

The Tree Theme Me

A creative form of occupational

ABSTRACT

This is a brief introduction to the Tree Theme Method® (TTM). TTM is a method for use within occupational therapy, where an individual's life situation is expressed in the form of an image creation and a life story with a focus on activity. The purpose of using TTM is to enable people with mental ill health, who experience difficulties in performing daily activities to be able to change their life situation. The theoretical background, i.e., person-centred practice, creative activities, and occupational life storytelling, will be described, following by a description of the research of the TTM, and then finally a concrete example of client drawings in practice.

Aviso zur Fortbildung über die Tree Theme Method® (TTM)

Im Jahr 2024 findet ein Webinar an fünf unterschiedlichen Tagen mit Fr. Gunnarsson und Fr. Schweng über die theoretische und praktische Umsetzung der Tree Theme Method® (TTM) statt. Das Webinar wird auf Englisch und Deutsch abgehalten. Nähere Informationen darüber finden Sie auf der Homepage von Ergotherapie Austria: www.ergotherapie.at.

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Introduction

TTM is a method for use within occupational therapy, where an individual's life situation is expressed in the form of an image creation and a life story with a focus on activity. The purpose of using TTM is to enable people with mental ill health who experience difficulties in performing daily activities to be able to change their life situation. This is achieved through doing creative activities and telling their life story in order to be active in the way they want and develop strategies for being able to do it in the future. The method's focus is on activities in daily life and on creating a vision of future possibilities and goals. TTM is a person-centered method (Law, 1998; Townsend & Polatajko, 2007; Wilcock, 2006), that is based on what is important for the individual in his/her everyday activities.

The TTM has been developed by the Swedish occupational therapist, and PhD, Birgitta Gunnarsson. The TTM is trademarked, which means that it is not allowed to carry out the intervention without education and training (theoretical and practical skills). Occupational therapists who intend to use the TTM in their work, need to complete a course (five course days and one certification day), and the course is also possible to take part in on-line. In Sweden, the TTM is used by occupational therapists, primarily in mental health care, pain rehabilitation, primary healthcare and for clients with somatic illnesses (Gunnarsson, 2022).

With the tree drawings, representing various periods of life, the client is encouraged to tell their life-story with focus on everyday activities. It is intended to support and develop a more realistic self-image and a better understanding of an individual's everyday life. In such a context, Atkinson (1998) described that „Story makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed and the confusing clear“ (p. 7).

Theoretical background of the TTM

Person-centered occupational therapy

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) proclaim in their position paper that occupational therapy is „client-centered“ and „occupation-focused“. Occupational therapists should „enable clients to participate in occupations“ and the occupational therapist should „respect and partner with clients“ (2010). TTM is person-centred, when it is based on the client's images and their own story about their everyday life. It is the client who decides what an image stands for, and what significance this has in his/her life, and when applicable; what they need to change in everyday life in order to form a meaningful everyday life.

Creative activities

Creative activities, for example painting or sculpting, are often used in occupational therapy. In a survey of Griffiths and Corr (2007) occupational therapists within mental health care, were asked how often they use creative activities in their

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work. There were 82 percentage of them, and 51 percentages of these, who said that they use creative activities at least once a week. One theme occupational therapists can use within creative activities is the tree. In the TTM the client decides for what the tree and it's parts stands for.

The tree as a symbol

The tree is an old symbol of the human being (Koch, 1952). The leaves and fruits may symbolize transience and instability. The crown is the part, that is in interaction with the inside and the outside. The trunk supports the crown and is the stable centre for the tree (Koch, 1952). The roots can reach far into the earth. The person is rooted with the ground, which gives nutrition, life and fertility (Moltmann-Wendel, 1994).

In the TTM the tree is used to represent the individual and the various life periods in life. The crown, with its branches, can symbolize various activities or interests, or the individual's mood. Fruits in the crown can, e.g., deal with joyful activities or strengths of the individual. The trunk can symbolize the body or where the individual „is going in life“. The roots can represent how anchored the individual is in their everyday life and the context to which they belong.

Dimensions of occupation – doing, being, becoming, belonging

Wilcock defined four dimensions of occupation in her theory of Occupational Perspective of Health (OPH): doing, being, becoming, and belonging. A synthesis between these concepts makes a person an individual with an identity of their own, and will be related to experience of health and well-being (Wilcock, 1998; 2015). Doing can be seen as being active and engaged in meaningful occupations (Hitch et al., 2014). Wilcock described being as „how people feel about what they do“, and mentioned it in context with roles, e.g., being a mother or being an occupational therapist (2006). Being correlates with the essence of an individual, as a reflective and spiritual dimension, and can be expressed through performing creative activities. Becoming refers in terms of change and development, with a focus on goals and is an ongoing process towards an individual's future life (Hitch et al. 2014). Hammell (2004) constructed a fourth dimension, called „belonging“ in context with „a life worth living“, and Wilcock (2007; 2015) stated, that belonging is connected with participation and interaction in a specific social context.

