



When words are not enough

An introduction to creative therapy

By Pauline Andrew

In the late 19th century, Sigmund Freud introduced the groundbreaking concept of the 'talking cure'. He sought to persuade medical scientists that a patient's unconscious conflicts could be revealed by verbalising their story and sharing their dreams. Of course, he would be the expert in analysing and explaining it all! Gradually, over time, psychotherapy shape-shifted under the influence of Carl Rogers, Eric Berne, Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck and others. But it was still, with a few exceptions, pretty much all about talking. That is, until two world wars began to change things.

Adrian Hill was a First World War artist, sketching and painting scenes from the western front, bringing home the devastation of the trenches through his work. The Second World War followed, during which he contracted tuberculosis, and while in a sanatorium he found his artwork combated the isolation and loneliness. He was invited to teach art to injured soldiers returning from the war, and, in the 1940s, he observed that those patients who expressed themselves through drawing and painting made faster progress, and had better mental health, than those who didn't. With the help of the British Red Cross, he also

managed to get famous works of art loaned to hospitals, as he deeply believed that art could heal.

That was just the start of recognising the place art and creativity can have in therapy.

Harnessing the power of creativity in counselling

The 21st century has witnessed a rumbling revolution in counselling training and practice. Integrating artwork and other creative tools within the work of therapy has become increasingly popular across core modalities of counselling. Training is now sought not just on artwork, but on working with symbols such as toy animals and nesting dolls, exploring the client's world through moulding clay, painting stones or using sand trays holding miniature figures. Fairy tales, films and nursery rhymes are used to identify primal archetypes and aspects of self; picture cards take clients on creative journeys, unpick family dynamics and unpack feelings; visualisations help clients recover a creative world long lost from their early years. Feelings arise unbidden as connections are made, unblocking memory and releasing emotion.



In 1994 my husband and I began a counselling and training company, Deep Release, and creative interventions quickly formed a major part of our work. Other counsellors certainly shared our vision, but it wasn't until the 21st century that a growing number increasingly harnessed the power of creativity within the counselling profession on a global scale. Creative counselling has profoundly impacted the way many counsellors work and is now a methodology that has earned respectability, thanks to a high level of professionalism.

How does it work?

Eileen Miller's quote, "Art can permeate the very deepest part of us, where no words exist" (Miller, 2008) sums up the essential power of the creative process.

Working creatively has the power to open up the client's deepest, often unacknowledged and unprocessed, areas of pain. A space is created where both counsellor and client embark together on a voyage of discovery with no compass, map or navigational instruments. Blown by the winds of an unconscious drive towards what Gestalt calls "unfinished business" (Perls, 1973), we can rarely predict where we will land. It's exciting, can be scary and is potentially life-changing.

To change the image, I hold the view that talk therapy knocks at the front door of the client's brain, encountering a well-defended frontal cortex, while creative therapy nips in through the back

window when no one is looking, heading straight for the limbic system.

Neuroscience in a nutshell. You're welcome.

Working creatively can feel quite deskilling in the early days, as counsellors may need to set aside well-rehearsed models of therapy and ways of being. We can be taken far out of our comfort zone, with no clear idea what is happening or why. The client might not understand what they have drawn, moulded in clay or worked on in a sand tray. Sometimes I might offer my own curious wonderings, making every effort not to impose anything, but essentially learning to 'trust the process' and wait.

Reading that will no doubt trigger some apprehension in counsellors who like a bit more structure and certainty, enjoying the to-and-fro of talking therapy. Rest assured; we don't lose that

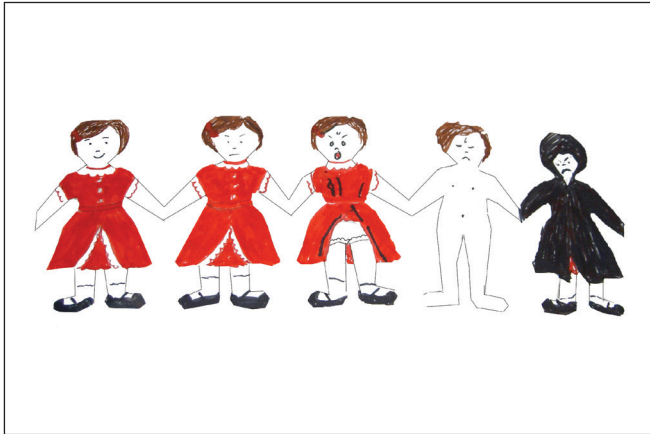
when working integratively. Creativity opens doors to deeper awareness that can lead to a greater level of relational depth. There may be several sessions of talking together, with creative interventions included as part of, or taking up a whole of, a session. Relentlessly producing a different kind of creative intervention every week is unlikely to be productive, and a good supervisor might well question this.

