

Therapy Metaphors

Therapy metaphors use a story or illustration to see alternative ways of looking at something. Every culture and religion uses these types of stories, analogies, parables to improve understanding, make a point more memorable, and help us make positive changes.



The example metaphors here are to help us see thoughts – their nature and role - in a different light. Just that alone, seeing thoughts differently, helps to create a space, a distance, between us and our thoughts, which helps us to stand back a little, see things a bit more objectively, and make wiser and more helpful decisions about how to react effectively.

Passengers on the Bus



You can be in the driving seat, whilst all the passengers (thoughts) are being critical, abusive, intrusive, distracting, and shouting directions, or sometimes just plain nonsense. You can allow those passengers to shout and chatter noisily, whilst keeping your attention focused on the road ahead, keeping the bus heading towards your goal or value.

(Hayes et al 1999)

Playground Bully

Our minds are like school playgrounds that are surrounded by secure high fences – they keep children in, and others out. Any bullies in that playground mean that the other children can't escape for long. This particular bully uses verbal abuse, shouting, teasing, and threats. They're all fenced in together, and ideally, all the children have just got to learn to accept and learn to be with each other. So neither can we escape our thoughts, we can't stop them, but perhaps we can learn to live with them by seeing them differently. Along comes bully, and takes on 3 potential 'victims' who all react differently.



Victim 1 – believes the bully, distressed, reacts automatically (bully carries on)

Victim 2 – challenges the bully "hey I'm not stupid, I got 8 out of 10 in my spelling test this morning, you only got 4" (bully eventually gives up)

Victim 3 – looks at the bully (acknowledges the thought), then walks away and goes off to play football with his mates (dismisses the thought, then changes their focus of attention.

(Based on Hannan & Tolin 2005)



The Beach Ball

We try to stop thoughts, but that's impossible. It's like trying to constantly hold an enormous inflatable beach ball under the water, but it keeps popping up in front of our faces. We can allow the ball to float around us, just letting it be. So rather than stop the thoughts, we can stop fighting them, and let them be, without reacting to them.

(Vivyan 2009)

Thought train

We can sit on the train, watching the scenery (thoughts, images, sensations) go by, or stand on the platform watching the thought train pass by – we don't have to jump on it.

The River

Sometimes it feels like we're being carried away downstream, struggling to stay afloat amongst all the mud, filth and debris. That muck and debris are thoughts, sensations, events, feelings, and that river is our distress as we drift helplessly downstream. But we can stand on the riverbank, watching as those thoughts, events, sensations, feelings go by. You might watch individual items as they pass – perhaps a thought floating on a leaf, a sensation as a log, event as on old bicycle. We can stand and watch.



The Tunnel

When we get anxious driving through a tunnel, the best option is to keep going rather than try to escape. This feeling will pass – there is an end to this tunnel.



The Mountain



Whatever the weather, or whatever happens on the surface of the mountain – the mountain stands firm, strong, grounded, permanent. We can be like that mountain, observing thoughts, feelings, sensations, knowing inner stillness.

The Mind Monsters (Bad Wolf, Good Wolf)



We can think of unhelpful or distressing thoughts as the Mind Monsters. (The Native American Cherokees use a similar example of a "Bad Wolf, Good Wolf"). Being a monster, we can't do much to stop or fight them – that just seems futile sometimes. When we do fight, it can help for a while, but those monsters may well just keep coming back. Like all monsters though, these Mind Monsters need food. If we can deprive them of food, then they'll eventually go off seeking sustenance elsewhere. These monsters (or 'Bad Wolf') feed off our reactions – our believing those monsters, reacting to them, being upset by them, and acting accordingly and often automatically and unthinkingly. We can maintain and make worse our situations just by those reactions. Those vicious cycles of our reactions mean that the monsters just keep coming. If we can stop 'feeding' the monsters – they'll get weaker and weaker and eventually move away. Others will come, but again we can choose not to feed them – by changing the way we think and react, and by paying more attention to the 'Good Wolf' in us.



Bad Wolf, Good Wolf: <http://www.rainbowbody.net/Ongwhehonwhe/cherokee.htm>

Google Earth & The Helicopter View

Sometimes it's useful to see the bigger picture. When something is distressing us, we're so close to it, involved with it, part of it – it's really hard to stand back from what's happening. It's a bit like Google Earth – we see the close up view but everything else is hidden from us. We can zoom out our perspective, and see the bigger picture. Some might describe it as like having a helicopter view – as the helicopter takes off, getting higher and higher, it sees a bigger picture, and is less involved with the detail at ground level.



Foreground & Background – Monitors & Zoom lenses

When doing presentations using a laptop and projector, there's an option of what to display on each monitor. The laptop screen is called Monitor 1, and the projector is Monitor 2. The graphic in Control Panel is shown as 2 large screens with large white numbers on them. Click on Monitor 1 and it enlarges and comes into the foreground, whilst Monitor 2 gets smaller and further away. Click on Monitor 2 and it zooms up towards you, getting bigger, whilst Monitor 1 goes away. It can be like that with our attention. Something grabs our attention – a sound, a sight, a feeling, a thought – and we zoom in, putting it in the foreground of our attention, making it bigger and more intrusive. Everything else moves away into the background. We can control what we put in the foreground – more helpful thoughts, our breath, imagery, a sensation, what we see, what we hear – so that other more unhelpful thoughts or sensations go more misty into the background. Like a zoom lens as it focuses in on something particular, the rest of the picture goes out of focus, loses clarity. We can zoom in and out, shifting our focus of attention.