In context with the TTM doing can be related to drawing an image of the tree. Being can be related to drawing in silence, as well as the reflective dialogue with the occupational therapist in the phase of occupational story telling. The initial

„Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.“

Hermann Hesse

tion of development and changes in everyday life, with support of occupational story telling and story making corresponds to becoming. Finally, the individual's social context can be seen as belonging, as well as the relationship between client and occupational therapist during the sessions of TTM (Gunnarsson, 2008).

The following graphic (Figure 1) illustrates the dimensions of doing, being, becoming and belonging in the context with the TTM and the OT-process:

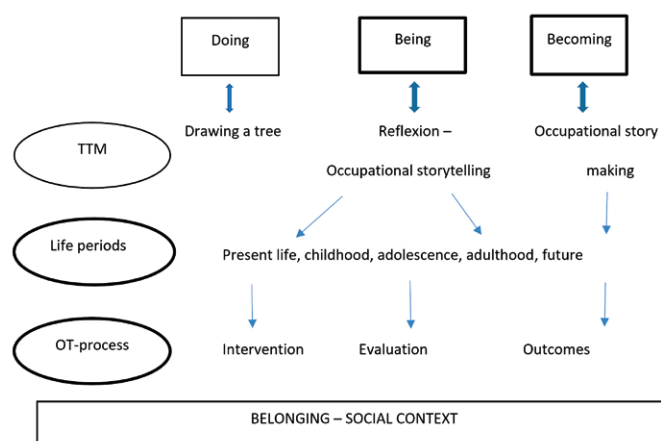


Figure 1: Dimensions of doing, being, becoming and belonging in relation to the TTM

Occupational storytelling and Occupational story making

By telling a story about their everyday activities, and their experiences of them in a context, an image of the individual gradually develops from early childhood to adult life. Florence Clark specified the dimensions „occupational story telling“ and „occupational story making“, of which both focuses on the individual's activities in everyday life. In the grounded theory she described how different techniques of occupational storytelling and occupational story making, would be useful as tools to encourage a client to tell their life story (Clark, 1993; Clark et al., 1996).

The first step is the creation of a „collaborative horizon of understanding“. It includes techniques like collaborating, building a relation based on empathy, including everyday life, active listening and being reflective. The second step focus on occupational storytelling, in which the client is en-

couraged to tell their life-story to make an analysis as well as a synthesis of everyday activities. The third step deals about occupational story making, and encompasses occupational coaching (encouraging positive redevelopment), providing occupational strategies, emphasize improvements), gaining insight about problems and possible solutions, getting an extended perception of everyday activities (e.g. dealing with emotions, friendship/intimacy), and finally, reconstructing self image and their cultural context (Clark, et al., 1996).

The TTM in practice

The occupational therapists will get a holistic view of the client and their everyday life, when the method can gather important information of the client's current and former activities and interest. This is the process of the narrative method „occupational story telling“. In the last session the focus is on finding positive perspectives and goals for the future, i.e., „occupational story making“. The client is encouraged to talk about their everyday activities, relationships, resources and limitations in everyday life. Although there are some manuals to use, it is important that the occupational therapist will use the method as intended, why they need specific training, in terms of frames and techniques, for using the TTM.

The TTM involves five sessions. In the first session, the client is asked to draw a tree, which represents their present life situation. The second session is focused on the childhood, the third on the adolescence, the fourth on the adulthood and, then finally, the fifth session deals with their future. Each session, apart from the fifth session, starts with a modified relaxation exercise, based on Jacobson (1938). At the end of this relaxation exercise, the client is introduced to drawing an image of a tree, representing the specific period of life.

Each session contains a nonverbal part. The client concentrates on drawing the tree, and when finished the drawing, the image is fixed on a wall (so that it will possible to look at the image from a distance). Now the verbal part starts, i.e., the occupational storytelling, in which the client and the occupational therapist have a reflective dialogue focusing on everyday activities. The picture image is by hand rotated, so that the client can reflect their experiences and feelings related to everyday life from various perspectives.

At the end of each session, the occupational therapist encourages the client to form a home assignment, that they carry out at home (e.g. calling a friend, go for a walk, ...) between the sessions.

In the final session the focus is on „occupational story making“, which starts with a retrospection of the previous sessions. The dialogue between client and occupational therapist is focused on the similarities and differences between images, aiming to enable the client to recognize various life patterns, and what things in everyday life they want to change. Afterwards the client is asked to paint a tree, representing their future everyday life.

