

Staying connected Presentation

Title

Balint mutation online during covid.

What about the frame, once We dared to jump into the sea...

Author

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Introduction

Dear Balint international colleagues, who could have guessed when we last met in Porto, that I would be speaking to you, on screen about Balint online?

Who would have dreamed that we would have gone through even e tenth of what happened over the past two years, throughout the Covid pandemic?

Everybody sharing worldwide experiences of lock downs, doctors, care givers and patients facing the same fears, incapacity to keep patients, friends and family secure, and experiences of either 24/7 cohabitation or desperate isolation ...

I started that script as I watched the Tokyo 2020 Olympic game closing ceremony.

Another international gathering facing a mutation to survive the Covid crisis, such as athletic games without a public, with the games broadcasted throughout the world to an international public, virtually connected while seeing athletes perform and hug on their TV screens.

The decision to run these Olympic games whatever the mutations required, seemed to meet a need for international connection, with an aspiration to communion and hope to meet for next Paris Olympic games.

The IBF community faced the same challenges in October 2020, and chose to launch its first online leadership conference, implementing small groups meeting in advance, followed by a two day online conference.

That event seems to have met a demand for connection between Balint colleagues around the world, and was followed by new opportunities to pursue Balint work online.

The situation

Different formats were launched to meet different needs:

- Some Balint group participants or international leaders expressed a desire to stay connected,
- Some Balint leaders proposed online sessions to their regular groups, or launched de novo online groups, or asked for supervision groups for their local Balint societies
- In addition, a group of international leaders joined a pilot Balint International Online Leadership group.

Overall

- It seems that some of us felt and expressed a need for international connections, to compensate for the impossibility to actually meet in person,

- As if Balint international online groups would help reverse the paradox of presence and absence...
- These experiences were also opportunities for leaders to try the online format, to exchange ideas between peers or benefit supervision to reflect on the evolution of the Balint scene. One of the outcomes being thoughts on the evolution of the format to preserve the safety of elaboration.

I had the chance to experiment several of these situations:

- A Short term regular Balint group which was run online during the lockdown,
- The de novo short term Balint group that was prior to the current “Staying Connected project”
- With an actual experience of co leading online,
- And the opportunity of Supervision online,
- As well as The participation in the pilot Balint International leadership Group launched since last online conference

What did these experiments tell us about the mutation of running Balint groups on line? was it still Balint work?

The outcome

Off we went, leading Balint groups online, on our own or with Co leaders.

After some time, it seemed that despite the fundamental lack of physical presence as well as our usual Balint circle of chairs, Balint co leaders who have “jumped into the water” were surprised to realize that the fundamentals of the Balint group dynamic seemed to remain constant.

The ability to share difficult situations, express unspoken emotions, and eventually work as groups around doctor-patient situations, experience moments of silence, and sometimes feel moments of synergy between each other’s subconscious elaborations.

The Covid crisis seemed to call for necessary adaptations:

Such as dedicating specific t for connecting, for getting together, which in the first hardest periods of the Covid crisis, gave participants an opportunity to share “how life and work were going for them in the midst of Covid”, and helped afterward focus on the actual Balint work.

In sharing experiences with other leaders, after wondering about losses or gains, it seemed that evolution, or even “mutation” of the actual Balint frame was at stake.

What we fear to lose?

The first comments focused on what we have lost or feared to lose:

Participants expressed that they missed physical exchange, such as the use of body language to express unspoken issues, or feel connected to each others.

In the first sessions we could feel a lack of spontaneity when it came to decide who’s turn it was to talk.

Some expressed the need for « coffee break chit chat », or « after the group connections, such as on the way to the parking lot ».

Definitely, the groups who regularly met in person, are expecting to meet again as soon as possible.

Over time, with the online Balint group format, we realized that many gains were also experimented.

What we discovered along the way

Both in Balint group international sessions or the Balint Online leadership groups, After a couple of sessions, the ability to connect to each other grew, despite a distance between the participants.

It was possible to experience elaboration and reflection as a group, Surprising as it might be.

We may notice a certain paradoxical experience related to proximity; some participants dared to speak of very difficult situations, implying counter transference of personal emotions. As if distance reduced the fear of transference elements, and helped participants dare more, compared to being in a regular Balint Group.

Another paradox was the feeling of intimacy despite the absence of physical encounter. Each participant being connected either directly from their professional practice or from their home, and exposing a “window” to some elements of the professional’s intimacy. Sometimes we might be greeted by some pets, that invite themselves on to the screen during Balint groups, debriefing or supervision sessions.

As if the sight of the intimate space or personal items could add a new facet to the virtual meeting compensating for the absence of physical encounter, putting a bridge that connects the intimate side of the professional, through a virtual presentation of the location he lives in.

