

Use of Metaphors in Counseling

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Abstract

Metaphors are used in everyday life in our interactions with others. Milton Erickson, the psychiatrist and hypnotherapist used Metaphors in clinical hypnosis to treat mental health problems. This article narrates with case illustrations how metaphors can be effectively used in helping people with various emotional and behavioural problems. It also gives ideas how this concept can be integrated to one's basic approach in counselling. Often client generated metaphors are used to bring out change in - how the client views themselves, others and the world around. Changes one's perspectives lead to changes in the emotional experiences and thereby in behaviour.

There are different orientations or approaches in counseling; these approaches help the professionals to look at an individual's problem from different perspectives. Counselor's understanding about a client's concern determines the type of interventions used. Some of these approaches are psychoanalysis, behaviorism, humanistic- person centered, cognitive, cognitive behavioral, hypnosis, etc. Now many helping professionals are following an integrated approach. As the therapists grow in experience, each one might develop their own style in counseling.

The author's basic orientation for practicing counselling and psychotherapy is cognitive behavioural. The other perspectives like psychodynamic, person centred, and hypnosis are integrated to understand and help clients in promoting their psycho-social well being. Person centred approach is followed in building rapport- especially the unconditional positive regard, accurate empathy and the congruence which Carl Rogers considers as the neces-

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sary and sufficient condition in counseling. Since few years, the author have been using metaphors to promote insight and facilitate change in client's lives.

Key words: Metaphors, Adoloescent, Counseling

Metaphors

A therapeutic metaphor is a figurative comparison used by a therapist to assist a client in the process of personal transformation, healing and growth; the helping professional may use metaphors in the literature or they may weave therapeutic metaphors into the counselling process, which are client - generated.

Metaphor as an approach used for conceptualizing the experience of emotion in a form that is relatable to other individuals (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Metaphors are a symbolic approach for expressing similarity between experiences, thoughts, emotions, actions or objects (Evans, 2010). Metaphor is viewed as a way to cognitively organize the emotional experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors generally can be considered to have two dimensions the target and source. The target domain refers to the concept the metaphor is being used to explain. The source domain is the concrete topic to which the target domain is being linked. By combining the two domains in a metaphoric expression, an understanding of the target domain's properties is established. The description of properties through the relationship between domains is referred to as conceptual mapping (Tay, 2012).

Metaphors can be verbal or nonverbal. It can be a picture, a word, image, symbol, a story, or a landscape which in turn can be the beginning of a colourful journey. It can be part of any insight oriented therapy like psychodynamic or cognitive behavioural therapy where the therapist induces a trance in the client. Milton Erikson the hypnotherapist widely used metaphors in his clinical practice (<http://www.therapeuticmetaphors.com/>). While analyzing, disputing and confronting, only the conscious mind is involved. During a metaphoric visualization subconscious mind is involved. According to Milton Erikson, unconscious and subconscious mind is more powerful than the

conscious; suggestions given to it (subconscious mind) in the trance have profound effect on the mind to heal the pain or overcome anxiety or fears. It almost looks miraculous when the patient experience relief in an instantaneous manner.

Metaphors in Counseling

Metaphors can be used in counseling for enhancing the effectiveness of counseling. The counselor need to understand what is most important affecting the client. Use of metaphors often leads to emotional changes. Metaphors could be treated as an ideal aspect for encapsulating relevant information in a better understandable manner. The client-counselor match is important in counselling, using metaphors are easy for creative people, it matches with clients who are creative and who think and visualize creatively.

A metaphor can enable a client to identify blocks and negative patterns as well as challenging belief systems that are no longer serve in a positive way. This awareness may facilitate growth and positive change. There are many studies showing the relation of metaphor with emotions. It is possible that intense emotions are difficult to be related to other individuals directly without references, and this may explain research evidence supporting an increased use of metaphor when describing intense emotional experiences (Crawford, 2009; Smollan, 2014). In addition to the possible need for source domains as references to describe intense emotions, metaphors may be ideal for relating emotional experiences because of their ability to encapsulate specific and content-rich information in a concise and broadly understandable manner (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987). When the counselor utilize metaphoric language with similar meaning metaphoric language is related to greater activation of brain regions associated with emotion (Bohrn, Altmann, & Jacobs, 2012)

(Few case illustrations are given below. The identification data described are fictitious)

Counselling an adolescent with Enuresis.

Clinton is 12 year old boy, born and raised by Christian parents in an eco-

nomically above average family in Dubai. At present he is studying in Kerala and lives with his mother, sister and maternal grandparents. Clinton used to bed wet from early childhood and his mother and grandmother took care of cleaning the clothes and premises. As a 12-year old he continues to bed wet but was deeply ashamed of it. His father arrived in Kerala for his vacation and brought him for counselling. After building rapport, exploring the concerns and the goal was set. A picture of urinary system was presented and described its function and how urine is collected in the bladder. He was told that it is possible to control the flow of the urine from the bladder at night too. There is a valve/door at the end of the urinary bladder which controls the follow of urine and your urinary bladder has a capacity to hold about a litre of urine.

After describing the functioning of the urinary system, he was asked to visualize his house and the main door to go out which would be closed before going to sleep and the key will be kept safely. Similarly the opening from the urinary bladder can be shut and locked like the door and the key kept with him safely. Next day after you wake up, you go to the toilet to unlock the bladder for the urine to pass.

