

Book Review: Imagination and Adolescent Trauma: The Role of Imagination in Neurophysiological, Psychological, and Spiritual Healing

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Summary. Mary Caswell Walsh's (2020) book, *Imagination and Adolescent Trauma: The Role of Imagination in Neurophysiological, Psychological, and Spiritual Healing*, is an engaging and informative read. The book provides a foundational understanding of trauma in relation to adolescent neurophysiology, development, and dreaming before describing a researched intervention the author conducts with traumatized adolescents. The details of the research, research findings, and individual cases give insight into adolescents' recovery process and the role of dreams in that process. This book is notable for its practical and engaged presentation of dreamwork with adolescent trauma survivors and provides interesting findings that will likely prompt ideas for future studies to better understand dreams and dream interventions among adolescent trauma survivors.

Keywords: Trauma, adolescent, imagination, dreams

Walsh's (2020) book, *Imagination and Adolescent Trauma: The Role of Imagination in Neurophysiological, Psychological, and Spiritual Healing*, is an engaging read that provides an informative review of the effects of adolescent trauma on neurophysiology and psychology along with how adolescent trauma relates to imagination, dreaming, and spirituality. The information is provided as a foundation for understanding the author's approach to working with traumatized adolescents through a combination of biofeedback and dream groups. Walsh's personal connection to trauma work with adolescents comes through in her writing, and her connection enlivens both the challenges and successes of the approach she details.

Chapter 1 provides readers with an overview of what brought the author to focus on using the imagination, and specifically the dreams of adolescents to facilitate psychological healing. Walsh introduces the topics covered in the book by describing the challenges of a specific adult woman she treated in therapy. She connects the client's symptoms with the neurophysiology of those symptoms and describes how facilitating an engagement with bodily sensations and imagination specifically in dreams allowed the client to begin healing and prompted an interest in spirituality. The healing process for this client was then related to the unique and additional challenges for traumatized adolescents. Challenges the author describes as being more formidable than those confronted by her adult client, primarily because of

adolescents developing brains, which are more susceptible to long-term negative effects resulting from trauma.

Over the next two chapters, readers are introduced to several adolescents negatively affected by trauma. The description of the adolescents captures the readers' imagination and aspects of their stories prompt deeper explorations of how trauma affects adolescent brains. Walsh adeptly describes trauma effects in a manner that is very informative and approachable. Through the chapters, readers' knowledge is built piece by piece, such that after several chapters a complex understanding of the multifaceted effects of trauma is understandable and recognizable by readers. The author also connects aspects of trauma that are commonly neglected, such as dreaming and spirituality, to the neurophysiological and psychological. This is valuable and uncommon when discussing adolescent trauma recovery and provides a key reason for this book.

The examination of dreaming in relation to development is informative but also highlights the need for a greater understanding of this topic. The overview Walsh provides highlights what is currently understood about posttraumatic nightmares among adolescents including associations between nightmares and gender that changes in nightmare content mirror changes in cognition and social development (Walsh, 2020, p. 25). One particularly interesting focus of the author is on the narrative coherence of adolescent dreams in relation to trauma, with narrative coherence in a dream defined by a storyline, some continuity with waking life, bizarre elements, and meaningful internal connections. The author draws from the work of several researchers and theorists including Barrett (1996), Hartmann (1996), Punamäki et al. (2005), and Van Der Kolk (1996) to describe a difference in the narrative structure of dreams related to trauma, with a lack of narrative coherence connected to trauma and impaired trauma recovery. This is an interesting distinction that is at the basis for the ideas and approach developed in this book. However, it is surprising that Levin and Nielsen's Neurocognitive Theory of Disturbed Dreaming and research on Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) was omitted.

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Levin and Nielsen's (2007) theory connects Hartmann's (1996) idea that the bizarre content of nightmares is part of a psychological healing process to observed neurological processes in dreaming that support the idea of psychological healing in novel nightmares. As such, the Neurocognitive Theory of Disturbed Dreaming would further ground the author's argument about narrative coherence. Additionally, research on IRT shows that imaginatively engaging in altering nightmare narratives to produce emotionally positive outcomes results in decreased PTSD symptoms (Casement & Swanson, 2012). The connection between imaginatively altering nightmare content and trauma symptom improvements, lends further support to the importance of narrative and imagination in trauma recovery, and seems like an odd omission because of the extensive research on IRT, its connection to trauma recovery, and the author's focus on dreams and trauma recovery.

