

SABINE GRAAF

Graduated pedagogue & Marte Meo therapist;
coordinator in the SPZ Meckenheim

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Marte Meo And Counselling For Relatives



1. Introduction

Relatives of people with mental health problems or who suffer from dementia have a great need to unburden themselves and to get suggestions for dealing with the person suffering.

The staff of the social-psychiatric centre (SPZ) in Meckenheim (an institution of the SKM-Catholic Association for social services in the area of Rhein-Sieg)(¹) has known this for more than 20 years and comply with this need by talking with the relatives, individually or in groups.

To listen, to understand, to share sorrow and shock with others are helpful in this process, but eventually the suggestions of the counsellors remain abstract if they are only conveyed verbally. The wish to show relatives in a more concrete, practical and effective way how they can form their behaviour in interaction with the family member with special needs, finally lead to Marte Meo as a method in advising relatives.

2. Starting A Project With ADele And Using Marte Meo As A Method

As so often in life, the people we meet are the ones that inspire us to do something new. In this case, it was Mrs. Dr. Ursula Becker, who gave a talk in a quality circle meeting about dementia, led by the SPZ, reporting with which good experiences people have worked in the inpatient elderly care with the Marte Meo method. A member of staff

of the SPZ, *Andrea Schmidt*, who is assigned the counselling of elderly mentally ill people and their relatives, became curious. Her workplace is called ADele (learning how to live with Alzheimer's and Depression), and she had the impression that Marte Meo could be exactly what was still lacking in our differentiated offers of counselling and care.

By getting in touch with *Maria Aarts* and *Dr. Therese Niklaus-Loosli*, this idea was soon implemented.

We wanted to start a project with ADele, in which we use Marte Meo as a method of advising relatives and assess whether we are successful in doing so. The Caritas foundation liked the idea so much, that sponsor the project on a small scale for three years. Meanwhile, half of the time has passed (December 2012, *Ed.*) and we can already say today that the work with Marte Meo in an SPZ is very successful. Thereby it is important that the Marte Meo method is tailored to the requirements of the work with mentally ill people/those suffering from dementia, that is to say that Marte Meo has to be developed further in a creative way, which is indeed in accordance with *Maria Aarts*.

3. Marte Meo Is Further Developed For The Needs Of Relatives

Fundamentally, one can say about the processes of advising relatives that the work with Marte Meo is an integrated part of the counselling process in the SPZ. That is to say, there are also counselling sessions between the Marte Meo reviews, a contact has been established before and usually, this also continues after the work with Marte Meo.

In the presentations about Marte Meo by *Maria Aarts*, *Dr. Therese Niklaus* and *Dr. Ursula Becker* that we have seen, it was generally the case that the development steps of the people to be counselled were demonstrated by means of film sequences, showing a before and after contrast.

This kind of procedure is not always possible when advising relatives in the context of the work in an SPZ, because the people that are interested in Marte Meo tend to be ones with developed communicative abilities. Thus, they will barely show changes in their communication that one could make visible in short film extracts.

Therefore we ask the relatives at the end of the Marte Meo process what they have learned and what has changed for them and their environment in order to

receive additional information for the evaluation.

Hence, we have developed Marte Meo slightly further for the needs of relatives of mentally ill people or of those suffering from dementia. We wanted to make sure that the relatives are the ones seeking help in these counselling processes and the ones suffering from mental difficulties can often not be there or do not want to take part. That means that we are not always able to record videos which we need for the Marte Meo process together with the patients and their caring relatives, but have to look for other solutions.

4. Two Ideas

Therefore we came up with two ideas, which are used in the following Marte Meo process with Mrs. G.:

1. We film our counselling sessions and show the Marte Meo Elements (MME)⁽²⁾ that are visible in them.
2. We use successful film sequences in concordance with selected MMEs that were recorded in other counselling processes and demonstrate the possibilities of transfer.

In case of the first idea, we were influenced by the following thought:

Getting to know the other (the diseased) in a new way happens with Marte Meo by getting to know oneself anew, becoming aware of one's own competences and to then use these purposefully and in a supportive way (cf. *Maria Aarts* during a conference in Hückelhofen, Germany, 05.06.12).⁽³⁾

In that process, we use the principles that are known from self-awareness. The principles are:

- (positive) feedback,
- here and now,
- unfreezing - change - refreezing.

Feedback goes without saying. Observing images of oneself in the video and the comments from the therapist function as a feedback on one's own behaviour. One becomes aware of how one behaves. Since Marte Meo is a very appreciative method and predominately positive images are shown, the feedback is altogether positive and has an affirmative effect.

