

**DEPRESSION  
IN THE TRAY:  
A CLINICAL  
OBSERVATION GUIDE  
FOR SANDTRAY  
THERAPISTS**



# BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

DEPRESSION IN SANDTRAY  
IS OFTEN QUIET.

IT MAY NOT LOOK DRAMATIC. ✘

IT MAY NOT LOOK CHAOTIC. ✘

IT MAY LOOK STILL. ✔

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO SUPPORT  
OBSERVATION - NOT ~~INTERPRETATION~~.

SLOW DOWN. NOTICE. REGULATE  
YOURSELF BEFORE DRAWING MEANING.

# I.) COMMON SYMBOLIC THEMES IN DEPRESSION TRAYS:

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## ISOLATION:

- SINGLE FIGURES FAR FROM OTHERS
- FIGURES BEHIND WALLS OR FENCES
- CHARACTERS FACING AWAY FROM CONNECTION
- DESERTED LANDSCAPES
- DIVIDED SECTIONS WITHIN TRAY
- BARRIERS/ISLANDS
- WATER-SEPARATING FIGURES

## ● **EMPTINESS / FLATNESS**

- MINIMAL TRAY USE
- LARGE EMPTY SPACES
- FEW MINIATURES
- “NOTHING HAPPENS” STORIES

## **DEATH OR DORMANCY**

- GRAVEYARDS
- SLEEPING FIGURES
- FROZEN CHARACTERS
- BURIED OBJECTS

## **BLOCKED MOVEMENT**

- ROADS CUT OFF
- BRIDGES BROKEN
- FIGURES STUCK IN MUD/SAND
- BARRIERS BETWEEN CHARACTERS

## **WORTHLESSNESS**

- TINY FIGURES OVERSHADOWED BY LARGE ONES
- FIGURES LYING DOWN
- ANIMALS WOUNDED OR CAGED

## **COLLAPSE & EXHAUSTION**

- FIGURES LYING DOWN
- FALLEN BUILDINGS
- RUINS
- BROKEN BRIDGES
- DEAD TREES
- WINTER LANDSCAPES
- GREY OR MUTED SELECTIONS

## CONTAINMENT & SUPPRESSION

- BURYING MINIATURES
  - OBJECTS PLACED UNDER SAND
  - HIDDEN FIGURES
  - OVER-CONTROLLED SYMMETRY
  - MINIMAL EXPRESSIVE MOVEMENT
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### ***REMINDER:***

AN EMPTY TRAY IS NOT  
AUTOMATICALLY DEPRESSION →  
CONTEXT AND NARRATIVE  
ALWAYS MATTER!

## II.) NERVOUS SYSTEM INDICATORS TO TRACK:

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DEPRESSION IS OFTEN A STATE OF  
DORSAL VAGAL SHUTDOWN.

### OBSERVE:

- SLOWED SPEECH
- HEAVY BODY POSTURE
- MONOTONE VOICE
- MINIMAL EYE CONTACT
- MINIMAL FACIAL EXPRESSION
- REDUCED SAND MOVEMENT
- LONG PAUSES

# ASK YOURSELF:

- IS THIS COLLAPSE?
  - IS THIS PROTECTION?
  - IS THIS EXHAUSTION?
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# III.) REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE THAT SUPPORTS EXPLORATION:

~ INSTEAD OF INTERPRETING, ~  
REFLECT WHAT YOU NOTICE ~



## YOU MIGHT SAY:

- “I NOTICE THERE’S A LOT OF SPACE HERE.”
- “IT FEELS VERY STILL.”
- “THIS PART SEEMS ISOLATED.”
- “I’M CURIOUS WHAT THIS AREA IS HOLDING.”
- “THERE’S A HEAVINESS IN THIS SECTION.”

## AVOID:

- “THIS LOOKS DEPRESSED/ING.”
- “THIS MEANS YOU FEEL HOPELESS.”
- OVER-ANALYZING SYMBOLISM TOO EARLY