

## Workshop: Imagery and Creative Work in Therapy

### Introduction

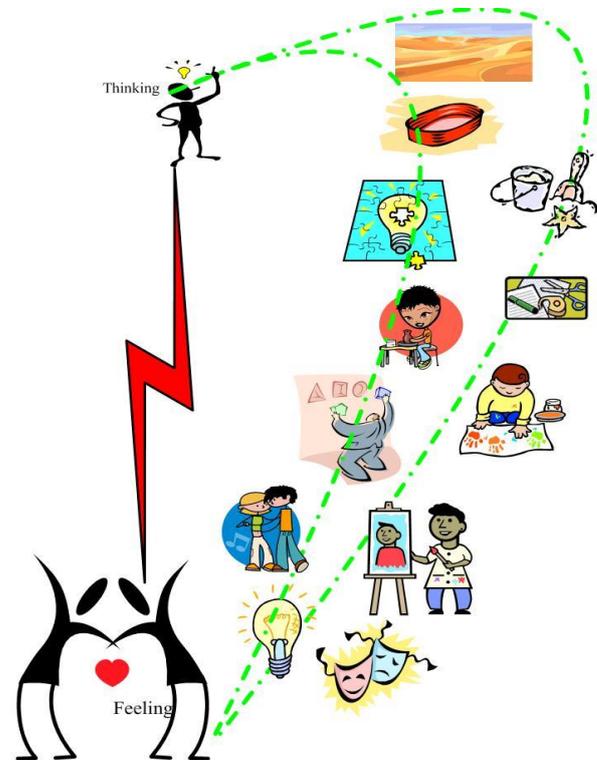
In the context of how I approach the therapeutic engagement, as well as my theoretical reasoning, my attitude is to not get overly fixated on definitions and try to maintain an openness to meaning in a creative and lateral manner. Behind this use of 'imagery and creative work in the therapy room' the function is to provide variations for the client (and therapist) to explore and discover what is occurring.

Everyone has particular ways to describe what they are experiencing. These particular ways may be amazingly rich, creative and imagery full, or, perhaps, dull and lacking stimulation or interest. Wherever the client is along this spectrum the opportunity exists to stimulate a fresh approach in meaning giving and making. This opportunity is about exploring differently; to offer a difference in the therapeutic relationship that allows the client to gain fresh insight, fresh awareness of their experiences.

The initiating stimulus of our actions lies with our senses. The five common senses are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling - exteroceptors. There is also balancing and movement – proprioceptors. From the sensation from these sources we respond.

The expression of our thoughts and feelings is never only verbal. We express through our body and through our movements.

An integrated observation of what is seen, said, heard, noticed etc. provides us with extensive information of a situation. Often, at some point, this is verbalised. Sharing a common language provides for the verbal communication of our experiences. In this communication, we also share common sights, sounds, smells etc. Our verbal expressions mostly evoke imagery and we integrate into our verbal expressions. We creatively express.



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The integration of thought, behaviour, feeling and body are enhanced with approaches that create a range of sensory inputs. This might be a view from the therapy window; the sounds of the garden, the smell of cooking in the kitchen, and so on. Of course, the reality is that these actual scenes, sounds and smells are not conveniently occurring with the therapy session. This add value to workshops that provide retreat settings involving meditation, nature walks etc; or working with animals.

Imagery and creative work in therapy is often to overcome, and sometimes literally bypass, what stands in the way of the individual being able to be in touch with their experiences more fully; with greater awareness. The work in therapy may be useful to lessen the intensity of the relational process that is sometimes experienced by the client. In other words, you – the therapist – are too much for the client; too intense, too present

Also, imagery and creative working may be useful where the work with the client appears to be at a stalemate, where no figure seems to emerge for the client then the use of creative interventions and experimenting may lead to a shift with the client grasping an emerging experience.

So, there are some particular situations that might warrant such work. The ongoing use of imagery and creativity however is agreeable with most therapeutic situations and is probably in action most of the time and its use is limited only by the therapist. I feel that needs greater explanation, or maybe greater experience...

**The power** of imagery and creative work in therapy is that it provides a route that can bypass a client's constructed thoughts and behaviours that limit or deny their felt experience.