Here and Now uses a phenomenon from communication. People behave in a typical way. It does not

matter, where they are and in what kind of situations. This means for the self-awareness that I can work in a process-like manner. Hence, I can give feedback for things, which I see and notice here and today and do not need to look back to past situations and analyse those. The transfer is then carried out by the person visiting the self-awareness group and who makes his/her experiences in the here and now. For Marte Meo, it therefore becomes clear why it is possible to work out MMEs from a conversation or a short film sequence and nonetheless make experiences for other situations, which are helpful then and at that time.

Unfreezing-Change-Refreezing describes changes in behaviour step-by-step, which take place in Marte Meo, but also in the process of self-awareness.

Through feedback (or observation of Marte Meo images), we become consciously aware of our behaviour. The focus is put on what I do, say, hear, how I look etc. in this very moment. It is not normally the case that one puts oneself in the focus in such a way and it is unsettling – unfreezing, similar to melting ice. In the initial stage of working with Marte Meo, the subjects experience exactly this. They learn about a MME and are supposed to practice it and suddenly they notice it everywhere.

Change then would be to consciously apply the learned MME and the so-called »Happ-Happ«⁽⁴⁾ when it was successful. A sense of achievement, according to learning therapy, has the result that that exact behaviour is shown more often and is bit by bit practiced in such a way that it becomes a typical one. It is refrozen – refreezing is the keyword from self-awareness.

5. How Does A Marte Meo-Counselling Process Look, When The Diseased Family Member Does Not Take Part In It?

I will show the course of action using the example of the Marte Meo process with Mrs. G.

5.1. The Task And The Setting

The Marte Meo-process with Mrs G. takes place at a time when it is still unclear from what kind of illness her mother, Mrs S., is suffering. Conspicuous in Mrs Sch.'s behaviour is that she forgets everything, can no longer organise the household chores and grocery shopping and generally makes the impression of being very agitated and sad. In the course of our time with

Marte Meo, the specialist will diagnose both dementia and depression.

Mrs G.'s request is to find a method with Marte Meo that makes it easier for her to deal with the mother in an adequate way, without constantly overburdening herself and thus to depress herself further. Furthermore, Mrs G. seeks to unburden herself since she feels responsible for supporting her mother (81) and father (90), because they live in the same house and her parents have been very helpful for many years when it came to supporting her with her three children. Hence, Mrs G. also wants to learn how to find a balance between caring for her parents and herself.

The Marte Meo counselling takes place without the participation of the mother. MMEs are developed in the sessions with me, and a freely recorded film sequence from another counselling process from the SPZ is used. The experiences in the course of the Marte Meo process reveal that Mrs G. is able to carry out the transfer and apply them in the interactions with her mother.

5.2. The Marte Meo Elements And The Process

The Marte Meo process with Mrs G. consists of four sessions with relative long breaks between them. This is partly because Mrs G. is quite inflexible in her schedule and because she wanted to think about whether she wants to work with the Marte Meo method after the initial session. Furthermore, a diagnosis was supposed to be made beforehand.

5.2.1. Session

Mrs G. tells me about her mother's behaviour and that she is not sure how she should treat her. On the one hand, she can see that her mother still wants to do things and be responsible for something, but on the other hand, she also realizes that her mother is not able to do that anymore.

Mrs G. describes an ordinary, very concrete situation with her mother from a few days ago. On that day, Mrs G. had brought fresh green beans from the market and asked her mother to prepare these for a joint lunch. Mrs Sch. then inquired again and again whether the green beans were meant for the salad or whether they were supposed to be cooked. Despite having been a good and experienced cook for years, she had forgotten that they were always washed first and cooked afterwards.

For this particular situation, I address the possibility of positive guidance. I describe for Mrs G. what kind of steps would have been more easily realisable for her mother: naming what has to be done and clarify this with double information. Announcing one step after the other and do the same, wait until Mrs Sch. can follow, acknowledge whatever she has done right...

This MME of positive guidance creates structure, orientation, predictability - all things that the mother, suffering from dementia, is losing bit by bit. By using positive guidance, Mrs G. can help her mother to orient herself and to do things »the right way«. This will have a positive effect on her, because it gives her a feeling of »I can still do something« or »I am worth something«.

5.2.2. Session And Review

The diagnosis is made. Mrs G. is sad and also angry with her doctor, because he was so brutally honest with her mother. Her mother has only reacted to it a few days later and does not accept the diagnosis. »I don't have Alzheimer's,« she says.

The depression has now been treated for a few weeks and Mrs Sch.'s mood lightens considerably.