As if the online format teaches us to meet virtually between « screen avatars », but to what extent might it contribute to the ability to fantasize, facilitating Balint work elaboration online?

In contrast, the anonymity of a hidden screen was perceived as awkward.

Another aspect gained with online Balint groups, leadership groups or supervision groups, is the possibility to connect international participants despite the distance, making it possible for rich international groups to connect on a more regular basis, as opposed to only meeting at the annual IBF events.

Can we talk about a mutation?

After thinking of gain and losses, it seems that we are facing an overall change in the Balint group setting, that may be compared to an evolution, or even a “mutation”, discovering through the Balint online session experiences, a new and distinct frame.

As for the setting, screens have replaced the “chairs in circle” format, a setting that provides a safe space in its midst and enables free associations between the members of the group. The in person interactions, supported by eye contact and sometimes conveying a sensation of containment of the emotions presented by the participants, as well as by the group perceived as a whole.

The screen is now the new setting of the Balint online group; all participants facing each other in a « gallery » layout. It gives a global view of the group, only visualizing each person’s face and shoulders in a given private location. Subtle emotions may be difficult to capture, until after a while, moments of silence are well accepted by the members of the group. We can then be sensitive to the tone of voice when a participant chooses to speak, and get a colored perspective of the spirit of the group we see as a whole on the screen. Everything below the screen seems to be avoided; faces are presented in 2 dimensions, and participants naturally adapt, making more distinctive facial expressions to convey emotions or lifting their hands in a visible way when they want to be seen.

As for group dynamic, and the ability for the leader to help the group contain the potential diversity of speech, I proposed in Porto's Congress book, the image of "the polyphony of an orchestra", as a potential "end out of" a Balint group session, when participants may have found a way to tune their speeches and integrate different points of view, as the Live image of a Balint group's ability to play the echo of a complex situation.

With the online experience of diversity of speech on screen, I proposed the image of "a patchwork on the screen, bringing together different perspectives expressed by the participants", in a given situation, as a symbolic proposition for the group to keep a certain idea of unity whilst accepting dissonant points of view. The image of the patchwork picturing some kind of link or connection on the screen, between participants, despite different ideas and emotions that echo a certain situation. The image of the patchwork may symbolize, online, a transposition of the physical experience of the Balint group as a containment and a certain feeling of "Being together" during a regular Balint group session.

Physical presence and contact, being replaced by the screen vision of the Balint participants within their professional or intimate settings, may help to witness a new facet of the Balint professional.

As for intimacy, we perceive aspects of the personal character, in addition to the professional self. And when participant express themselves from their personal or professional environment, they may feel gradually more secure once they have experienced a couple of sessions.

As for physical distance, once the connection is built between participants, it seems that distance may convey a feeling of security as well, even helping the participant to express more intimate issues, which may be more difficult to expose in a regular Balint group.... As if distance offered a certain sense of security.

Overall, the evolving adaptations of Balint groups seem to bare such paradoxical evolutions as "experiencing proximity and sometimes a touch of intimacy from a distance", and "compensating physical absence with international diversity on the screen".

Discussion

Three main questions came to my mind; What remains of the Balint frame? What about free association? and What about co leading and supervision online?

In the words of Andre Green, a French psychoanalyst who wrote about the concept of "frame" in 2002, in the "Guidelines for a modern psychoanalysis", and I quote:

"The word used by Winnicott is "setting", which has a much wider significance. We can translate it by « dispositif ». I personally proposed a word you cannot find in a bilingual dictionary: "montage". But frame seems "good enough"."

... He also states:

"more recently I proposed to distinguish two parts in the frame: the *active matrix*, including free association of the patient, the floating attention and listening, marked by neutral benevolence ("neutralité bienveillante" in French) of the analyst, making a dialogic couple where the analysis is rooted, and second part, the *Box* ("écrin" in French), defined by the number and time of the sessions, the periodicity of the encounters, the payment.. *The active matrix being the jewel contained in the box.* »

What about the frame?

In that perspective, How can we define the core of the Balint frame?

I would describe it as:

A specific space, where a group of participants connect, with the support of one or two leaders,

That come together in a given time and location

To present a clinical case that they have experienced as doctors, or care givers

allowing the group to elaborate, in person,

Following the principle of free association.

The frame being the shelter of the Balint work and elaboration.

What does not seem suitable ?

The “no paper “rule seems to remain advisable,

The use of “chat” increases the risk of loss of focus and changes in group dynamic,

The interference of mails and chat in between two sessions, does not respect the unity of time and space. Which in my experience does not Support the Balint dynamic of Co elaboration.

However, Possible Adaptations seem more neutral to the Group dynamic

We have discovered the difference between what is on the screen and below the screen.

We see elements of each participant’s personal life as slight sightings of intimacy while keeping the global professional focus.

