



**COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES**  
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**METAPHOR, USE OF**

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Definition: Metaphors (literally ‘carrying over’, like ‘transference’) link one thing with another and are commonly used to make otherwise-inaccessible feelings visible to others (e.g. ‘when my husband left me it was like a red hot poker had been driven through my heart’).

Elements: The therapist helps patients use metaphors to depict what troubles them e.g. by asking “*What was it like to ... be an only child with elderly parents?*” (‘like being a helper in an old people’s home’); “*...find yourself at that party knowing not a soul?*” (‘like being in a foreign country unable to speak a word’); “*...come home from school and find that your father had died?*” (‘like falling out of an airplane without a parachute’). The therapist may offer a metaphor (see below) to try to describe how the patient might be feeling, which can then be examined, dismissed, played with, or modified.

Related procedures: *Narrative therapy*; story telling; psychodrama imagery; giving perspective; *cognitive restructuring*

Application: Psychodynamic psychotherapy - individual and group.

1st Use? Winnicott DW (1971)

References:

1. Bateman A, Brown D, Pedder J (2000) *Introduction to Psychotherapy: An Outline of Psychodynamic Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge
2. Berlin R. et al (1991) Metaphor and psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 45; 359-367
3. Holmes J (1992) *Between Art and Science*. London Routledge.
4. Winnicott DW (1971) *Playing and Reality*. London: Penguin.

Case Illustrations (Holmes J, unpublished)

*1. Patient-generated playful metaphor to enhance a sense of creativity and interactive competency*

Anna sought therapy for depression and chronic low self-esteem. In session 3 she said her boss at work was demanding, never satisfied, and able to sack her at any moment. The therapist asked “*What’s it like when you’re summoned to his office?*”. Anna replied “As though I’m alone in a field with a raging bull”. The therapist suggested that she needed to develop matador skills, and to remember that, though less powerful than her boss she could, with grace and skill, and knowledge of his lumbering mentality, outwit and ultimately defeat him. This metaphor struck a chord, and in the ensuing 2 years of therapy both patient and therapist often referred to it.

*2. Therapist-generated metaphor*

John, an only child aged 22 sought help through a student health service for feeling desperately upset when his apparently happily married parents split up. He made great efforts to stay on good terms with both of them. It emerged that he had been very close to his parents throughout his childhood, with little or no conflict in his teenage

years. He usually confided any difficulties to his parents rather than to friends. When they became preoccupied with their own problems and separated he felt doubly bereft. In session 6 the therapist suggested that the divorce of John's parents was like a tsunami engulfing the whole family including John, and that, like villagers living on the side of an island facing the huge wave, he was at much more risk of drowning than people on the other side. Thus his intimacy with his parents was both a blessing and a curse. The tsunami image seemed to help John gain some distance from his difficulties. Over the next 6 months he became more financially and emotionally independent, getting a job, forming a close relationship with a girl, and becoming able to tell his parents how angry he had felt about their failure to stay together.