

100+ Ideas for Directed Sandtrays in Counseling

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Abstract

This article developed out of a year-long project where the author challenged herself to complete a sandtray a day and journal about each tray. The author lists more than 100 ideas for directed sandtray interventions to help spur other therapists using the sandtray to be more creative in their sandtray work. These ideas may also translate to other expressive arts interventions in counseling.

Keywords: sandtray, counseling prompts, counseling supervision

100+ Ideas for Directed Sandtray Interventions

Therapeutic sandtray work involves a miniature sandbox within the counseling environment. Sandtrays have been widely used in a variety of counseling and therapeutic interventions for several decades (e.g., Mitchell & Friedman, 1994; Weinrib, 1983). While initially being used primarily as a form of play therapy with children (e.g., Homeyer & Morrison, 2008), in recent years, sandtray interventions have had increasing use with adults (Garrett, 2013; Pearson & Wilson, 2001). Sandtray-based counseling interventions are now popular in work with individuals, couples, families, and groups across the lifespan (Carey, 1999; DeDomenico, 1995; Draper, Ritter, & Willingham, 2003; Gil, 1994; Hunter, 1998; Lowenfeld, 2007; Turner, 2005). The standardized sandtray (roughly 30 by 20 inches and 4 inches deep) is partially filled with wet or dry sand, and presented to the client with a variety of small items or toys that serve as miniature representations of objects and people in a client's life (Boik & Godwin, 2000; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011).

Counseling clients are asked to play in the sandtray or to create scenes in the sandtray which are then discussed or processed with the counselor or therapist (similar to how other expressive art interventions are used; Amatruda & Helms-Simpson, 1997; Bradway & McCoard, 1997; Ryce-Menuhin, 1992). Clients may also be asked to journal about their sandtray creations or the experience of working in the sandtray (Soneff, 2008).

As a counselor and counselor educator, the author engaged in a self-development project challenging herself to complete a sandtray every day for a year and journal about the experience. The project was initiated with the hope that spending that much time thinking about and creating sandtrays would help to build creativity and intervention ideas to be used in future counseling sessions and to help to better prepare counseling students in their work with clients. While stylistically many therapists prefer non-directed trays or counseling interventions (allowing the clients to control what they choose to engage in within the counseling session), it can be helpful to have ideas in mind to provide direction to a client if he or she struggles. Additionally, many students or new counselors may feel more comfortable with a new intervention if they have some structure to start.

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Giving direction can help new counselors feel more confident when engaging clients in an expressive arts intervention. Some of these tray ideas emerged from the titles of the author's trays during her year-long sandtray experience. Otherseolved from readings or came out of the sandtray sessions conducted with clients. This list is intended to help spur therapists who might be looking for directed tray ideas. The categories below are not intended to be rigid and many ideas may work across different populations.

Directed Sandtray Ideas for Adults

1. Create your world / create a tray about your life (this is a standard sandtray direction).
2. Create a tray that describes your beliefs, thoughts, or feelings about ...
3. Create a tray that describes how you feel right now.
4. Create a tray about the emotion _____ (fill in the blank).
5. Create a scene about what keeps you up at night.
6. Create a tray about a challenge you have faced in your life.
7. Build a scene that describes your relationship with ...
8. Build a tray to show the meaning of ... in your life.
9. Build a scene that describes a time in your life when ...
10. Build a tray about the decision you made to ...
11. Create a tray that shows what it means to be a (good) wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, etc. (this prompt can also be used with work titles).
12. How/where do you see yourself/your life in 5 years? 10 yrs? (see Bykofsky, 1990, for similar ideas generated from journaling prompts).
13. Create a tray that describes your journey/path...
14. Solve your issue or problem in the tray (e.g., examine multiple sides of an issue or problem in 2 separate trays or on different sides of the same tray).
15. Create a scene about what your life would look like without ____ (a version of the miracle question used in solution-focused therapy).
16. Build a genogram/family tree (e.g., focusing on the member characteristics and/or relationships; using only animals, foods, musical instruments, or some other category that has personal meaning to you.).
17. Recreate a scene or memory from your past/a specific scene of interest.
18. Create a scene about where you would like to go if you could take a vacation this week.
19. Create a tray that describes your current home/living situation.
20. Create a tray that describes your ideal home/living situation.
21. Create a tray that shows how you are similar (or different) from ...
22. Make a tray about your work situation/your boss/your office/workspace.
23. Create a tray about your ideal job.
24. Make a tray about your happiest/saddest childhood memory.
25. Make a tray about your happiest/saddest adult memory.
26. What is the first image that comes to mind? Expand that image in a tray.
27. Create a tray that shows what you want out of your current/future relationship.
28. Create a tray showing the goals you have for each of your kids.
29. How do you think your kids/spouse/partner see(s) you?
30. What would the perfect worker/employee look like?
31. Create a scene about the first thing you would change about yourself or your life if you had a magic wand/magic powers.
32. Create a scene of how your life would be different if you won the lottery.
33. Create a tray to introduce me to someone who you have lost in your life.
34. Create a tray about a dream you have had.

