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## DIGÉRER LE NON DIGESTIBLE: COMMENT "MORDRE" DANS LE SENS DE L'ÉCHEC\*

## DIGEST THE NOT DIGESTIBLE: HOW TO "BITE INTO" THE SENSE OF FAILURE

Chiara Salandin\*\*, Tiziana Bonifacio Vitale\*\*\* and Tiziana Gavagnin\*\*\*\*

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*"Sara is now at school for me ..."*

*It is 5 pm on a September day, the month in which for many children and for many families the everyday life restarts, after the summer break. At that time she would be at school. A sure absence in an equally certain presence. This mother consoles herself and comforts us, welcomed by a group wrapped in a dense silence. Her voice, controlled and warm, fills the room and tells us the urgency to escape loneliness; the comfort of a daily meeting with her daughter, on the grave at the cemetery; the fear of a potential pathogenic pain, which she feels could make her sick; the desire to discover what happened, even in the details, and the desire not to know it at all.*

*Surviving those who we have engendered and losing a child is unnatural and cruel. A pain which surprises us unprepared, as a thunderbolt. We deluded ourselves: she was getting out of it, it was a happy period, she had new projects and new energies in her life. Nothing prefigured that she would fall in the trap, this time without exit. She proudly extracts a photo from her bag. She wants to show us the face of Sara, her youthful daughter, her beauty. The photo passes from the hand to hand, cradled by all*

*the parents presented who say: "The son of one of us is the son/daughter of anyone".*

*There were so many young people at the funeral, for the last goodbye to a friend who always said a word to help anyone. Even the boyfriend was at the funeral. He was as hard as nails, with a wedding dress. That boy who saved himself thanks to his forty kilos more and thanks to the drug rehab that made him healthier, stronger. That boy who, despite the effects of the drug, rescued her; raised her and brought her up to the front of the house, where he shed tears on her body, lying on the sidewalk. The boy's mother said that it was like "la pieta"; she gave the first aid, she warned her parents and powerless she assisted to this loss. The words of her father were. "Now Sara has found the peace". The group in chorus is unanimous: "And so she found it. Our guys not yet..."*

In Italian there is a saying, when somebody starts doing something (a journey, a new job, a relationship, etc.) "you know what you lose you don't know what you find".

We think that this statement fits with what we want to highlight with this work, addressed to the families of young teenagers, that we are building in a restricted

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\* Communication presented at the 8th European Congress on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology and XXX Congress of SEPYPNA, which under the title "Psychological development, psychopathology and human relations today: interaction between the biological and the social aspects" took place in Bilbao on April 26, 27 and 28, 2018.

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group of three psychologists psychotherapists, into the Prevention, Youth and Families Area.

In fact, being parents today is a task increasingly articulated and tested by situations of internal and external vulnerability to the family and, very often, these vulnerabilities undermine the relationships within the household.

This vulnerability has led us to highlight an increase in the request for help from families with young children who use substances (alcohol, substances of abuse, etc.), which show symptoms related to traumatic situations and relational difficulties.

As stated by Fiorella Pezzoli (2006) "Within the nuclear family dynamics are established, largely unconscious, which have a great weight on the definition of the identity of each of its members (Pezzoli, 2003). Acting in order to support this process in situations where particular problems are present or in prevention of mental disorders in the developmental age, represents an intervention of social utility".

This awareness has led the operators of the "young area of the SerD of Mestre Terraferma of the ASL 3 of Venice" to prepare an intervention first of all oriented to the adults parents of their patients as asserted by the EBP scientific evidence, that recognizes the effectiveness of the treatment if the family of the young patients is involved too.

For these reasons, we decided to propose a study aimed at the parents of patients who have been taken care of by the Public Service, involving a psychologist-psychotherapist of the "Community of Venice" Social Cooperative. The aim of this project is to propose a study of integrated public-private approach for the management of group aimed at the families of young people in treatment. The role of the psychologists in charge of this project was to strengthen and support their parenting skills in a moment of vulnerability and fragility, facilitating the "relationship of elaboration and containment" and the outsourcing of their own experiences, helping them with their anxieties.

In these working groups, we increased the awareness that, as F. Di Maria and G. Lo Verso affirm "the small group proposes an intermediate space between single life, life of the couple and of the individual reflection, and the social life; this intermediate space reconsiders

and rethinks the links between individual and society".

During this work, the therapists had to face and, above all, to recognize what each subject was undergoing, an experience marked by deep wounds and internal lacerations already present or gradually emerging.

These are the goals of the therapeutic process:

- To offer a space of comparison/ understanding and elaboration among people experiencing the same problem lived, for some of them, in extreme solitude;
- To Reflect on the parental role and on how this significantly affects the treatment of drug addiction, restoring the parent's identity and their competence;
- To overcome the sense of guilt and shame;
- To reduce suffering;
- To create new relationships and to start possible changes.

