



# Utilising stones in counselling

By Angie Petrie



Have you ever used stones as a counselling intervention?

Maybe you've not experienced how effective this natural product can be. Its ready availability and wide variety of colours and textures offer an instant source of reflection. A bowl of varnished stones in your counselling room can provide a client with an easy opener. Choosing one, then holding, looking and talking about the stone's attributes can facilitate imaginative conversation. This engagement can lead to insights and therapeutic breakthroughs, as clients are able to explore and express their inner world in a safe and supportive environment. They can use the stone to symbolise their inner child or another part of them that needs to be seen and heard, which can then be explored further through imaginative play.

Whether you explore stones using person-centred configurations (parts) of self or with transactional analysis scripts (see example, below), the stones can represent the many thoughts or emotions the client is bringing into your room. Stones can support them to explore externally what may have otherwise remained unsaid.

Stones can also be calming: one simple intervention is to provide a stone and some olive oil for the client to massage into their hands while talking. The smooth feeling of the oil sliding over the hard texture of the stone can soothe a nervous client, facilitating deeper engagement.

## Inspired to explore

I caught my passion for stones from Jennifer Rees Larcombe, who was my spiritual mentor. If you ever made it to her home in Kent, you would have found bowls of beautifully varnished stones in every room. They were integral to the prayer sessions at 'Beauty from Ashes' – her house of prayer. She used stones with difficult emotions written on them, so someone could pick up a stone to represent a burden and carry it to the large cross at the end of her garden and leave it there for God to hold.

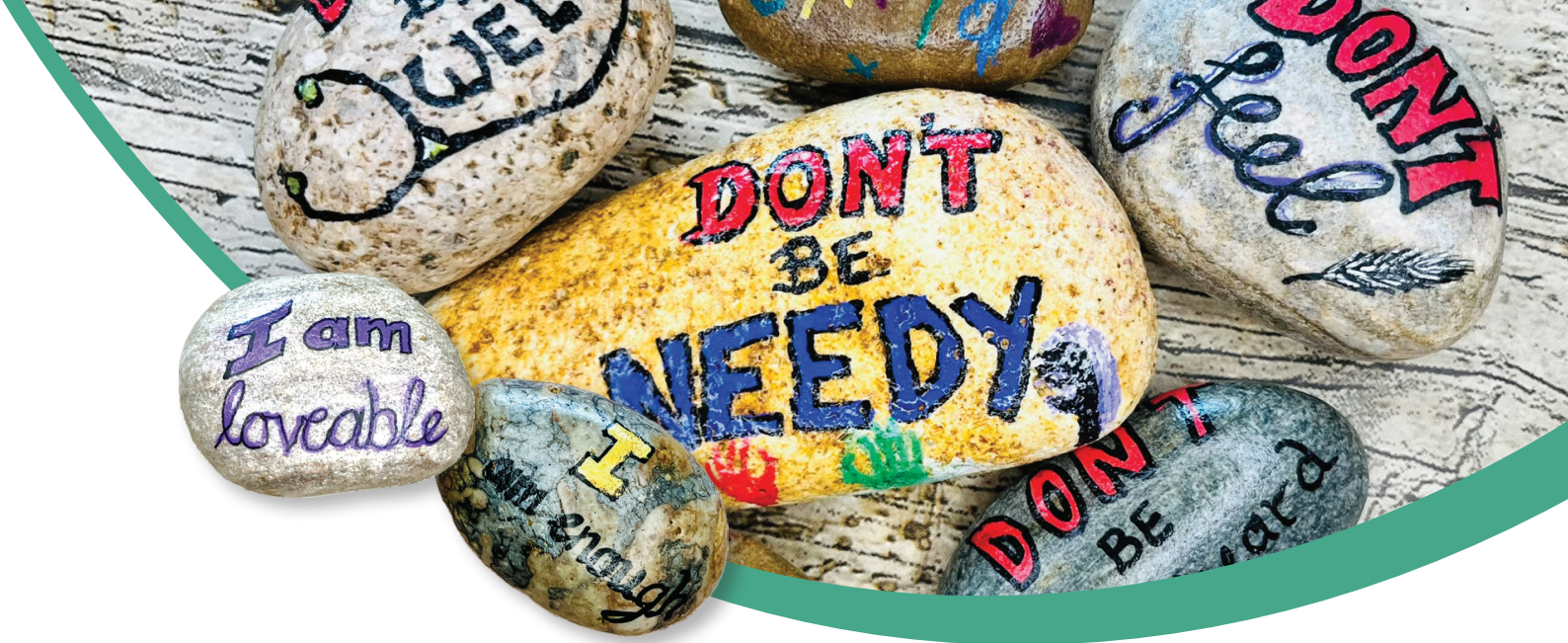
The experience with Jennifer was the beginning of my explorative use of stones, initially as an aid to discover more about my relationship with God, and then as an aid to prayer for myself and clients. Holding a stone in my hand and asking God what he wants me to let go of can be a powerful reminder of his passion for my freedom. I am regularly surprised at what he responds with. I have similarly offered stones in counselling sessions where the client has a desire to 'let go' of something. Most of all I use stones to pray for clients and leave them in God's hands. I have a small, sculpted pair of open hands along with a small cross to enable this.