A short form of progressive muscle relaxation is used prior to inducing a trance, and visualization of the urinary system and its locking from inside was used – indirectly suggesting he has control over urination even while sleeping. He is advised to let this visualization and self suggestion be repeated as he was falling asleep. Clinton was also told to drink lot of water during the day to avoid dehydration and to drink very little water from 6.30 pm and until he falls asleep by 10 pm. He was asked to completely empty the bladder before he goes to bed. He was asked to report after a week. To the surprise of the counsellor during the first follow up session the whole family came with gratitude. Bed-wetting had stopped from the next day after the use of metaphoric visualization.

How did it work? Remember the subconscious and unconscious is more powerful than the conscious mind. In sleep the conscious mind goes to sleep but the subconscious mind receives the suggestion to stay in control of the behaviour.

An adolescent girl with anxiety and depression

The following shows how metaphors help in tapping client's 'inner world' and express emotion in unique ways.

Christina is a CBSE student of class XI. She did not write the board exam since she was planning to continue in the same school. Many of her classmates wrote the board exam and scored better marks than Christina who used to be a topper in her school. The competitive spirit prevails very much among the students, parents and teachers from the high school itself, they are involved in preparing students for the medical and engineering entrance exams. When the result was published, Christina had only 93% and some of her friends who wrote board exams had 97% and 98%. This made her stressed and anxious, continued to ruminate over negative thoughts; 'I am not competent as my classmates', I made blunder by not writing the board; she was not able to concentrate, became restless due to the feelings of regret and shame.

As usual a protocol comprising of progressive muscle relaxation to calm her mind and the body was used, and cognitive therapy to change her negative thoughts by disputing irrational thoughts. In the first follow up after a week, she had improved but not significantly. She was introduced to metaphors and asked to find a metaphor for inner experience. She metaphorically expressed her inner self 'as the Titanic sinking into the sea'. She was asked if the situation was to change and the mood is to be elevated and active as the previous year what would she symbolize as. Her reply was "as the mountaineer who climbs the Everest"

Christina was on the 95th percentile in her logical functioning and it is considered as very superior. The counsellor responded metaphorically by saying, "God has given her that strength to climb up the peak. She has a strong body and legs. The metaphor of trekking and climbing the Mount Everest was used in a trance and advised to continue the same visualization in self-hypnosis along with progressive muscle relaxation. After a week it was found her anxiety, shame and depressions were cleared.

Metaphors are effective in helping clients with anger outbursts/
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explosive disorders.

Arun is a Mechanical Engineer, qualified to get a seat in government engineering college for his masters. Recently his sister was married to a boy who was less qualified than her. Arun was of the opinion that proposal do not match his expectations for his sister; however his parents went ahead with the marriage. His father had conflictual relationships with two of his sisters and the event of marriage was not utilized to repair the family relationship which resulted in their non involvement. So the negative emotions and interactions continued in the family even after the marriage. These were mounting to the frustrations of Arun.

Arun developed anger outburst recently after his sister's wedding. The following descriptions reveal his anger outburst: Arun was asked to go to their shop next day at 6.30am so that parents can go to Trichur early enough to meet his sister and her back answers and explosive behaviour. Arun pushed his father aside, throwing out things and going out of the house at night. Parents had to drop their plan to go to Trichur and the family got acutely stressed.

The metaphor Arun found for his anger outbursts was 'sneezing'. Though short it is possible to get indication for 'sneezing', which would help a person to take handkerchief to smother, block or reduce involuntary expulsion of air through the nostrils and mouth to avoid interpersonal discomforts. He could visualize those in the trance state. In follow up sessions it was found that his explosive behaviours were significantly improved by gaining control over his emotional outbursts. Reviewing and discussing about his experience produced insights to the client to control his emotion and avoid acute interpersonal stress as it happened with his father.

Metaphors in treating nightmares

Miriam is a senior citizen. She was brought by his son who takes care of her. Miriam has nightmares almost every day, she gets frightened, cries, and shouts for help. This caused disturbances for the whole family consisting of his wife and children. Miriam used to have terrifying dreams of somebody or

the other attacking her. After analyzing the content of her terrifying dreams, she was made to visualize a therapist generated metaphor. God has millions of angels in heaven when we ask for help he sends a group of them to our house to guard us. She was guided through this visualization of protection. And she was taught how to make her relax and enter into this visualization very vividly after going to bed and to continue with this visualization as she enters into sleep. She got better with two more follow ups.

The therapist uses either client generated metaphor or some common metaphors in the literature. Let the visualization be very vivid and specific. Visualizing in the trance is more powerful.

There are some common metaphors which are helpful in bringing out positive emotions and behaviours. Visualizing ourselves as a river, sprouting of a seed, growth of a plant, waterfalls, brook etc

Sources and Approaches of Metaphors

Metaphors in counseling have two sources, the client and the counselor. The source of the metaphor is important to consider when describing approaches to working with metaphors in clinical practice. Client-generated metaphors provide a lens into the internal world of clients that combines their emotional reactions and experiences in an understandable manner. This creates a bridge to clients' internal worlds and feelings with the counselor. Counselor-generated metaphors provide a tool to further guide and support clients in the achievement their objectives. Through both client-generated and counselor-generated metaphors, the inner experience of clients can be more directly accessed and positive change can be facilitated. Therefore, the recognition and incorporation of metaphors can be an incredibly valuable tool for counselors

Conclusion

Metaphors often seem to be simple, but it has an important role in counseling. It requires professional expertise observing metaphor usage in clients, actively exploring metaphors with clients and generating metaphors to ad-

dress therapeutic goals for clients. The brief descriptions and illustration given above shows some practical ways in understanding and positively utilizing them.

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