

Boosting healing with metaphor: the 'Clean' approach

by Judy Rees, first published in ICM Journal, December 2007

The use of metaphor has a long tradition in the healing arts. It's a natural way to describe illness, health and healing: so natural, in fact, that we rarely notice it. Nobody is surprised to hear phrases like 'fighting infection', 'pain killers' or 'heart attack'. It can take few minutes to realise that these phrases are metaphorical – that they refer to one thing (physical illness) in terms of another (a violent incident).

Many complementary approaches make extensive use of metaphor, acknowledging that the metaphors the client uses to think about themselves and their condition can have a powerful influence on the outcome. And metaphor is at the heart of the commonplace distinction between conventional and complementary approaches: 'the body is a relatively simple machine' versus 'the body is a highly complex system which can be influenced in many ways'.

Recent research in cognitive linguistics has revealed that metaphor is absolutely central to the way human beings think: that metaphoric language is a side-effect of metaphoric thought. It's as if we cannot think of abstract 'things' like illness or health directly, but have to think of them in terms of more tangible things, such as a fight.

And there's another fascinating feature of metaphor: it seems to form a bridge between a person's conscious, thinking mind and their unconscious system. Just as we rarely consciously choose the words we use in our native language, we rarely consciously choose the metaphors we use in our thinking. And, just as we're largely unaware of the metaphors embedded in our speech (around four metaphors a minute), we're largely unaware of the metaphors behind our thoughts.

Clean Language is a way of helping a client to use this bridge, to bring their unconscious metaphors into the light to aid physical and emotional healing. At one level it's shockingly simple – a method of questioning and listening which uses the client's own words and gestures as far as possible, reflected back to them unchanged. And it's also highly sophisticated, requiring exquisite attention from the facilitator to achieve dramatic, long-lasting change quickly.

Clean Language was originally devised by a psychotherapist, David Grove, working particularly with victims of trauma. Two colleagues, Penny Tompkins and James Lawley, codified and extended David's work, and their book about the process, *Metaphors in Mind*, was published in 2000.

Now Clean Language is catching on in fields far away from its original home in therapy: coaching, management, marketing, teaching... and, of course, among complementary therapists.

For example, Shiatsu practitioner Nick Pole uses Clean Language alongside his meridian-based therapies and NLP. He explained: "Metaphor is a way that you can persuade people that their own insides are trying to communicate with them in a meaningful way.

“Clean Language is the best way I know of helping them to make that connection. And it’s quite astonishing how quickly their body can be communicating with them effectively.

“And in Shiatsu terms, if you use your client’s exact words in your questions, you also enhance the Ki connection between you, giving your treatment much more potential.”

Clean Language can be used effectively on a number of levels:

1. as relatively brief session-opener
2. as an integral part of a session or series of sessions
3. as a standalone approach.

1. **The Clean session-opener**

By far the simplest application of Clean Language in healing is to open a session, before the ‘main’ work begins. I am aware of Clean Language being used in this way by a variety of body- and energy-workers, and in conventional medicine.

The therapist encourages the client to describe their symptoms in metaphor, and using the client’s own words, phrases and gestures with Clean Language questions to seek further information.

As a result the client feels that her experience is being acknowledged and respected. At the same time the therapist can get the information she needs: as in the example above, just a few Clean questions can reveal information that wasn’t in the client’s awareness at the start of the session.

For example, Nick told the story of a client who came to him saying that she would like to have more energy.

He asked: “And how would that be, to have more energy?”

She replied: “I would be back on track”, and straightens a little in her chair.

“And how would that be, to be back on track?”

Gesturing with twists of her wrists, as if holding a small ball of energy in front of her, she said, “The Rubik Cube would be sorted out”.

“And if the Rubik cube was sorted out, how would that be?” he asked.

Suddenly, her expression changed, her upper body softened and she gazed out through the window; she was silent for a while and then said: “It would be like a whole new avenue opening up”.

Nick asked: “And how is it when there is a whole new avenue opening up?”

This time she gestured up and down the midline of her body, connecting heart to hara, and said softly, “Peace...serenity”.

In Nick's shiatsu terms, this was a point where he could go beyond words, into working purely with Ki. Her energy had changed profoundly, and her gestures had indicated the Ki connections she wanted the shiatsu treatment to make for her. He could then continue with his energy work.

2. Integrating Clean and other approaches

Clean Language can also be integrated with other disciplines more fully, woven into a longer session or series of sessions.

For example, a two-day workshop used a combination of Clean Language and Pilates to work with participants' physical symptoms. One participant had been suffering from pain in her upper back which had started a year before she finished writing a book.

She wrote: "I so wanted to finish the book I used my will to keep working, even though my back was worsening.

"The first Clean Language question I was asked was: "And what would you like to have happen?". I replied I wanted to be free of this bloody pain so I could be comfortable while wearing a shoulder-strap handbag again. I was asked questions that helped me get clear about my symptoms, and then I was asked "And that 'tightening, grinding, abrasive back pain' is like what?". I replied "It's like I have a cross on the inside of my body. My spine is the long part of the cross, and the cross bar goes through my shoulders."