The TTM requires approximately 90 minutes for each session, focused on occupational storytelling. For the last session two hours are needed. Between each session, there should be an interval of one week. It is important to carry out the whole of the TTM-intervention within a well-defined period of time (Gunnarsson, 2022), so that the client can be enabled to reflect their life in a coherence (Maierhofer, 2011).

Research about the TTM

The TTM is an evidence-based method, and up to now eight studies have been published.

The first study was a longitudinal single case-study. The aim of this study was to find out how the TTM can be practically

implemented in a structured treatment process. The drawings of the trees formed a starting point for talking about the client's daily activities, and supported her to positive changes in everyday life (Gunnarsson 2006).

The second study had a quantitative design, based on data before and after a TTM intervention. This study evaluated changes regarding performance and satisfaction with performance of daily activities, various health related factors (e.g., self-control and sense of coherence), therapeutic relationship, and client satisfaction with the intervention. The outcomes showed significant improvements for all of the measurements (Gunnarsson, 2009).

The third study had a qualitative design, in which 20 clients were interviewed about their experiences of the TTM, as well as their therapeutic relationship with the OT. The clients told that the intervention was developing and supportive. They had been able to talk about the activities in which they had participated in their lives in a context, where the painting became a help to express their experiences. The co-operation with the OT was important for gaining new perspectives that could be useful for the future (Gunnarsson et al., 2010).

In the fourth study, OTs were interviewed about using the TTM. They experienced the TTM as being structured, but with the possibility of being flexible within the framework. In order to be able to make use of TTM, the client needs to have an ability to symbolize, i.e. have the ability to link specific feelings to specific situations. According to the OTs, TTM initiates a playful process that triggers and makes the life story more profound. It is a reflective process where painting a tree initiates a dialogue between the client and the OT, and a process of change where the clients get the opportunity to view their life situation from new perspectives (Gunnarsson et al., 2011). A follow-up study with 31 former clients showed that earlier improvements had been maintained over time. The clients increased their ratings significantly in terms of sense of coherence and satisfaction according occupational performance. Further, the self-rating questionnaires regarding psychological symptoms, activity level and self-mastery was shown to be stable, which means that they had maintained their improvements over time (Gunnarsson & Björklund, 2013).

The aim of a further project, a randomised controlled trial, was to compare TTM-treatment with other occupation therapy (where the focus was on conversations about activities and structure of everyday life). The participants were people who had depression and/or anxiety and were affected to such an extent that it caused them problems with everyday activities. The results showed positive outcomes in terms of everyday activities, psychiatric symptoms and health for both groups, but no differences between the groups (Gunnarsson et al., 2015; Gunnarsson et al., 2018). This indicates that the TTM is just as good as best practice. Further analyses of data collected 3 and 12 months after the initial treatments showed that the positive outcomes for both groups were maintained (Gunnarsson et al. 2022).

Maierhofer (2011, 2012) conducted a single case study and performed a SWOT-analysis (i.e., analysis to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) of the TTM. The client perceived the TTM as supportive, when it was possible for her to act with her everyday life in a constructive way. This process supported her to draw her future tree, and to find positive aspects for her future-life. The SWOT-analysis revealed that the TTM was experienced as having more strengths than weaknesses (16:9). Strengths described were that the OTs may gain a lot of informations and a holistic sight of their clients, that the TTM is solution-focused with the focus is on the client's strengths. Weaknesses described were that someti-

Title, authors year	Study design	Participants	Data gathering	Outcomes
Gunnarsson, Jansson & Eklund (2006)	Qualitative, longitudinal single-case study	One client (woman)	5 TTM sessions, qualitative, interviews	Positive changes in everyday life
Gunnarsson & Eklund (2009)	Quantitative, quasi-experimental pre-post-test – design and correlation study	35 clients (29 women, 6 men)	Questionnaires: COPM, SOC, SDO, SCL-90-R, Mastery Scale, HAQ-II, CSQ	Significant improvements in everyday activities and health related aspects (p=.31)
Gunnarsson, Petersson, Leufstadius, Jansson & Eklund (2010)	Qualitative design	20 clients (18 women, 2 men)	Individual interviews	Increase of self-esteem and everyday activities, new perspectives useful in everyday life
Gunnarsson, Jansson, Petersson & Eklund (2011)	Qualitative, focus-groups	9 occupational therapists (9 women)	Two focus group discussions	TTM is structured and flexible Initiation of a playful process, and then a reflective process, following by a changing process
Maierhofer (2011)	single-case-study	One client (woman)	5 TTM-sessions, SWOT-analysis, expert-interviews	More strengths than weaknesses, and led to positive aspects for future life for the client
Gunnarsson & Björklund (2013)	Quantitative quasi-experimental follow-up three years after a TTM intervention	31 clients (29 women, 6 men)	Questionnaires: COPM, SOC, SDO, SCL-90-R, Mastery Scale	Significant changes: sense of coherence, occupational performance, satisfaction with occupational performance
Gunnarsson, Wagman, Håkansson, Hedin (2018)	RCT Baseline and follow-up	118 clients (88 women, 20 men)	Questionnaires:COPM, SDO, OBQ, SCL-90-R, MADRS-S, HADS	Significant improvements (p ≤ 0.01)
Gunnarsson, Håkansson, Hedin, Wagman (2022)	Longitudinal follow-up 3 and 12 months after intervention	118 clients (88 women, 20 men)	Questionnaires:COPM, SDO, OBQ, SCL-90-R, MADRS-S, HADS	Significant positive outcomes in everyday life, but no significant differences between groups