There are many more training courses available now that help counsellors manage the pace and master the skills needed. We don't abandon our core training, of course, but we learn to be flexible and tolerate uncertainty, travelling side-by-side with the client as the way unfolds before us.

Examples from casework

I remember vividly a session where the client brought me a paper chain explanation of what had happened to her. The front doll was a little girl in a red dress. The theme of the red dress had come up a number of times in the therapy, always relating to abuse. Carefully I unfolded the rest of the dolls. The client had dissociative identity disorder, and it was her six-year-old self who brought to me this extraordinary visual image which conveyed not only the abuse, but the self-hatred that had taken root in her life as a result. In this simple exercise she told me her story in a

“
**Creative counselling
has profoundly
impacted the
way many
counsellors work**



The red dress paper chain doll

way words could never have conveyed. It was a profoundly moving moment in the therapy. Sadly, she died many years ago, but generously gave full permission for me to share such powerful moments from our work together.

I also recall the middle-aged chemist with aphantasia (the inability to visualise), who found that whole area of her brain coming alive as we worked creatively, releasing her child-self from inhibition and anxiety (shared with permission). I have also seen both clients and trainees reluctantly beginning to draw with pencil, rubber and ruler and ending up using finger paints and splashing colour all over the paper with happy abandon.

I have learned that the process is as important as the outcome; that everything is helpful, including the client's initial resistance – which can sometimes lead to surprising moments of revelation.

The suitability of creative therapy

I would hesitate to suggest a definitive rule for 'client suitability', because my work, and that of many colleagues, has included a widely diverse group of clients. Having said that, I believe it is important to be transparent, and my contract makes it clear that I work integratively and creatively.

We cannot always accurately predict how a client will respond, but we have a responsibility to spend time getting to know our client and to build a

safe therapeutic alliance, as far as possible. There may well be times when the amygdala suddenly fires, and our client is flooded with powerful emotions. To be truthful, you can't always stop this happening, and good training in trauma and grounding principles is important. It is of course also the case that this can happen with talking therapy too, but working creatively has without question more potential for triggering. We work *with* the client. We encounter them, we don't invade them or impose interventions on them. We are attentive, aware of the possibility of overwhelm, check in with the client regularly, step by step, discerning when to apply the brakes (2004, Rothschild, B.). We learn the rhythm and pace of therapy.

I like Tanja Sharpe's definition of grounding, as "an anchoring practise that helps to bring a client or us an in-the-present-sense of physical, emotional and spiritual safety – an in-the-moment-awareness and connection to feeling in control" (Sharpe, 2022, p. 61). I recommend Sharpe's chapter 'Relationship and grounding' for a deeper discussion on this issue.

But I'm not creative!

When I've interviewed students for a diploma course and informed them that I like to weave creative interventions into the course curriculum often eyes widen, perhaps with excitement, but more likely with something approaching terror. I've

probably heard it all, from: "Oh, I can't draw!", "Do I have to do those modules?" to "Maybe I'll chose another course." Even on supervision diplomas I've heard a similar lament, including one very experienced counsellor anticipating with dismay that I might "make them use a bucket of puppets"!

In most cases, the source of the anxiety can be traced back to early experiences of a parent, sibling or teacher crushing spontaneous and joyful, creative play with ridicule or frustration. Saying things such as: "Let me do it for you", "You're doing it wrong" or "That's not what a dog looks like." Shame is a destroyer of spontaneous creativity. I have no doubt that each one of us is creative, because we are made in the image of Creator God. In the process of training, as in the process of therapy, fear and shame can be explored, leading to greater freedom.

“
**Creativity opens
doors to deeper
awareness that can
lead to a greater
level of relational
depth**



The process is as important as the outcome

Cultural and linguistic considerations

Working with clients from a different culture and language from our own can present issues when the main way of counselling is just using words. This is where we can find creative interventions to be highly effective in encountering the client's world through their own cultural imagery and myths.