We discuss the MMEs friendly face and contact, and moreover waiting and sharing happiness. I show the mentioned MMEs gradually to Mrs G., using video recordings from our first session. As it is usual in a Marte Meo review, I have prior to this selected sequences and still images of Mrs G., in which she is successful in applying these elements. She sees herself standing in good contact with me and also views her good, friendly face. She is surprised that we are able to laugh together despite having a discussion about a very sad topic. I can also show Mrs G. the waiting element in our talk and she realizes that it is good for me that she can wait until I can think through and fully formulate my thoughts.

By means of the shown images and sequences, I explain to her that the Marte Meo elements correspond to the primal urge of every human being to feel accepted and appreciated. Mrs G. herself is able to see that this contributes to herself feeling more comfortable and relaxed.

5.2.3. Session And Review

Mrs G. has practiced the elements and is quite glad that the relationship with her mother has become more relaxed. In her work as a librarian, she also uses her new »friendliness«. Mrs G. reports that

she feels better when her mother is doing well. She seems much less burdened today and embraces the new MMEs: *double information* and *naming*.

Again, I show her images from our filmed discussions (this time, I have selected scenes from the 1st and the 2nd recording) and show her at what point and when she acts in accordance with the MMEs. As before, I have chosen sequences with successful Marte Meo moments and give Mrs G. some time to observe these. I explain to her why the elements mentioned are of such great importance to her demented mother's orientation.

The MMEs *double information* and *naming* contribute to making the information clearer and to create unambiguousness. Mrs G.'s mother can orient herself using them when she herself has lost all orientation. She can avoid »mistakes« that would distress her mother and thus can have a share in her well-being. We agree to talk about positive guidance again during the next appointment and to use a film sequence from another family for that purpose.

5.2.4. Session And Review Taken From Another Family's Marte Meo Process

Today, we conclude the Marte Meo process. We talk about positive guidance once more, because this will gain in importance in dealing with Mrs Sch. in the future. For this purpose, we use a review from another family's Marte Meo process. In this film, the wife of a demented man is successful in guiding him positively, so that he can follow her instructions without feeling that he is not able to manage things alone anymore. She names things in small steps, waits for an adequate period of time, so that he can react, clarifies double information, what she has said and meant.

Mrs G. has no trouble to transfer the shown film sequence to her own domestic situation. She notices the parallels to our discussion about the green beans, so that we can come back to the beginning of our Marte Meo process. Now she also has images in her head that fit to the things discussed.

These images, as the Marte Meo images from our discussions, can serve as a model for dealing with her mother in the future. And apparently she already does this, because Mrs G. reports in the end what she has been able to apply from the Marte Meo process and how good she feels doing that.

6. Experiences and new insights

Mrs G. describes her experiences with Marte Meo and the insights she has gained:

- »Better ... good, we have learned a lot, I have learned a lot ... am able to deal with the situation in a better way ... certain things just don't escalate that much anymore, because I respond differently to her, don't contradict her anymore ... I try to stay as calm as possible and to react to what she tells me ... without commenting ... to react positively to it ... so that she gets a bit of feedback and then she also feels better because of that ...«
- »I was already able to do that ... I also paid attention to that ... to let her come out a bit more, to wait ... for her, but also for myself.«
- »To extract things better ... that, which is better for the other ... and at the bottom line also for myself.«
- »I notice that when one gives her the opportunity to laugh that she feels good.«
- »Yes, I'm already aware that ... in calm situations... I can imagine that I will act like that ... when I can

feel that it's positive ... contrary to stress, which immediately transfers itself.«

- »I'm very content, when I'm sometimes able to deal with such situations ... also realise that this has a positive effect on my mother ...«
- »Everything was helpful ... more or less things I was consciously aware of ... especially the contact is something I keep in mind ... to wait, to allow her some time as well ... there are only problems when I'm pressed for time.«

Mrs G. has learned that there is a correlation between her own actions and those of her mother. When she is not pressed for time, the MMEs we have discussed are successful and the domestic situation is altogether more relaxed.

Mrs G. points out: »There are only problems when I'm pressed for time«.

Therefore, she was advised in the counselling sessions to not call on her mother when she is pressed for time if possible, to maybe get help from someone from outside and to tell, whether she has time or not.