The “no drink policy” sometimes seems to be played with, without much consequences.

Overall, leaders and participants have trained with the new setting until proper tuning was found in order for the boat sail properly, keeping the core of the Balint frame, while adapting some of the habits to the new setting (equivalent of the « écriin » of Andre Green).

What about free association?

Quoting Andre Green again:

“One of the most remarkable phenomenon of the analytic speech, is the free association dynamic for the patient. Which is in relationship to the suspended listening of the analyst, which constitutes the dialogic couple which characterizes psychoanalysis.”

What we feared in the first place

We all remember our first online Balint groups,

With the fear of loss of participants,

The difficulty in giving each participant, opportunities to speak,

Finding ways to try to respect the order in which participants share their thoughts.

A certain momentum on the way

Yet after a while, online,

It seems that silences arise again,

As if participants and leaders would reconnect with the idea of free association

And experiencing that free association may also happen online, once we have kept the active matrix of the Balint frame, protected within a reshaped box ...

What about Co leading ?

Once we experienced the loss of eye contact, the absence of physical containment that we usually experiment in a regular, in person, Balint group.

We could find, as Co leaders, new ways to connect to each other, building on given times online before the sessions dedicated to connection, discussion around our respective Co leading habits and values. Before each session, a time for connecting seemed useful to share ideas and organize the format of each session. And a debrief was suitable afterwards.

On this path, I have experienced that we could build Co leading teams online, even “de novo”. Exchanging ideas, and using the opportunity to debrief online, compensating for the absence of physical encounter, builds in a certain feeling of continuity overtime.

Facilitating more regular online contacts between leaders overtime, included in busy daily schedules and life routines, might help to compensate for the loss of physical presence by trying different kinds of personal connections.

Yet I do value the idea of keeping the same online format to deliver both Balint work and supervision, for the continuity of the elaboration and the security of the frame.

What about supervision?

Once we have adapted to the online format, regular debriefing and supervision sessions could be planned in between Balint sessions, or along the international leadership group.

Along the preparation of the “Staying Connected Event”, supervision with international colleagues could be provided online by members of the task force on a regular basis, for international leaders.

Providing regular supervision sessions for international leaders despite different Time zones and locations, was definitely a great advantage of the online format, and helped to provide a strong support structure for these online leading experimentations.

In Conclusion

A year has passed, and it seems that the experience of running groups online has brought us more confidence, in using online Balint group

As a « good enough » alternative as opposed to the regular in person Balint groups

Especially In the following situations:

- When in person meetings are not possible
- To include members from different locations in “de novo” Balint groups or leadership groups
- And to facilitate the development of supervision groups

Once the jump was made, and the fear of losing our usual Balint group setting was passed, it seems that new opportunities have come through. And like an *initiativ* experimentation, Covid crises DID change us.

As the covid situation changed our perspectives and priorities
a strong demand for international Balint connections was heard,

To compensate for the loss of physical encounter

Like any evolution

Balint online made us Experience

Losses, Gains, and new opportunities

Such as more frequent opportunities to meet or propose supervision between international leaders, in between biannual meetings.

And a new opportunity to reflect about what remains of the core of the frame of Balint work, once the setting or content has evolved.

The mutation of Covid crisis pushed us to invent new tools
And accept to adapt Balint setting or frame to the online format

What seemed important to keep of Balint rules for leaders
Could be called « the core of the frame »,
to propose containment and elaboration opportunities for Balint people
Despite important changes in the setting,

Adapting to the new « écrin » designed to contain the « Balint work jewel » on Line.

Thank you very much

With the collaboration of:

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And members of the staying connected supervision group.

Quotation

Andre Green – idées directrices pour une psychanalyse contemporaine - 2002

Chapitre 3 . Cadre – processus - transfert

Remarquons que le terme utilisé par Winnicott est « setting », qui a une signification beaucoup plus étendue. On peut le traduire par « dispositif ». J'ai proposé pour ma part un terme qui ne figure pas à cette entrée dans le dictionnaire bilingue : *montage*. Mais cadre est suffisamment bon

...

Plus récemment, j'ai proposé de distinguer, dans le cadre, deux parties : la *matrice active*, composée de l'association libre du patient, de l'attention et de l'écoute flottantes, empreintes de neutralité bienveillante de l'analyste, formant un couple *dialogique* où s'enracine l'analyse, et, deuxième partie, l'*écrin*, constitué par le nombre et la durée des séances, la périodicité des rencontres, les modalités de paiement, etc. La matrice active est le bijou que contient l'écrin. Un des phénomènes des plus remarquables de la parole analytique est le fonctionnement en association libre du patient. Celle-ci, mise en relation avec l'écoute également en suspens de l'analyste, constitue le couple dialogique qui caractérise la psychanalyse.