Fairy tales and folklore

When working with fairy tales, for example, we invite the client to choose a tale that comes to mind, and then to identify a scene from the story to work with. We invite them to draw this, very simply, then engage with the emotions that arise, the innate conflicts that are often present and the symbolism of the characters. It is not important that we, as counsellors, know the story. An example from my own casework was the princess in the tower. Neither the client nor I could remember exactly how the princess got there, or



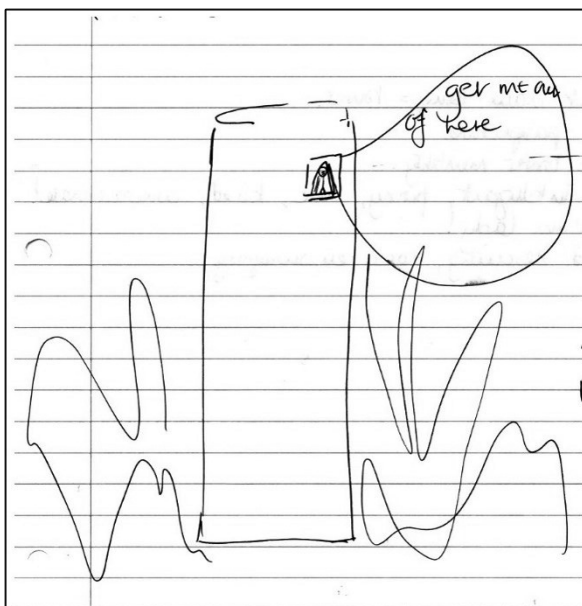
even what the fairy tale was called; but it didn't matter. The symbolism and imagery were chosen to reflect the client's feelings of being trapped and alone, with no way out.

Nesting dolls

Nesting dolls originate from Russia and China and will be familiar to most nationalities. A simple way of working with one is for the client to see the outer layer of the doll as the part of them that most people see. This can be their genuine true self, but often it is a mask, a persona, to cover up parts of themselves that they don't want to be seen. The simple act of breaking this outer self apart and revealing the 'doll' who is hiding underneath can evoke powerful feelings. Continuing to work down through the layers (I use a maximum of five), as much as feels safe, can move the client towards their core self. I like the smallest nesting doll to be solid. For me, this represents a person's potential, their God-made self, before trauma and pain robbed them of so much.

Spiritual dynamics

It can be hard to sit facing a counsellor across a room, being observed, as we try to give voice to painful, shame-filled feelings. Working creatively, often side-by-side, the client can show the counsellor what their emotions look like, how dark they can be, how fearful, without having to find the right words to express this verbally. I often feel this is sacred ground, when the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth (John 16:13). Jesus often used metaphor and imagery (for example, he invited us to see him as bread, a shepherd, a grapevine, as a door). He told stories and used picture language to help his listeners visualise and get the message.



A client's representation of the princess in the tower



“
It’s exciting, can be scary and is potentially life-changing

Final thoughts

If you are thinking of trying creative approaches for the first time I would recommend Tanja Sharpe’s book, as it has a wealth of information on preparing for and engaging in working creatively. I would emphasise that good supervision is essential, and there are now an increasing number of trained creative supervisors who understand the power of working creatively. If you would like some further advice from me on how to get started you may find my YouTube video [introducing the resources I produce](#) helpful.

I love Maya Angelou’s quote (Elliot, 1989): “You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.” Working creatively in the counselling room can transform our practice. It can also change us at a profound level, as we work together with the client, alongside them, building the road as we travel. I have learned so much from witnessing clients’ extraordinary creativity, and the joy they experience as they realise its power to release them into deeper freedom.

I recommend you try it!



About the author

Pauline has 25 years’ experience of working with clients and supervisees, and casework underpins her teaching – along with honestly sharing her own experiences. She is director of Deep Release (deeprelease.org.uk), which offers professional training for counsellors online and face-to-face, and has also developed original and creative counselling resources – available from pact-resources.co.uk.



References

- Andrew, P. (2022) *A Creative Guide to Working with Nesting Dolls*. Shenfield: PACT.
- Andrew, P. (2018) *A Creative Guide to Working with the Inner Child*. Shenfield: PACT.
- Elliot, J. (1989) *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. London: Virago Press.
- Hill, A. (1945) *Art Verses Illness*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Miller, E. (2008) *The Girl who Spoke with Pictures: Autism through art*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Perls, F., Hefferline, R. and Goodman, P. (1973) *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and growth in the human personality*. London: Penguin Books.
- Rothschild, B. (2004) ‘Applying the brakes’. Available at: www.somatictraumatherapy.com/applying-the-brakes/ (Accessed: 15 October 2024).
- Sharpe, T. (2022) *Creative Counselling: Creative tools and interventions to nurture therapeutic relationships*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Siegel, D. (2020) *The Developing Mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. 3rd edition. New York: Guilford Press.