## A key moment

While exploring the use of stones in the house of prayer I had the great fortune to meet Pauline Andrew, who introduced me to further possibilities in using stones therapeutically, ultimately starting me on my counselling journey and cementing my interest in creativity in the counselling room.

Pauline used stones to work with a client's inner scripts (for example as understood in transactional analysis (TA)). In TA the understanding is that we



can carry negative inner scripts and feelings such as “Don’t be fine”, “Don’t be well”, “Don’t exist”, “Don’t feel” and in addition, in order to deal with or negate them, we create protective counter scripts – for example: “Be strong”, “Be perfect”, “Please others”, “Hurry up” and “Try harder”.



To give an example, a client may pick up the stone that says “Don’t fail” and go on to share a few situations from their early life where this prohibition was experienced and unresolved. Next, they may pick up a stone that has one of their counter scripts written on it, such as “Be perfect”, and explore childhood experiences where this counter script may have been protective, but was nonetheless conditional on them being perfect. While holding the two stones together, the client may go on to pick up the stone that says “Try harder” as another script that has worked as a bridge between failing and being perfect.

The stones enable the client to recognise and hold the unrealistic pressure to be perfect that they have lived with, and which has caused disappointment in themselves and shame when receiving anything perceived as negative feedback. They may be able

to now visualise how this has pushed them into a cycle of self-persecution: trying even harder, yet still not being perfect.

While holding all of this, the client can then be invited to let go of this set of stones and their associated scripts and replace them with a stone that has on it an affirmation such as “I am enough”, “I am lovable”, “I belong” or “I am OK”. They can make the choice to put down the stones that symbolise the negative/limiting script and hold the affirming stone/s, experiencing the belief they can be enough for themselves in this moment.

The impact of this process is often enlightening and, although change doesn’t often come instantly, the stones open up a new dialogue in the sessions, enabling the client to see where negative patterns are being repeated and encouraging new mindsets.

## Emotion stones

Emotion stones offer another area of work, particularly for those who experience alexithymia (where emotions are unable to be recognised or named). These quirky stones, with their individual faces, enable vocabulary to be formed where it was hard to find. They can become accessible caricatures rather than scary emotions, to be viewed in the abstract and discussed on the table, outside of the body. This allows the brain space to see and explore them rather than go inwards and feel the emotion, and thus provides the opportunity for the client to gradually find the right words to express their emotions verbally.

After initially painting about 20 characters, I used these stones for my own personal development, and they helped me to explore my configurations of self or parts. The stones would depict my internal emotion characters, which seemed to have their own voices, and allowed me to externally express internal conflict. As a verbal processor I found this incredibly helpful. (It’s worth thinking about how a client processes when working with any creative media.)



For a time, painting emotions as facial expressions on stones became part of my self-care. I was fascinated by the way a stone can change when varnished. For example, clients who feel unseen are often drawn to a stone where a little face that I painted seems to have nearly disappeared under the varnish as the stone became darker than its unvarnished state.

Whatever your theoretical model, exploring emotions using these emotive stone faces can help to illuminate a client's deeper emotions. One of my clients found three stones that depicted an emotion together. As we talked about them, she began to cry and said: "They are hiding the real issue." She was able to create a stone for the hidden sadness and validate a part of her that needed comfort and support.

