

Self-nurturing - A Precious Gift from "Hidden Treasure"

By Adriana Ribas & Rodolfo Ribas, PhD, Active Members of the Violet Solomon Oaklander Foundation, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

There are many, many precious ideas waiting for people interested in child and adolescent psychotherapy in Violet Oaklander's book, "Hidden Treasure." One that stands out is the concept of "self-nurturing." Violet writes, "Some time ago, I discovered that no matter how much good work I did with my clients, something seemed to be missing. That something, I found, was helping the client nurture the self." Since the 1990s Violet has examined the importance of a process she calls "self-nurturing work" in many academic articles and book chapters. In her latest book, "Hidden Treasure," she explores this concept more thoroughly and persuasively. As Violet has developed her ideas over time, self-nurturing has not only become a central concept in her therapeutic model but has also been adopted by many therapists worldwide. Violet points out that in the course of therapy it is not enough to help clients strengthen the self, express blocked feelings, enhance contact functions and process difficult issues, as "a kind of void" remains within the person if self-nurturing is not developed. She observed that the children and adolescents she saw in clinical settings had many introjected negative messages and beliefs about themselves. These negative self-messages or introjects are acquired in an early stage of development when children do not have the maturity or cognitive competence to evaluate them properly. Introjects usually lead children to constrain and inhibit aspects of the self, and are deleterious to healthy and optimal development. They are also relatively stable and tend to remain with children throughout their lives. According to Violet it is fundamental to deal with these negative self-beliefs using self-nurturing work. "Becoming self-nurturing fills that void" attests Violet. Self-nurturing helps the child or adolescent to be more accepting, caring, and actively nurturing toward themselves. Violet observed that this is not an easy task because in our culture children are usually taught that care of the self is wrong or selfish. In Gestalt therapy self-nurturing is understood as an experiential process, not a training of abilities. To facilitate teaching clients about self-nurturing, in 2008 we decided to create an activity book on self-nurturing. Our five-part book, "Taking Care of Myself," focuses primarily on children and adolescents, although it can also be used in therapeutic work with adults. The book presents a series of activities that can be applied along with a variety of techniques and materials, such as clay, sand tray, puppets and dramatic games. Ideas from Violet, Felicia Carroll, and Rinda Blom guided our writing of the book. The activities in the first part of "Taking Care of Myself" encourage discussions about the meaning of "to take care of" and reflections on who takes care of whom in one's life. The activities in the second part motivate the child or adolescent to look at the self, identify positive characteristics and talk about them. These activities aim to strengthen the idea that to feel proud of one's qualities is not only permissible, but is desirable, and to contradict the notion that self-praise is not appropriate. The third part of "Taking Care of Myself" addresses the integration process. The activities invite the child or adolescent to feel, to make contact with and to talk to the aspects of themselves they like and don't like - or even hate. The child or adolescent and therapist experience and discuss ways that these aspects can coexist. Polarities of experience can emerge and then it is possible to cope with them. The goal is to strengthen the child or adolescent's awareness of self. The activities in the fourth part of the book contrast the ideas and feelings children or adolescents have about themselves with the ideas and feelings they think others have about them. We explore the idea of "labels," and the importance of seeking, finding, questioning and removing "labels" that they and others have pasted on them. The self-nurturing process expands children's capacities to love themselves and accept their flaws. Making contact with and accepting who you are is a fundamental element in the change process. The fifth part of the book presents imagination exercises with two characters, a fairy and a wizard. Children are invited to close their eyes and imagine that the fairy or the wizard are on their side telling them good things when they face something they dislike about themselves, or they feel dumb or ugly. The fairy and the wizard are characters that stay with the child to protect and nurture. The therapist can also use puppets to represent the wizard and fairy. These activities can contribute to the development of self-support abilities and, consequently, the fairy or wizard can remain inside the child, ready to accompany, to smile, to encourage, and to give shelter. All parts of our book were inspired by Violet's therapeutic model and her concept of self-nurturing. Her ideas are precious. We are happy to have the opportunity in this article to say "thank you very much" to Violet! We believe that throughout the self-nurturing process children and adolescents can fill the void created by negative introjects. In the book we write: "Taking care of myself is being with myself, looking at myself positively, accepting who I am, and never abandoning myself." We have received numerous comments from colleagues that have used the book telling us that our book has helped their clients. Who could ask for more? Note: This work was based on a previous article published in the International Gestalt Journal. Rudolfo and Adriana Ribas live and work as psychotherapists in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. For further information: rodolfo.c.ribas@gmail.com; aribas@globo.com; rodolfoaribas@globo.com Scenes from Rio de Janeiro!