Table 2: Overview of the TTM publications

mes 90 Minutes are too long to carry out in clinical practice, and that the sessions may trigger strong emotions, which an occupational therapist cannot manage in the same session (Maierhofer 2011, 2012).

All in all, the outcomes of the studies revealed that the clients gained improvements concerning everyday activities and health related aspects (Table 2).

Illustration of a TTM intervention: Anna's lifestory

A fictional story about Anna, a woman in her 40s is presented here to illustrate the TTM. She shares her images and verbal life story. Anna's first tree image represents her current life situation. It is a large deciduous tree, which fills almost the entire paper. The crown is orange with splashes of green and purple. Around the brown trunk, a purple color forms a spiral. The roots are deep and brown, but some of them are also purple. Anna tells us that the color purple stands for exclusion, not being like everyone else. The big crown deals about Anna having too much to do, at work, at home with her family and in her free time. She feels pressured and gets too little space for her own activities. Her father died some time

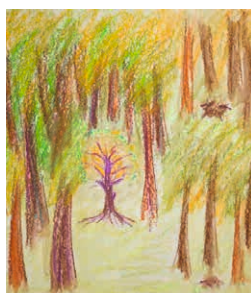
ago and she feels that she does not have time to mourn him. She also says that there are frictions between her and her husband. Anna has found it increasingly difficult to sleep at nights and during the day she is noticeably anxious and finds it difficult to focus on what she needs to do.

At the next session, Anna paints a childhood tree. She paints a small tree with an orange crown, brown trunk and in all parts of the tree there is the color purple. The small tree is surrounded by big trees; Anna says that she was raised in a large and active family. She was part of the family, but still felt like an outsider. She was in company with many people, but had a strong need to be by herself. Most of the time, she played outdoor games, and especially enjoyed accompanying her father to football. When Anna talks about her father, who is no longer alive, she is touched – she misses him, all the support he gave her and the interests they shared.

At the third session, the theme is Anna's teenage period. Even the teenage tree is surrounded by other trees. The tree takes up more space compared to the childhood tree. The teenage tree has a brown trunk and orange crown. The outermost layer of the crown is green. In this tree, the purple color is



present life tree
„The tree representing Anna's present life situation”



childhood
„The tree representing Anna's childhood”



teenage
„The tree representing Anna's teenage”



adulthood
„The tree representing Anna's adulthood”



future
„The tree representing Anna's future”

only found inside the tree and „is not visible on the outside“. After Anna paints her picture, she tells that she wanted to be like everyone else. At the same time, she did not want to be „anybody“, that is, one of the crowd. She belonged to group of girl friends; they fixed dinners and went out to have fun. There were a lot of people around her, but she felt like a loner, even if those around her did not perceive her like that. In her solitude, she pondered a lot about who she was as a person and whether one can do both „girl activities“ and be „daddy's girl“ and share his interests.

At the fourth session, Anna paints an adult tree. Here, the crown shifts from dark green in the middle to increasingly lighter green tones. It is like the crown just gets bigger and bigger and the many branches stretch in different directions. In Anna's tree, which represents her as an adult, there is only a hint of the purple color in the roots, trunk and crown. However, the purple color is found as a ring on the ground, around the tree. Anna tells that the big crown is about all the activities she is occupied with. She has difficulty protecting herself,

which is symbolized by the small ring around the tree. She is a mother and has both toddlers and teenagers to look after and she listens too little to her own needs. She feels depressed after father has died. She misses his support, but has increasingly reflected that she often adapted to what he wanted her to do regarding education and interests.

At the final session, all the pictures are put up on the wall and Anna reflects on life patterns, what has limited her in life and what strengths she has. She then paints a tree for future strategies in everyday life. It will be a defoliated winter tree with branches, trunk and roots in various gray and black tones. Throughout the tree there is a faint tone of purple. The tree stands for itself, which is important to Anna. The children will grow older and no longer need the same daily care. At work, maybe she can let others take over some tasks? With the tree, she shows that she can create space for recovery and balance and also has concrete suggestions for what it can contain. She can get off the „squirrel wheel“ and listen to what she herself needs in everyday life. ■

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