(Vivyan 2009)

The Poisoned Parrot

Imagine you're given a parrot. This parrot is just a parrot - it doesn't have any knowledge, wisdom or insight. It's bird-brained after all. It recites things 'parrot fashion' – without any understanding or comprehension. It's a parrot.



However, this particular parrot has been specifically trained to be unhelpful to you - to continually comment on you and your life, in a way that constantly puts you down, criticising you. For example, the bus gets stuck in a traffic jam, and you arrive at work 5 minutes late. The parrot sits there saying: "There you go again. Late. You just can't manage to get there on time can you. So stupid. If you'd left the house and got the earlier bus you'd have arrived with loads of time to spare and the boss would be happy. But you? No way. Just can't do it. Useless. Waste of space. Absolutely pathetic!"

How long would you put up with this abuse before throwing a towel over the cage, or getting rid of the parrot? We can often put up with the thoughts from this internal bully for far too long. Notice that 'parrot' – and cover the cage. Eventually it will tire of the towel and fly away.

(Vivyan 2009 – based on "The Malevolent Parrot", source unknown)

The Plane Crash

Not so long ago, a plane landed seemingly miraculously on the River Hudson. All 155 people came out alive. What did those 155 people feel as they stood on dry land and realised what they'd been through? Would they all have had the same reaction? Absolutely not! Many would have felt very distressed and upset – they nearly died, and they might decide never to fly again as it's clearly too dangerous. Others might be overwhelmed with relief and happiness at having survived. Some might decide to live life to the full as a result of their experience, and be determined to fly even more. There could be 155 different reactions. Same event, different responses. It's not the event which causes our emotions, it's the meaning we give them. Those who interpreted the event as terrifyingly dangerous may feel very distressed, and be too anxious to fly again. Others will feel ecstatic as the meaning they gave the event was that they were incredibly lucky to survive. (Ayres 2009)



The Quicksand

Used by Stephen Hayes to introduce clients to Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT). When we're stuck in quicksand, the immediate impulse is to struggle and fight to get out.



But that's exactly what you mustn't do in quicksand – because as you put weight down on one part of your body (your foot), it goes deeper. So the more you struggle, the deeper you sink – and the more you struggle. Very much a no-win situation. With quicksand, there's only one option for survival. Spread the weight of your body over a large surface area – lay down. It goes against all our instincts to lay down and really be with the quicksand, but that's exactly what we have to do. So it is with distress. We struggle and fight against it, but we've perhaps never considered just letting it be, and being with the distressing thoughts and feelings, but if we did, we'd find that we get through it and survive – more effectively than if we'd fought and struggled. (Hayes et al 1999)

The Traffic Accident

When there's a traffic accident, police ask for witnesses to come forward and describe what happened. They like to have as many witness statements as possible so that they can build up enough evidence to give them a broader, more realistic version of events. In a traffic accident, there will be many different



perspectives on what happened. The driver of one car will have one view, another driver or a passenger will have yet another view. Each onlooker who witnessed the accident will have a slightly different perspective, depending on where they were, how far they were, how good a view they had, what else was going on, how much danger they felt they were in, how the accident affected them, what the accident means to them. It's the same principle with everything - each situation, event, conversation, means something different to all those involved, and also to those not involved.



(Vivyan 2009)

Tug of War with a Monster



Imagine you're in a tug of war with some huge anxiety (depression etc) monster. You've got one end of the rope, and the monster has the other end. In between you, there's a huge bottomless pit. You're pulling backward as hard as you can, but the monster keeps on pulling you ever closer to the pit. What's the best thing to do in that situation?

Pulling harder comes naturally, but the harder you pull, the harder the monster pulls. You're stuck. What do you need to do?

Dropping the rope means the monster's still there, but you're no longer tied up in a struggle with it. Now you can do something more useful.

(Harris 2009)

Struggling Uphill in Top Gear

Sometimes life can feel like we're struggling to drive or cycle up a long and steep hill, in top gear. The motor just can't get us there. It works really hard, but it's impossible to get up that steep hill in top gear. We need to change down a gear or two. Changing down gives the motor more torque, and is much better able to drive those wheels up that hill, albeit a bit slower.



We often try to struggle on in top gear, expecting so much of ourselves, of others, of life itself. Sometimes we need to change down a gear. Slow it down, reduce the struggle. Carry on, but in a lower gear.

Metaphors for the Mind *(Act made simple, Harris 2009)*

A master storyteller

The world's greatest storyteller – it never stops! It's never short of a story to tell, and it wants us to listen, whatever the story is. Like any great storyteller, it'll say whatever it has to say to get our attention. Some stories are true: we can call these facts. Others are opinions, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, assumptions, judgements, predictions etc. Stories about how we see the world, what we want to do, what we think is right or wrong, fair or unfair, good or bad. Just listen now, to the story your mind is telling you now.



Radio "doom and gloom"

Broadcasting a lot of gloom about the past, doom about the future, and dissatisfaction about the present.

A spoiled brat

Making all sorts of demands, and throwing tantrums if it doesn't get its own way

A reason-giving machine

Churning out a never-ending list of reasons why you can't or shouldn't change

A word machine

Manufacturing a never-ending stream of words

A fascist dictator

Constantly ordering you about and telling you what you can and can't do



A judgement factory

Spending all day long making judgements