"In describing this metaphor, words, pictures and movements came naturally, unbidden by me. As I became engaged with my metaphor, I realised "It's not the cross that's the problem, but the cross bar is bolted on with four huge metal bolts. There is no flexibility at all. Every time I move against one bolt, they all are put under strain and hurt." At this point the symbols ceased to be symbolic -- they took over my reality!

"After more questions, and more insights, I was asked to draw a picture of my metaphor, and to use a dictionary to look up some of the words I had used (e.g. cross, refuse, bolt). When I considered the word 're-fuse' I realised it had an electrical connotation, and a mass of multi-coloured electrical wires suddenly appeared between the four huge bolts. I added this new image to my drawing. I then did gentle Pilates exercises, all the while focussing my attention on my metaphor.

"The next day more Clean Language questions were asked, and more developing of the metaphor resulted, until at some point I leaned forward in my chair. When I came back up, the most amazing thing happened. I could feel the bolts in the cross releasing. It felt like 'ping-ping-ping' and I just sat, aware that change was happening in the moment. When the 'ping-ing' stopped, my back pain was gone. I thought we were finished. But thankfully the questions continued because they helped me become aware of the effects of the change. The crossbar was now attached by rubber bands wrapped around it at all angles. This meant that as I moved, the cross bar was flexible and could move with me.

"This continued until I had a full, embodied sense of my cross turning into a willow tree, with electrical wires beautifully woven through the trunk -- flexible, stable, graceful and strong. Every question increased my bodily awareness of this change.

“Since this workshop I have had a few twinges in my back, but these disappeared as I focussed my attention on my willow tree and did my Pilates exercises. I still have my willow (will-o!) and, yes, I carry a shoulder-strap bag, and wonder of wonders, I can even wear a backpack!”

This workshop was led by Caitlin Walker and Catherine Saeed: experts in Clean Language and pilates respectively.

For this more integrated approach, formal training in Clean Language is strongly recommended. Exploring metaphors can have powerful effects – potentially, both positive and negative effects. Clean Facilitators are trained to carefully direct the client’s attention to the positive aspects of their experience, or to what they would prefer, rather than seeking a very detailed metaphor for their unwanted symptoms. In the example above, the new metaphor of the willow tree was the result.

3. Standalone Clean Language

Perhaps most powerfully of all, Clean Language can be used as it was originally devised: as a standalone ‘talking therapy’. Clients routinely report dramatic results even from a single session, as they discover entirely new ways of understanding longstanding problems, and their double-binding patterns unravel.

And one of the best parts is that it’s good fun! A Clean Language session has been described variously as being ‘like being gently led through the Garden of Eden’, or ‘like white-water rafting’, or ‘like a virtual-reality journey on the Star Trek holodeck’.

For me, the most compelling metaphor for the experience comes from the children’s TV programme, *Mr Ben*. A bowler-hatted suburban businessman discovers a magical costume shop, in which he can try out various outfits – knight in armour, jungle explorer, caveman etc. In each costume, he steps into an adventure in which he plays a key role in setting the world to rights. Just as everything is resolved, the shopkeeper appears, to lead Mr Ben back to the everyday world and his own suit and bowler hat. But Mr Ben is subtly changed by the experience... and always keeps a trinket to remember his adventure by.

Try it out for yourself

If you’re keen to try Clean Language for yourself, here’s an exercise you can use. It’s ideal if you’re planning a big change for New Year – stopping smoking, cutting down on booze, getting regular exercise and eating well – *yet again?* This resolution season is like Samuel Johnson said of second marriages: a triumph of hope over experience.

As we’ve seen, Clean Language is a way of making changes which honours your personal beliefs and your way of thinking, and which therefore helps the changes to stay changed more permanently.

For this activity you’ll need up to an hour, a quiet place, a pencil and several sheets of paper. And if you have a friend to practice on, you can easily adapt the process.

Step 1: Build the (metaphorical) dream

If there is something in your life you'd like to change, take a moment to write it down.

Like many standard New Year's resolutions, it may well be about giving something up. You could start with that, but this process, like so many, works even better when you can say what you'd like *more* of, rather than less of.

For example, "I'd like to give up smoking," means you'd like *less* of smoking, but it doesn't say what you would like more of. So answer the question by stating something you would like more of, such as, "I'd like to feel fitter, taste my food better, breathe more easily and have more money to spend."

One way of helping your mind to make that shift is to read back to yourself the words you've written and then ask yourself, "*And when all of that, what would I like to have happen?*"

Using another piece of paper, write down the first words that come into your head in answer to that, even if they're exactly the same as before, or if they don't make much sense. Because the magic of Clean Language is that it can work whether the words "make sense" or not, because of the way it uses the metaphors inherent in the words we choose.

Let's say I answered: "I'd like hope to triumph over experience." That's fine – it represents something I want more of (triumph of hope) rather than something I want less of (smoking). In the jargon, it's a 'desired outcome'.

If you answered again in terms of something you'd like less of, for example: "I'd like to lose some weight", ask yourself again, 'And when all of that, what would I *like* to have happen?'

