

*Responding to  
Hopelessness in  
Sandtray:  
A Guide for Working  
with Suicidal Themes  
& Symbolic Death*



# *Step 1: Differentiate Symbolic Death from Intent*

Symbolic death can represent:

- Transition
- Transformation
- End of identity
- Desire for relief
- Emotional numbness

It does ~~NOT~~ automatically mean  
suicidal intent -

But we assess gently when  
themes emerge.

## *Step 2:*

# *Gentle Assessment Language*

Instead of direct confrontation, try:

- “When this figure was buried, what was happening for them?”
- “Is this about wanting relief or wanting to be gone?”
- “How much of this feels symbolic, and how much feels real right now?”
- “Is this something you’re thinking about outside of session?”

***If active ideation is suspected,  
follow your agency’s risk protocol.***

# *Step 3: Regulation Before Exploration*

If intensity rises:

- Slow your voice
- Ground through sensory awareness
- Invite breath
- Ask them to feel their feet on the floor
- Touch the sand together

REMINDER ~ The tray is not the emergency.  
The nervous system is.

# *Step 4: When to Pause*

## *Sandtray Work*

⏸ Pause if:

- The client becomes dissociated
- The room feels dysregulated
- Assessment reveals immediate risk
- The tray becomes retraumatizing

You can say:

***“I think we may need to slow this down and make sure your body feels safe first.”***

# *Documentation Reminders:*

## **Document -**

- ✓ Symbolic themes observed
- ✓ Assessment questions asked
- ✓ Client responses
- ✓ Risk determination
- ✓ Safety planning if needed

# *Therapist (Your) Reminder:*

You are allowed to:

- Slow the process
- Shift modalities temporarily
- Seek consultation

*Hopelessness in the  
tray is often the first  
safe place it has ever  
been expressed.*

*That matters!*