35. Create a scene from your local area/town. (This idea can also be used with groups to build communication, teamwork, or rapport within the group and also to encourage groups to compete against each other if groups are asked to try to guess the location and judge which tray is most clear/accurate).
36. Use the tray to show how you would design your garden or yard (if you had unlimited time, resources, or gardening skill).
37. Create a tray that shows what you see when you look in the mirror/what you think others see when they look at you.

Directed Tray Ideas for Couples

38. Create a scene about how you met.
39. Create a scene about your strongest memory as a couple.
40. Create a scene about how you see this relationship in 5 or 10 years.
41. Create a scene about the house you would like to buy together.
42. Create a family tree/genogram that blends both of your families of origin (using animals or some other category of miniatures that is meaningful to you and your partner).
43. Create a scene that describes how you communicate as a couple.
44. Create a tray that describes what ... means in your relationship/marriage (e.g., trust, love, commitment, etc.).
45. Create a scene from the town you grew up in (or the house you grew up in) and then take your partner on a tour.
46. Collaborate on a scene that shows what you would do if you won the lottery (again, this is an example of the miracle question).
47. Create individual trays about what attracted you to your spouse/partner.
48. Create individual trays about how this relationship has changed each of you as individuals.
49. Create 2 trays (one each) about ... and after describing the trays to each other, create a third tray that blends the elements you each felt were essential in your individual trays (e.g., where you want to be as a couple/family in 5 years, or any other directed tray idea).

Directed tray Ideas for Children or Adolescents

50. Create a tray using only miniatures of a specific color.
51. Do a scene showing the divorce in your family.
52. Create a tray about the family you would like to have.
53. Do a scene about your new baby sister/brother.
54. Build a tray that depicts your (average) day at school.
55. What would your life look like if you didn't have to follow your parents' rules?
56. What would your life look like if you didn't have to go to school?
57. Make a picture with all your favorite things in it.
58. Make a picture of the future.
59. Make a picture of your life.
60. Make a picture of yesterday.
61. Create a scene out of your favorite book or movie.
62. Make a picture of your house/room.
63. Make a picture of what you and your dog/cat/pet like to do together.
64. Make a tray about the pet you would like to have.
65. Make a tray about your best friend/favorite sibling.
66. Make a pretend story that happened a long time ago in a place far, far away ...

67. Make a scene of your family doing something (similar to the kinetic family drawing prompt).
68. Make a picture of the happiest thing/day you can remember.
69. Make a tray about what you would do if you had one "free" day to spend with your favorite parent.
70. Make a scene of you with your baby-sitter/care provider and what you do together.
71. Make a tray that shows what 3 things you would wish for if you had a genie to grant you three wishes.
72. Create a scene that highlights ... (a wish-item).
73. Make a tray that shows the things you want to do/will be able to do once you are officially an adult.
74. (Teen) Create a tray showing all the characteristics of your ideal date/girlfriend/boyfriend.

Directed Tray Ideas for Military Individuals/Families

75. Make a scene of the day your mom/dad comes home (from deployment).
76. Show me life with mom/dad deployed/gone.
77. Make a picture/scene of your favorite house/places you've lived.
78. Show me life at your new school compared to your old school.
79. What would your life look like if mom/dad wasn't in the military?
80. Create a picture of you and all your friends and family using animals to represent friends and family.
81. Create a series of trays depicting all the places he/she has lived and how his/her life has changed with each move.
82. Where do you see your military career in 5 years?
83. Build a tray about your fears or dreams related to your next duty station (or your spouse's or parent's next duty station).
84. Create a scene about the best or worst place you've ever lived or worked.
85. Create a tray that describes your feelings about your last deployment or your next deployment (or your spouse's deployment).
86. What does it mean to you to be the best Soldier/Marine/Airman/Sailor or military spouse?
87. Create a tray that shows what you have given up to serve in the military (or to follow a military family member).
88. Create a tray that describes what it was like to grow up in a military family.

Directed Tray Ideas with Religious/Spiritual Themes

89. Create a tray that describes your spiritual journey/path (in childhood, so far in life, projecting into the future, etc.).
90. Create a tray that describes your beliefs about God/higher-power.
91. Create a tray that shows your beliefs about death.
92. Create a tray about the temptations or challenges you have faced in your life.
93. Build a scene that describes your relationship with God(your church, church family, higher-power, etc.).
94. Build a tray to show the meaning of prayer in your life.
95. Build a scene that describes a time in your life when you knew God was with you (or when you felt he had abandoned you).
96. Build a tray about a time when you questioned God's plan for your life.
97. Build a scene that describes a time when your religious beliefs influenced (or failed to influence) your decision(s).
98. Build a scene about your baptism or what it means to you.
99. Build a scene about the influence of God in your marriage.
100. Create a tray that shows three things you would like to be remembered for after you die (similar to the epitaph prompt used in journaling).

