worked on in future sessions were:

1. Confidence – to have the courage of her convictions
– to be able to express herself.
2. Independence – to be her own person
– to learn to think for herself.
3. Self-image – to feel alright about herself.
4. Reduction of medication (but not yet).

It seems clear from the material presented that G.I.M. was effective in helping Winifred achieve some of her goals. It is a non-threatening medium which enabled her to work at her own pace. Whilst it is directive in one sense – for example, the choice of induction and music can set the scene for a session – it remains the client's responsibility to make whatever use he or she chooses of the imagery evoked. The client remains in control. This was clearly evident in some of Winifred's sessions, for example the session where, in her imagery she was struggling to release herself from the narrow, restrictive tube. After the session, she said that she recognised this as some sort of a "rebirthing process", but got nervous about it and literally stopped it before its completion.

Throughout the series Winifred continued to have regular consultations with the psychiatrist every two to three weeks. The G.I.M. facilitator also conferred with him periodically.

It is evident from this case study that G.I.M. can be very effective as an adjunct to verbal therapy, and can provide a new and rich dimension to a client's quest for personal growth and wholeness.