**The danger** of imagery and creative work in therapy is that it provides a route that can bypass a client's resistance to explore thoughts, behaviours and feelings.

Succinctly, creative work can enable the overcoming of a client's defences but these defences are there for a purpose. The work of therapy is not to break these defences, rather, to help the client know and have the skills to loosen these defences.

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## Creativity

With Gestalt therapy creativity is at its core. Indeed, its founders were known for their creativity and artistry. Paul Goodman was a poet, wrote short stories, novels and plays; Laura Perls referred to herself as a musician and writer; Fritz (Frederick) Perls enjoyed, and worked in the theatre. However, in constructing the Gestalt theory they recognised the simplicity of creativity in our everyday experiences. This distinguishes the creative works of art, music, dance, song, theatre etc. In the introduction to the book *Creative Licence: The Art of Gestalt Therapy* Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and Nancy Amend Lyon point out that

“Creativity, traditionally seen as a special gift of remarkable and exceptional personalities, is considered in Gestalt therapy to be a quality of spontaneous adaptation in interpersonal processes, as well as an essential ingredient of healthy social living.”  
(Spagnuolo Lobb & Amendt-Lyon, 2003, p. ix)

So, creativity attaches to the quality of spontaneity and adapting to the situation that we are experiencing. The spontaneity relates to the freshness we can engage with, rather than a habitual responding. The adapting is occurring in every situation we experience – adapting our own needs with those of others;



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adapting our behaviour with regard to what we perceive is happening, be it wanted, demanded, or required; and so on. The process of experience implies an essence of a creation.

Creativity is the activity that occurs when the individual has awareness of what is novel in the situation and behaves responsively with this. Creativity is the human-process, and to explore creativity is to explore human-process, and thus explore the self. Therapy explores creativity as the Self-in-Relation with, in, of, for, and by, the situation.

## Adjustment-Creativity Spectrum

What of the creativity polarity? As night is the polarity to day, creativity is the polarity to adjustment. Creativity has the qualities of spontaneity and adaptation to/of/with/by the situation; and a quality of freshness and novelty with the moment. Adjustment, however, lacks these.



Adjustment has the qualities of rigidity, and adjusting of the Self only, or the environment only, or both without adapting, meaning without integrating or assimilating from the situation. Adjustment lacks attention to the freshness and novelty of the situation, instead is stale with prediction of what will be or analysis of what was.

We all flowing along this creativity-adjustment spectrum. Gestalt therapy uses the phrase creative-adjustment to describe the process whereby we configure our situations to be the best possible situation available to us that provides the best possible outcome for our being in the world (at that time).

Of course, for so many, the best possible situation is often the necessity of denial of the needs of the self and the acceptance and adjustment to the needs of an other. Thus we might be sit still and a 'be a good child' rather than excited and active that draws accusations of annoying and disruptive rather than with excitement and joy. The result is to take in the other's instruction and demands and these become your own instructions and demands. Your own adaptation has been usurped and instead there is the adjustment and Introjection of another. In terms of the individual moving to act, introjection might often inhibit the act, divert or reshape or even terminate the act. Thus we arrive at psychopathology.

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Conversely, Natoli (1994) cited in Spagnuolo Lobb (2015) defines happiness as a natural state of grace that does not require reflection, its opposite, pain, disconnected from the naturalness of the human being – that in Gestalt therapy is called the spontaneity of the self. Spagnuolo Lobb (2015) continues

Depressive experiences lack such an openness and full breath, and they lack a perspective of what is going to happen and of the now-for-next. We are ontologically projected towards the future, and depressive experiences imply a collapse of this ontological dimension of the human being. Location 927-933

I have a rule of thumb that the degree of spontaneity is a measure to the degree introjects govern a person's situation. The lower the spontaneity, the greater the introjects. So, one approach to assist in undoing the introjects is engaging in supportive, creative working. Also this is reducing the incidence and degree of depression that may develop.

Consider your own sense of creativeness with regard to spontaneity and being fresh, your openness and availability for the present situations. What thoughts limit or interrupt and hold you to past experience; that require you to anticipate the situation; that activates defences?