The group worked around four fundamental principles: space, time, role and task.

The group met every fifteen days for an hour and a half at the headquarters of the SerD of Mestre-Venice, for six months. Initially, the project was presented to twenty people; eleven of them agreed to participate and finally the participation was settled at eight people. During the summer a point to every participant has been realized concerning the path taken.

Concerning the roles, every group was managed by a coordinator assisted by a psychologist specialized in Relational Family Therapy, with the task of helping the group to elaborate their own experiences, help them overcome obstacles, facilitate group communication, highlighting its resistance.

In the group the family opens up, recounting themselves in a progressive growth of confidence. More they find themselves similar in pain, in fatigue, in shame, in despair, more they have the courage to uncover their own specificity and their own difference. Every participant listens to the story of "normality", a normality that is different for everyone, but that in everyone has met a moment of block, as a cog jumping off the track. The typical dynamics of the adolescent period is the

<sup>2</sup> is a work of Renaissance sculpture by Michelangelo Buonarroti.

conflict of the boy / girl with their parents in the process of individualization and separation that leads to the progressive exit from the family. The development of a symptom in adolescence is usually linked to a difficulty in this process.

When the normal family custom experiences pathology of one of its members, it is difficult to recognize oneself as part of the problem. You are blind, defended. And then it is the fault of society incapability of offering opportunities; it is the fault of the group of friends who leads them astray; it is the fault of heartbreak to which the son / daughter has not been able to react; it is the fault in having been in the wrong moment at the wrong time... but what place the family can/must attribute to herself? And how to work on one's own role and responsibility by keeping away the guilt, which subtracts energies without producing new ones?

Families angry, disappointed, rejecting or compliant but equally blocked and powerless, in difficulty in enduring these levels of suffering, of their own and their children. It was hard for everyone to shift their attention from their kids to themselves. Some members of the group have worked very hard and this effort has contributed greatly to the evolution of others.

If it was difficult to narrate and to deal with the suffering inflicted on each of them by their child, it was even more difficult to express the feeling of shame felt for the failure of their parental role. Important was the recognition and acceptance of "errors" emerged in their stories. The moods were beyond the shame of the failure and also the feeling of insecurity leading the family to think that they were not able or sufficiently capable or intelligent enough to achieve the objectives prearranged. In some cases, pain and suffering were expressed with psychophysical discomfort signs involving the body such as insomnia, depression, rashes, etc., as well as giving rise to resistance and defense mechanisms. In fact, for some of them, their experience was intolerable and therefore they lived emotionally the fear of failure like a burden that did not allow them to open up to the group path sharing.

It is important to highlight how the wounds can heal, but the scars will forever remind us what we have experienced. Hence the importance of not ignoring pain because ignoring that it only hides it. When suffering is

massive, we lead to rigid and primitive defenses such as Negation, Projection or Projection Identification. For this reason, externalizing pain takes on a particular importance, recognizing it and facing it through a "containment relationship" and through promotion of comparison, to search for different meanings in events, behaviors and to experiment with alternative strategies.

And within this process of creating a plot in order to contrast the sense of failure and building new hopes, we see arriving the extreme defeat that breaks every sense of life: the loss of the Other. During the summer, after the end of the group, one family lost their only daughter twenty years old from a heroin overdose.

This loss had repercussions on both sides as if the objective that united parents and psychologists had been torn apart. The whole work group was injured, with a sense of defeat, exhaustion, and infertility. How many times in our speeches the topic of death hovered or faced as a possible reality. The psychologist, a technician of human suffering, contains and supports the states of pain, of disorientation of that family which is the natural context of reception and care of the discomfort.

The healthcare staff, not as usual, assumed an "active" attitude by participating in the funeral of the young girl. This choice has a reparative aim. Giving space to the experiences of the members of the group was felt by the team as indispensable as these events are complicated to take in. Following the traumatic event, in order not to let the member of the group live the pain in extreme solitude, we urgently organized an extraordinary meeting as reported in the initial story. "The rite transforms the void of loss into a space-time of relationships" (Cigoli, 2005). So it was. The organization of this meeting space-time made it possible to understand the meaning of death in the family and the group was able to share the pain. "It is sharing that allows bonds to feed, restructure and find new energies" (Cigoli, 2005).

To conclude, this work aims to be an example of a useful tool to be used in the process of caring for the child and for all the family members to overcome critical situations in order to improve internal relations. The containment report has allowed the whole group to recognize and support themselves even in moments of strong crisis of everyone and reduce loneliness, infusing trust and hope.

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