Repeat until you come up with something you'd *definitely* like *more* of – a fantastic figure, the feeling of being vibrantly healthy etc. Once you have a desired outcome to work with, stated in the positive, it's time to move to the next step.

Step 2: Develop the desired outcome

Now, use Clean Language questions to find out about that desired outcome. Ask a few questions from this list, in any order:

- *And what kind of X is that X?*
- *And is there anything else about X?*
- *And where is X? or And whereabouts is X?*
- *And that's X like what?*
- *And is there a relationship between X and Y?*
- *And when X, what happens to Y?*

So, we might ask: "What kind of triumph is that triumph?" or "Is there anything else about triumph?"

Ask yourself these questions, several times, about various words in your desired outcome. In the example “I’d like hope to triumph over experience”, you could ask about ‘I’, ‘like’, ‘hope’, ‘triumph’, ‘over’, and ‘experience’.

What new ideas come to mind? What new connections seem to form?

Step 3: Ask for a metaphor

Then ask:

- *And when all of that, that’s like... what?*

This question invites you to come up with a metaphor linking some of the ideas you’ve come up with. For me, ‘hope triumphing over experience’ might be like the end of a Star Wars battle scene, featuring an exotic victory parade into a gigantic stadium, or it might be like the joy of placing a perfectly-baked, cinnamon-scented apple cake on the table. For you, it will be something different. In this process there really are no right or wrong answers.

Step 4: Develop the desired outcome metaphor

Now it’s time to enjoy developing this metaphor. Think about it. Ask yourself

- *And what kind of X is that X?*
- *And is there anything else about X?*
- *And where is X? or And whereabouts is X?*
- *And that’s X like what?*
- *And is there a relationship between X and Y?*
- *And when X, what happens to Y?*

Use the questions in any order that seems appropriate, and ask any of them more than once.

TIP: Ask *lots* of ‘where’ questions!

In my example above, I might ask myself, ‘What kind of parade is that parade?’ or ‘Is there anything else about exotic?’

Feel free to make a few notes if you would like to. Or just allow your mind to wander, exploring the amazing landscape of thoughts. Occasionally, particularly if you notice your thoughts drifting towards something you’d like less of, ask yourself:

“*And when all of that, what would I like to have happen?*”

Stay with the metaphor. There’s no requirement to figure out how these ‘fantasies’ relate to the ‘resolution’ you first thought of. You may find that your ideas develop and change as you go through this process. For example, my Star Wars victory parade might transform from a march to a dance, the music from massed trumpets to acid house.

That’s fine. Your own imagination holds a much wilder and more far-reaching idea of your potential than any Government-sponsored health campaign! These are *your* dreams, *your* hopes, *your* thoughts.

Spend all the time you need to develop your metaphorical desired outcome in exactly the way that is right for you. You might even find yourself curious about: "*What kind of 'I' is the 'I' that would like that to happen?*"

Use some extra Clean Language questions to find out about the sequence in which things happen within the metaphor, if that is relevant.

- *And what happens just before X?*
- *And then what happens?*
- *And what happens next?*

The answers to these questions can help to set this piece of exploration within a wider context, to check that this is an appropriate change for you to make.

Finally, give your metaphor a name, a label, so that you can refer to it in the next part of the exercise.

Step 5: What needs to happen?

OK, you've developed a big dream, a metaphor, for the thing you'd like to have happen, and you've given it a label. Now ask yourself:

- *And what needs to happen for X?*
(where X is the label of your metaphor.)

Make a written list. And ask yourself the question again, several times, about each thing that needs to happen, 'drilling down' to a fundamental level.

For example, if your first answer to "And what needs to happen for X?" was "A and B," then ask "And what needs to happen for A?" This time your answer is "C", so the next question is "And what needs to happen for C?" and so on. You'll know when to stop when you have the sense that it is achievable.

Once you've completed what needs to happen for A, then begin the process again, asking about B.

And when you think you're finally done, ask:
- *"And is there anything else that needs to happen?"*

Your list may be metaphorical ("I need to fly over the rainbow"), or it may refer to real-world actions ("I need to buy a ticket"), or it may be a mixture of the two. The exercise will work just as well either way – your other-than-conscious mind knows what it all means.

TIP: It's best not to have the conditions in the form of abstract concepts. Instead, transform them into metaphors (*That's like what?*) or solid, real-world actions that can be easily observed.

Step 6: Ready for action

Once you have a complete list of what needs to happen, ask yourself:
“*And can I?*” (do the actions that need to happen?) You can go through them one at a time if necessary, to check.

If you can't (or you won't) do them, just acknowledge this, give yourself a pat on the back for being so honest with yourself, and return to Step 1 to adjust your desired outcome so that it takes account of your reservations.

Ask: “*And when I would like <label> and I can't or I won't (do the actions that need to happen), what would I like to have happen now?*”

And, as Bruce Forsyth used to say, that's all there is to it!

If you would like to explore further:

For more general information on Clean Language and its applications, go to www.cleanlanguage.co.uk

For details of workshops with Caitlin Walker, go to www.trainingattention.co.uk

For details on Nick Pole's courses contact him at nickpole@madasafish.com

For details of Clean Language training with Judy Rees, go to www.cleanchange.co.uk