The adjustment-creativity spectrum is to be experienced in its fullness to the extent that there is always a need for adjustment as much as there is always a need for creativity. This is a question of balanced movement, or in other words, creative-adjustment. Taking place fully in the current, present, situation will provide for a greater sense of self and satisfaction.





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## Imagery

What image do you bring to mind, I wonder, as I am typing these words – typewriter, sitting at a desk?

Imagine a ...

<b>safe place</b>	<b>secure place</b>	<b>peaceful place</b>	<b>restful place</b>
<b>meadow</b>	<b>beach</b>	<b>woodland</b>	<b>hilltop</b>
<b>stream</b>	<b>track</b>	<b>pool</b>	<b>spring</b>
<b>crowd</b>	<b>festival</b>	<b>couple</b>	<b>person</b>

Imagery is synonymous with description, picture, metaphor and similes; as well as the act of imagining.

Each time we communicate, verbally, we are making use of imagery in our words to enable meaning and sense for the other person. We creatively adapt our imagery and metaphors in our current situation. And more, we adapt our expression and movement along with our words.

The above is a passive imagery response in that there is no requirement to go further than creating the imagery. Active imagery moves the process on to engage you with the imagery. For example, imagine a stream. Now imagine how you are going to cross to the other side. The use of your imagination is being utilised in expanding a situation in a way that empowers you with the ability to cross the stream. So, this is now moving into guided imagery. Guided imagery adds a dimension of relaxation that allows for the person to imagine situations, particularly of trauma, to be imagined and explored without pushing the person into the trauma.

In this writing, however, I want to remain with the exploration of imagery with the words of the client.

The Merriam-Webster (n.d.) online dictionary provides this description for the meaning of imagery:

figurative language, and  
language that causes people to imagine pictures in their mind.

These descriptions are rooted in imagery as being verbal, perhaps expected, yet imagery are the pictures in our minds; the graphics of thoughts. It is in the communication of such imagery that language is often required. That is often, not always. The imagery may be expressed physically through movement; may be expressed through art; may be expressed with other sounds like music.



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The process we engage in with our clients very much makes use of our ability to manipulate language and there is a parallel with the development of our language acquisition particularly in respect to describing our felt experiences.

... imagery can best be defined as descriptive language. If you take that definition one step further and apply it to the five human sense, then the definition simply becomes, descriptive language that has the ability of appealing to the five human senses. That does not necessarily mean that imagery applies to all five human senses collectively. It merely means that imagery is the use of descriptive language that can be appealing to one or more of the five human senses. Your Dictionary (n.d., Imagery)

With this in mind I wanted to consider how I might appeal to each of our senses for any particular sensation experienced.

### Exploring the Five Senses

What follows (on the next page) is a table experimenting with language I might use that is directed from each of the five senses. I am imaging what this experience might be like with a client, and where this might fit in my client work. In other words, I am wondering on the function of this with a client. Also, I have added a column 'Feeling' that addresses the resultant sensation.

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## Descriptions through the use of the five senses

Word / Descriptor	Sight	Sound	Smell	Taste	Touch	FEELS like
Stomach churning	My stomach is a kaleidoscope of greys	My stomach is like the sound of an orchestra tuning	My stomach is like the smell of boiled cabbage mixed with beetroot	My stomach has a bitter sweet taste	My stomach is like touching tapioca	A meat grinder
Tense shoulders	My shoulders are dark paint dripping down a bright wall	My shoulders are screeching	My shoulders are acrid with gunpowder	My shoulders taste of strong lemon	My shoulders are like the touch of cold water on hot steel	A rubber band
Excited						



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Word / Descriptor	Sight	Sound	Smell	Taste	Touch	FEELS like

With each descriptive phrase, the therapist is curious as to what tapioca is to the client; what is evoked with an orchestra tuning. As the therapist imagines this s/he is able to be in the world of the client. As the exploration with the therapist deepens the client moves to a fuller sense of congruence with their experience of, for example, a churning stomach.

There is a mixture of Simile and Metaphor. So, to describe how I feel is LIKE an orchestra tuning is a simile. To describe the tension in my shoulders as my shoulders are screeching is a metaphor.

