

# Coffee Break with Dena Baumgartner



50 years and beyond  
group competency for  
a world in conflict

## How long have you been a member of IAGP?

I first joined IAGP in 1992. I then presented for the first time in 1995 at the 12th International Congress in Argentina and have presented since at all our international conferences.

## Which theoretical approach is your primary one? Why do you feel closer to this approach?

a) I would say that my main theoretical approach is eclectic. I am trained in many models as a psychotherapist, but in my group work I primarily use psychodrama. I am a trainer of psychodrama and I am certified as a group psychotherapist by the AGPA.

b) I feel closer to the psychodrama model as I have enjoyed its creativity and working in the moment with the protagonist. It allows me to incorporate different modalities into the process. I have found it to be far more powerful than talk therapy because it reaches all of the senses.

## How long have you been practicing as a psychodramatist?

I have been practicing as a psychodramatist certified by the American Board of Examiners since 1985. In 1990 I was certified by that same board as a trainer, so 38 years.



## How was your first encounter with psychodrama?

My first encounter with psychodrama was when Tom Schramski, a TEP, came into one of my master's graduate courses in 1982. I was amazed and fell in love with the method.

## What led you to pursue an interest in psychodrama?

What led me to pursue an interest in psychodrama was how amazed I was at the process and I wanted to learn it. So, after my master's I applied to St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, DC for a year-long internship. I felt very blessed to have been chosen among hundreds of applicants to become one of the seven chosen to study that year.

***“What psychodrama has taught me is the true beauty of the human soul. The resilience to life lessons. The acceptance with grace of dying or facing major illnesses. The forgiving the working towards the authentic self. The wanting to have a better world for all.”***

## What would you say is the most rewarding and the most challenging aspect of psychodrama?

The most rewarding aspect is the creativity and spontaneity of this method. I have enjoyed branching out to use it with different populations and cultures. You are always learning and creating with psychodrama and that is important for me as I get bored easily.

The most challenging aspect of psychodrama for me is seeing people try to use it without training. This has done damage to the method. There are so many aspects to learn, and a big one people forget is that of sociometry or teaching the theory. Psychodrama is not just a method of techniques.



## IAGP Member of the Week

**Dena Baumgartner**  
Member for 31 years

- Elected to the board for The International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) as Senior Member of the EMG, 2022 to 2025. Served as a board member from 2009 to 2018 and served 3 years as Psychodrama Chair for IAGP from 2015 to 2018.
- 39 years of private practice and group work
- Fellow of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama.
- Awarded the 2014 J.L. Moreno Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama.
- Served 5 years as chair of the awards committee for ASGPP.
- Collaboration Award, with Milton Hawkins, from ASGPP - 2004.
- 34 years national and international trainer and presenter of Psychodrama.
- 9 years of service on the American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama. Member and former Chair.
- 1995 J.L. Moreno Alumni Award for Outstanding Psychodramatist from St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital, DC.
- Awarded a Certificate of Achievement from the Department of the United States Army for her work at the Fort Meade Counter-Terrorist Mission in 1984

<https://www.denabaumgartner.com>

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**What would you say have been the most significant developments within the field of psychodrama since your interest in this area began?**

I think the pandemic put a pinch on the teaching of psychodrama in person. However, at the same time, people became more creative and were using sociometry to connect. This was beginning on Zoom and led to more people being able to see people in other countries and to not feel isolated. People then started to develop how to do dramas online, a great example being teledrama. I believe Zoom helped people better understand the concepts of sociometry. I believe more interest in sociodrama came about because of Zoom and due to the world's social issues. Moreno's ideas like sociatry were becoming clearer to people because of these unfolding times. I believe Moreno's ideas and methods are being seen more clearly as very strong ways to heal, connect, and create a better world for all mankind.

**What would you say are the most common issues you have encountered in the groups you led?**

Well for all therapists, individual and group, we deal with guilt and shame. The transition of life, abuse, death, aging, and mental illness. Presently, due to the pandemic, climate change, and political interest. I see more anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and fear.



**Can you tell us about one particular psychodrama session which has affected you?**

Oh, there have been so many over the years. I have been interviewed by the ASGPP archivers and other places where I talk more in-depth. But I think I relate more to the themes, populations, and cultures over time. My dissertation was on inner child work, and I have found that to be amazing throughout all cultures, especially the claiming one's own inner-child and rebirthing scenes. My trauma work, especially with Natives abused by the priests in Canada. The tender moments of death goodbyes that could not happen. Then the happy dramas of joyous moments in life and being present for the sorrows and joys felt and seen in the actions was a gift to my soul and a privilege.

***"A good enough psychodrama leader would be one that stays present in the moment and listens. They do not have an agenda but use their creativity and spontaneity to create in the moment with the protagonist. Zerka would say to be the mid-wife for the protagonist's development. Be present, listen, and trust their spontaneity and creativity."***

**What is your suggestion or message for young professionals?**

My suggestion or message to young professionals is of course to try out psychodrama. But more importantly, find your passion with whichever method or methods that allow your creative self to grow and enjoy your work. And never stop working on yourself.



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