7. The Marte Meo Process Of Mrs. G In An Overview:

| mrs. G. has already developed: | mrs. G. still has to learn: |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mrs G. is very much able to stay in contact. | Mrs G. should learn to stay in contact longer, since her mother experiences this as an appreciation. MMEs friendly face, moment of contact. |
| Mrs G. can show a friendly face. | Mrs G. should learn to allow her mother enough time to do things on her own and to say respectfully: MME waiting. |
| Mrs G. can wait in a conversation. | Mrs G. should learn to create situations in such a way that her mother receives some kind of structure and orientation. MMEs positive guidance and double information. |
| Mrs G. sometimes gives double information. | Mrs G. should learn to bring an atmosphere of relaxation into the domestic sphere. MME sharing happiness. |
| Mrs G. can share happiness. | Mrs G. should learn to name herself and others consciously in order to create a boundary. MME naming, which can protect her from excessive demands. |
| Mrs G. names herself and the situation. | Mrs G. should learn to register successful MMEs as an achievement and be happy about them, because it strengthens her. MME »Happ-Happ«. |

8. The MM Process Of Mrs G. Is Typical For The Experiences That We Have Made With Marte Meo In Advising Relatives

The relatives learn:

- In an exemplary way, since the counsellors apply the Marte Meo method in their counselling sessions.
- To get to know themselves, their behaviour and their competences better by means of selected images.
- To apply the behaviour that was deemed positive more often than before and not only in dealing with the concerned family member, but also in other social contexts.
- To be pleased about successful Marte Meo moments in their daily lives, and to relax when dealing with their mentally ill relatives.
- And they learn to influence situations in their shared daily life in such a way that they are perceived as more comfortable by themselves and the diseased relative.

9. Interim Conclusion

To date we have learned from our project »Marte Meo in advising relatives« that Marte Meo is a very suitable method for counselling relatives and for showing them what kind of behaviour has a positive effect on the ill family members. The domestic situation became more relaxed and cheerful and also in our discussions and reviews, we laughed a lot together. The work with Marte Meo is useful for the relatives seeking help and therefore also for the mentally ill/demented patients with their special needs.

But the work with Marte Meo is also helpful for the counsellors, because they profit from the applied MMEs as well. This is an effect we did not think of at all when we planned our project, but one that is more than welcome in times of exhaustion, excessive demands and burnout.

Notes:

- ⁽¹⁾ Website SPZ Meckenheim: http://caritas.erzbistum-koeln.de/rheinsieg_skm/fachdienste/sozialpsych_zentrum/
- ⁽²⁾ See regarding the Marte Meo elements especially *Marte Meo – Basic Manual*, 2nd ed., MARIA AARTS. ISBN 978-90-75455-16-8 (Aarts Productions, Eindhoven, 2008). German edition: *Marte Meo – Ein Handbuch*, 3rd ed. ISBN 978-90-75455-26-7 (Aarts Productions, Eindhoven, 2011).
- ⁽³⁾ MARIA AARTS on the conference *Marte Meo and the »other« person – establishing, supporting and sustaining communication channels in dementially changed people*, June 5th, 2012, in Hückelhoven, Germany. Organisation: Hospiz Erkelenz, Germany. At this symposium, MARIA AARTS provided information regarding how to establish, support and sustain communication channels for people with perception disorders, demential changes and in palliative care. Further information, mail to MARIA AARTS, aarts-maria@martemeeo.com; Website: www.martemeeo.com. Or contact: Hospiz der Hermann-Josef-Stiftung, E-mail: hjaekel@hjk-erkelenz.de.
- ⁽⁴⁾ Regarding »Happ-Happ« see: MARIA AARTS, *Marte Meo – Ein Handbuch* (Marte Meo – Basic Manual), 3rd edition, p. 174. ISBN 978-90-75455-26-7 (Aarts Productions, Eindhoven, 2011).
And: MARIA AARTS & HILDEGARD RAUSCH, *Mir fällt nix ein – Marte Meo Kommunikationstraining* (Nothing comes to mind – Marte Meo Communication Training). ISBN 978-90-75455-19-9 (Book & DVD), p. 52. (Aarts Productions, Eindhoven, 2009).

About:

- Dr. Ursula Becker:
Website: www.ursulabecker-bonn.de; or see survey on: <http://www.martemeeo.com/en/links/Germany/>
- Dr. Therese Niklaus-Loosli:
Website www.therese-niklaus.ch; or see survey on: <http://www.martemeeo.com/en/links/Switzerland/>

Abbreviations:

| | |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ADele | learning to live with Alzheimer's and Depression |
| MME | Marte Meo elements |
| SKM | SKM-Catholic Association for Social Services in the area of Rhein-Sieg (SKM = Social Service of Catholic Men) |
| SPZ | Social-psychiatric centre, Meckenheim (Germany) |

Further Information:

SABINE GRAAF | Certified pedagogue & Marte Meo therapist; coordinator in SPZ Meckenheim

E-mail: sabine.graaf@skm-rhein-sieg.de

Website: skm-rhein-sieg.de › Fachdienste › Sozialpsychiatrisches Zentrum

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