Directed Tray Ideas for Older Adults

101. Create a tray that describes the major lessons you have learned in your life.
101. Create a tray about the skills, knowledge, or insights that you have gained that have surprised you.

102. Create a tray about your biggest accomplishment to date.
103. Create a tray about something you would do differently if you had the chance.
104. Create a tray about something that makes you proud (or fill in another appropriate emotion).
105. Create a tray about the things for which you are most thankful for in your life.
106. Create a tray about your biggest accomplishment to date.
107. Create a tray about something you would do differently if you had the chance (a personal regret).
108. Create a tray about things have changed in the last year (or since major change such as moving to assisted living, nursing home, etc.).
109. Create a tray about what you'd like your life to look like this time next year.

Directed Tray Ideas in Supervision

110. Take five minutes to create a mini-scene or just play in the tray before we get started today.
111. This was a challenging supervision session – why don't you take the last ten minutes of our time to create a tray that will help you to relax before you head back to work.
112. Pick approximately 5 items that show what you would do if you had a totally free hour today with no deadlines hanging over your head.
113. Create a tray with your understanding of where the client is now. Process this tray with the supervisee. Take a picture of the tray for later (or to use as a reference if you only have one tray, or if the counseling situation is so complex that this process may take several supervision sessions). Now create a tray of what it would look like when this client's situation is resolved. Processes the noticeable differences between the two trays. How do you see the client getting from this tray (now) to this tray (solution)?
114. Create a tray that shows where you are in reaching your professional goals.
115. Create a tray to help me understand your theory of change.
116. Create a tray showing your path to becoming a therapist.
117. Create a tray that shows the kind of therapist you want to be.
118. Create a tray that showcases 3 things you want to get out of this supervision.
119. Create a tray with 5-10 items that will help me to get to know you on a professional level.
120. Create a tray to show how you think your client sees you. Or, create a tray to show how you would like your client to see you.
121. Create a tray to show how you see our supervisory relationship.
122. Create a tray about how your life would be different if you already had your license.
123. Create a tray about how I can help you in this supervision process.
124. Create a tray about the qualities you think will make you a better counselor/therapist.
125. Create a tray about how you are helping your client. Or, select three to five items that demonstrate the progress you have already made with this client.
126. Create a tray about how you are not able to help your client.
127. Create a tray about a specific intervention you used with your client and how it was received by your client.
128. Create a scene that shows how you anticipate this client will push your boundaries.
129. Create a tray about your goal(s) for your work with this client and the potential obstacles you see in this process.
130. Create a scene showing other ways you might get to this same therapeutic goal.
131. Select 3 to 5 items to demonstrate the strengths you have as a therapist so far.
132. Create a scene of your client's world. Then, add a character or miniature to show how you fit into this world.

133. Create a tray showing the client's issue or presenting problem." In a separate tray, "create as many solutions to this issue as you can (Lahad, 2000).
134. Create a tray about what is holding this client back or what is holding you back as his/her therapist (Lahad, 2000).
135. Create a tray that shows the various emotions this client has been experiencing (Lahad, 2000).
136. Create a genogram, sociogram, or family map for your client (Gil, 1994).
137. Create a family map using only one category of miniatures" (e.g., addictive behavior-related miniatures for clients who have a strong family history of addictive behaviors; Gil, 1994)
138. Use miniatures to describe the relationship between the key players in the client's family (Gil, 1994).
139. Create a tray of the emotion that was behind what the client was describing in this session.
140. Recreate what the client talked about in this session in the ST and bring this to life by dialoging within the tray" (give voice to various components or parties involved in the therapy).
141. Assign specific or directed STs outside of the supervision session to encourage in-depth thought about a case or professional growth or development. This is referred to as "response" work and is a common in the art therapy world (Fish, 2008).
142. Recreate a ST about a specific moment or turning-point in your session.
143. Create a tray about your wish for this client."
144. Create a scene about who this client reminds you of.
145. Assign journaling - written or visual based [including photos of other STs]) to follow up on client STs or STs created in supervision (or about supervision-related topics (Kiello, 1991).
146. Create a tray about the underlying symbolism or cultural aspects from your client's tray.
147. On this side of the tray, create a scene about what this miniature might mean to you; on this side, create a scene about what this might mean to your client.
148. Select 3 to 5 items that speak the unique family culture of your client.
149. Select 3 to 5 items that speak to your client's cultural background and 3 to 5 items that speak to your cultural background. Create a tray that shows how these worlds interact.

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