I find emotion stones helpful for an initial check in when clients aren't sure what to talk about. I also use them when there seems to be a few different opinions being vocalised; giving each a face on a stone can enable them to be heard separately and explored. Such stones also work well for endings; one client painted emotion 'faces' on separate stones for each of her constructs of self and took them home with her saying: "Now we get to do life together."

## Wrapped stones

I started experimenting with using silver jewellery wire to wrap around a stone; I created a few just to see what they looked like and how it felt holding them. Then a peer explained how she had been wrapping and unwrapping stones with clients. Using the wire, they would explore a specific

difficulty – how it was impacting them as they wrapped it around the stone. They would then discuss how the client could work through the difficulty or release it as they unwrapped the stone. This particular approach seemed to work well with clients experiencing loss.

I decided to experiment with this among a small group of counsellors. Interestingly, one person didn't want the stone to be unwrapped; they wanted to work with it as it was, stating that the stone was now a new creation with the wrapping. We experimented with using embroidery thread and coloured wire to show life stages. When I went on to use this approach within counselling sessions, a client worked with one life stage stone, reworking it until the coloured wire snapped; their takeaway was: the piece of work was done.

## Stable objects used in many ways

I'm always aware that we may not know how the client will use the resources we offer them. Being open minded as to their use of the stones and remaining curious has often been both a breakthrough for them and eye-opening for me. It is important to check in with an open remark about how they are experiencing the stone, such as asking what it reminds them of or whether there are any emotions coming up. This helps us to keep in touch with their thinking without taking the focus away from their process.

Stones can offer a wonderful source of transitional objects. If you haven't heard of these before, think of a child with a bit of cloth they drag with them everywhere because its existence and proximity give them a sense of safety and security. A stone as a transitional object can bring a stable, solid object into an unstable existence. As adults we may need something as a solid reminder. The smoothness of the stone and the feel in the hand can be very comforting and has a permanence typically not found in softer material.



### ACC online training

Angie is offering an online tutorial session for ACC members, 'Working with stones in counselling' on Tuesday 19 November from 10am to 2pm. For more details, and to buy tickets, [click here](#).



A note of caution: a stone is an easy item to throw, so you might want to think twice before using stones with clients exploring anger – unless you can take your sessions outside and offer them a safe space to throw the stones, which can be particularly healing if there is a body of water to throw them into.

## Finding resources

Accessing stones is straightforward; you can gather them from a beach (if allowed), buy from a garden centre or from Facebook marketplace. Check they are washed and dried ready to use, and that the surfaces are good to receive paint. If the stones are waxed or varnished the acrylic paint may rub off. I tend to buy Scottish cobbles from my local garden centre. I find 5–7.5cm gives me enough surface area to work with.

As a base coat I use acrylic paint or gouache (opaque) – surfaces can be rubbed down with fine sandpaper to give a flat finish. Posca™ pens and similar acrylic pens offer lots of scope for decorating, while metallic and glitter acrylics add sparkle. Embroidery thread, wool and floristry wire are all easy to find and reasonably priced. With a multitude of colours and thicknesses they offer lots of scope for experimentation.

For varnishing I prefer a spray-on yacht varnish as it lasts longer. Check whether a varnish is gloss or matt (according to the effect you want) and make sure you don't accidentally buy black rather than clear as all your hard work will disappear.

Once I have everything ready, I choose a stone and wet it slightly to see what colour it will go when varnished. This will tell me whether to use lighter or darker pens to allow my design to stand out. I have a piece of paper handy and draw round the stone so I can practice my design on paper first.

## Utilising stones in your continued professional development

If this has made you curious, why not gather some stones and get together with peers for a painting and exploration session? You could watch the 'How to paint and work with stones in counselling' video on Pauline Andrew's YouTube channel ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcW4ZhTvdJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcW4ZhTvdJw)), where I talk you through some techniques.

I hope this introduction to stones has inspired you to have a look at where they may fit into your prayer, counselling or supervision practice.



### About the author

Angie Petrie is a creative counsellor working mainly in private practice in the beautiful Kent countryside. She is part of Crossline Christian Counselling service in Maidstone and has been on team with Beauty from Ashes for ten years. Her purpose-built counselling space is open for exploratory creative sessions and in-person stone continued professional development sessions. For more information visit [www.angel-army.info](http://www.angel-army.info) or contact her on [angelarmy1971@icloud.com](mailto:angelarmy1971@icloud.com).