By Chapter 4, readers have an understanding that enables them to appreciate the therapeutic work described by the author and presented in a small pilot study the author created. Using heart rate variability (HRV) biofeedback and a dream group, the author treated thirty-eight adolescents with trauma. The HRV biofeedback was used to help students cope with the stress, autonomic nervous system response, and emotions related to their trauma. The dream group was used to promote social engagement and emotional processing between participants while at the same time supporting the development of participants' self-narratives through the incorporation of dream imagery. Walsh presents these interventions as targeted to the challenges of adolescent trauma survivors and as likely be more time and cost-effective than individual psychotherapy, which is important in situations where there are limited treatment resources. The findings of the study support HRV biofeedback and group dream work as being linked to recovery. This was shown through measured physiological coherence related to HRV and greater psychological coherence through changes in dream narrative structure, measured using the DreamSAT (a dream data entry and statistical analysis tool), a revised Hall/Van de Castle coding approach, and the Sleep and Dream Database (SDDb).

The descriptions of participant changes supported by HRV biofeedback data and dream narratives is fascinating and prompts further investigating of these approaches. However, a big question related to the study, which it cannot answer and the author acknowledges is what led to the changes in psychological and physiological coherence? The study participants were engaged in thirty-minute weekly individual counseling sessions, occasional crisis counseling, and family support groups three times per month, in addition to the weekly dream group and two weekly HRV biofeedback sessions making it impossible to accurately attribute change to any specific intervention. It is important to recognize this limitation, but despite the uncertainty of the causes of participants' healing, the ability to observe and measure the change through HRV and dream reports is notable.

Following the chapter detailing the structure and findings from the study, Chapter 5 contained specific cases from the study, relating the changes occurring in group participation, client self-reports, and HRV to changes in dream content. The author does an excellent job of making direct connections between dream content and observed physiological and behavioral changes. Through the cases, the power of

the dreams and effect they have on the dreamer and dream group become clear, bolstering the study findings presented in the previous chapter.

An observation regarding the author's approach to dreamwork is that it is focused on having group participants extract information and insights from the dreams rather than imaginatively engaging with the dream content. The approach used in the study is a traditional approach to working with dreams, but as IRT research shows (Casement & Swanson, 2014), there can be positive results among trauma survivors who imaginatively engaging with and alter dream content. It seems like an imaginative engagement with dreams could fit well with the goal of promoting greater narrative coherence both in dreams and waking, and it would be interesting to see how it would alter the results of a similar, future study.

Case studies are extended into Chapter 6 but with less focus on individuals in the dream group and more focus on the group. The examples from the study highlight the benefits of group engagement and are connected to research support for group work and group dream work as part of healing. Of particular note was Walsh's process analysis of group communication in which she noted the tendency of participants to speak in rapid and overlapping ways, which she labels "swarming". The author's commitment to effective therapy and insight into treatment comes through in her description of trying several approaches to manage group communication before observing and noting the effectiveness of swarming for engaging and connecting the group as well as for opening new opportunities for members to share. It is a section to reflect on for all those who facilitate group work.

The final chapter of the book primarily addressed spirituality, its connection to dreams and imagination, and its role in trauma recovery. This chapter drew from cases in the study but also diverged from the study more than the preceding chapters, spending much of it describing why spirituality matters in psychological healing. It was fascinating reading the well referenced descriptions and links between Christian and Jewish texts and dreaming and psychological healing. It is clear the author has a deep knowledge of these topics, but it is important to note that the author also highlighted the importance of working from clients' belief systems. When encountering belief systems for which she was unfamiliar, Walsh describes making referrals to experts in religious communities and educating herself on unfamiliar belief systems, particularly noting her own work to better understand the Hindu symbolism a client presented. This chapter was fascinating and relevant to adolescent trauma recovery, dreams and imagination, and neurophysiology but less practical for treating adolescent trauma survivors. The biggest takeaway from this chapter is that spirituality may be an important aspect of trauma recovery and therapists should look for and support spiritual development to help their clients.

Overall, this is an excellent book, enjoyable to read, practical, and informative in relation to understanding and working with adolescent dreams and physiology to support healing from trauma. The study and dream accounts in the book pull the reader into the lives and challenges of the adolescents, while creating natural links to the well-written and referenced review of literature on those challenges. The connection between dreams and psychologically healing group work among traumatized adolescents will be valuable for all those who work with or are interested in working with that

population. Hopefully, this book and the study within it will prompt further investigations into interventions using dream work and biofeedback, as it sounds promising.

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