In therapy to move from the 'the LIKE' to 'the IS' allows for more embodiment. So, from saying "I have a headache" to saying "I am a headache". An interestingly different exploration, especially when expanded from "I am a headache" to "my situatedness is a headache" – which is a position of recognition to the relatedness of Self and Environment.

## Exploring the client's situation with metaphor of the senses

Description	Sight	Sound	Smell	Taste	Touch	FEELS
Stomach churning	My stomach is a kaleidoscope of greys	My stomach is like the sound of an orchestra tuning	My stomach is like the smell of boiled cabbage mixed with beetroot	My stomach has a bitter sweet taste	My stomach is like touching tapioca	Like a meat grinder

With each descriptive phrase, the therapist is curious in exploring further for the purpose of having the client experience shared with the therapist at a felt level, at a physical level even.

*Your stomach feels like touching tapioca. Tell me about the touching tapioca.*

Tapioca is slippery, it's soggy and it's like squeezing puss.

*I'm creating a sense of soggy and slippery and puss oozing out*

It's more like popping rather than oozing

*Okay, I've got that now: popping puss, slippery and soggy – in your stomach*

Now I am feeling closer to what my client is experiencing. This itself can be sufficient; the client knows I know their experience. If I was take this further I might want to connect the differing senses and explore the connectedness (beyond each being stomach churning). As I imagines this I am able to be in the world of the client. This process is not for an outcome, it is for being in the moment with the client in their experience. This process is embodying the client's experience, and as the exploration with the therapist deepens the client moves to a fuller sense of congruence with their experience of, for example, a churning stomach.

## Simile to Metaphor

There is a mixture of similes and metaphors being used. So, to describe how I feel is LIKE an orchestra tuning is a simile. To describe the tension in my shoulders as my shoulders are screeching is a metaphor.

In therapy to move from 'the LIKE' to 'the IS' allows for more embodiment. So, from saying "I have a headache" to saying "I am a headache" offers an interestingly different exploration, especially when expanded from "I am a headache" to "my situatedness is a headache" – which is a position of recognition to the relatedness of Self and Environment.



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## Function of exploring the five senses

I imagine this could be useful to illicit greater awareness with a client's less used senses. For my own experiences, the sense most difficult to respond to was smell, and I have a general reduced sense of smell. Is that significant? I am wondering whether exploring through each of the senses impacts on a particular creative function with the individual?

The essential element in the function of exploring the five senses must be to assist the individual to arrive a better and more meaningful verbalisation of their experience.

Utilising the five senses and the use of metaphor and imagery provides the client with an increased opportunity of congruence of their felt experience and their verbal description. This links very closely to the workshop 'Working with the Client's Words'. In this workshop, the focus is on the sharing for the therapist (and client) to meet in the client's felt experience, whereas the 'Client's Words' workshop has a focus on building the client's expressiveness of experience. Perhaps a subtle difference, perhaps not different at all ...

## Attunement

Attunement involves sensitivity to, and reverberation with, whatever is going on for the client (p16). To the degree that the therapist is attuned to the client and conveys that attunement, the client feels respected. (Erskine, Moursund, & Trautmann, 1999, p. 47)

The better, therefore, you know the what is going on for the client, the better the attunement. The paradox here is that exploring deeper meaning and metaphor might actually be a mis-attunement! The therapist skill is to first attune and for situations in which the client is descriptive in giving the therapist the sense of what is going on. Then, there exists, the opportunity to ask to explore this more which enables you to be with the client in their place.

## Presence, Empathy, Inclusion.

we could say that the opposite of a depressive experience is not happiness but hope. Our brain is made so as to develop empathy for the intentional movements of the other.

Hope is an experience of empathy for the movement perceived in the other. Hope blooms under the light generated by the love of a caregiver who recognizes the intentional movement of the beloved generating in turn an experience of trust and

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openness towards the future in those illuminated by his or her light. Spagnuolo Lobb  
2015 location 943-949

### Self Care

Entering the world of the client, particularly through the use of imagery and creative approaches needs to be supported out of the therapy room. This support is to ensure the therapist leaves the client's world behind; that the therapist is able to recognise their own separate world. The danger is not simply vicarious trauma, it is also actual trauma.



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