

MARIPOSA

Guide for Symbolwork Methods for Counsellors

Disclaimer

This guide offers some more information on the use of the symbolwork methods. It is important to state, that this guide is not for self-help, but for professional use only.

We advise only use these methods as described in the following pages, if you have the sufficient training and experience to work as a counsellor / coach / therapist. These methods can only be used when the client is not in a crisis situation. In crisis, or when the case of the client exceeds your level of expertise, please direct the client further for crisis help services.

Working with Women Facing Gender-Based Violence

When you are working with clients who faced abuse, you have to be aware, that even if the threat is over, the client is most probably having certain levels of post-traumatic stress. Therefore a trauma-informed approach is needed, which has the following basic principles: Acknowledgement, Safety, Trust, Choice and Control, Compassion; Collaboration, Strengths-based Focus. For more information about trauma-based approaches can be read from Mate (2022), Levine (2015), or Van der Kolk (2014).

When you work with people with a history of abuse, you have to be prepared to meet the following feelings (not exclusive):

- anxiety: unsafe in space, with strangers, solitude, etc. Abuse survivors usually get anxious easily in any situation which remind them of past abuses.
- anger: strong anger towards the abuser, those who do not acknowledge her, the society, as well as herself.
- depression: feeling of meaningless, emptiness
- dissociation: numbness, confusion, a lost connection with their bodies. Bad relationship towards the body
- mood swings and irritability
- shame: feeling they are worthless, deserved what they got, etc.
- trust issues: problem with trusting others

Therefore as a counsellor, you always have to develop a „safe space” for the counselling. Working with the safe space is an active and aware practice to create a transitional space in the physical world, where our workshops take place, where the person also feels emotionally safe. It includes the safe and comfortable, fitting place, the building and maintaining of trust between the participants (if there are more), for the time being as well as for the future.

The acknowledgement of the emotions of the client is also very important, as well as the validation of their right to feel angry or upset (or anything else). Several times during their toxic relationships, the very existence of their feelings, or their right for their feelings were questioned, which therefore has to be reinforced.

The third important approach is the unconditional acceptance. They most probably have problems with themselves. The counsellor has to empower them again and again, make it sure to transfer the message that “you are valuable”.

Key factors for practice:

- Well-defined boundaries (timewise, placewise, rulewise)
- Rule of confidentiality, building of trust
- Empathy
- Validation of feelings
- Unconditional positive regard

About Symbols and Symbolwork

Symbolwork was originally developed by Wilfried Schneider, based on his counselling experiences with different vulnerable groups, including addictions. As Schneider wrote:

“It became clear to me that when clients have symbols in front of them and can take them into their hands, talk about themselves without words, quickly get lost in games, don't have to control themselves, are active right from the start of work and quickly use and accept these materials as a means of communication. And, what seems very important to me, they have fun with it.” (Schneider, 2011: 4)

Using physical symbols (or as in online work, emoticons and small symbols) therefore open up the opportunity to discuss hard topics in an easier, more playful form.

The use of symbols in counselling has a long past. As Alvarado and Cavazos (2008: 51) suggest, “the use of metaphors and other symbols provide a creative, non-intrusive, and non-confrontational approach to counselling” which can contribute to the promotion of self-awareness through the use of stories, fables, parables, rituals and even motion pictures (see appendix 5c). The use of metaphors is also seen as “supportive of relationship and intimacy building, accessing and symbolizing emotions, uncovering hidden assumptions, working through resistance, and providing alternate frames of reference” (2008:52). Furthermore, Geldard (2016: 176) explores the place of physical objects as symbols to “represent feelings, thoughts, beliefs, people, and relationships” and suggests objects should be chosen by and be of interest to the client and, as Jung (1968) proposed, enable the ‘uncovering of unconscious material’ which can contribute to self-awareness.

Working with symbols is seen to have the benefit of maintaining engagement, interest and enthusiasm with the client, and

1. Helps the client access and disclose information consciously;
2. Enables the client to get in touch with, and explore, feelings, beliefs and thoughts;
3. Represents particular alternatives so that these alternatives can be anchored for comparison;
4. Represents polarities within self so that these can be explored;
5. Represents particular people so that role-played dialogue between these people can be created;
6. Represents something of positive or negative value that may need to be discarded or dealt with in some way. (Geldard, 2016: 177)

During the counselling encounter, the very process of choosing and describing a symbol may be the source of inquiry by the counsellor. This may involve an exploration of the emotions associated with the choice of object, particularly if the task had been difficult and the source of ambivalence. The counsellor may invite the client to choose more than one symbol to adequately represent what they are feeling or thinking. Subsequently, the client is encouraged to “describe the symbol and its qualities” to cultivate exploration rather than provide an interpretation, allowing the subconscious to be more readily accessible. A respectful and sensitive approach by the therapist is required when concluding the counselling session through inviting the client to tidy the symbols away or through the preservation of the client’s work (Pearson, 2001; Geldard, 2016). Further examples of the use of physical symbols within a therapeutic intervention could be to represent alternatives for comparison or ranking/ordering. Dialogue between alternatives as represented by symbols can be encouraged by the counsellor particularly regarding troublesome relationships. Geldard (2008 and 2016) highlights the use of miniature animals as symbolic representations which can be approached both as a light-hearted or more structured exercise. Either way, this method can initiate engagement in the counselling process and potentially enable accessing suppressed thoughts and feelings.

It is also described as a “projective technique” to explore interpersonal relationships of the client through a less threatening and less inhibited form of intervention. It allows the client to “project ideas

from their family, peer group or other social system on to the miniature animals that are used as symbols, but have the freedom to exaggerate or modify these projections” (2016: 184).

Symbolwork Interventions in Mariposa Project

Safety Barometer and Emergency kit

Why and when to use the emergency kit?

The emergency kit originates from the stabilization phase of trauma therapy and was developed and used in the treatment of borderline patients. The emergency kit is developed at the beginning of a consultation / therapy and can be extended and modified over the course of a consultation / therapy. How much time you spend on this depends on the process. At the beginning, it is possible to actively and intensively deal with the creation of the suitcase, while in the course of time the extension and modification will take less time.

The emergency kit with its contents offers constructive incentives for information and action. During crisis, people's mindset is narrowed and they are turning to the existing reactions and behaviours, even if those are maladaptive. Also, during crisis the ability of looking for help, and finding information is usually constrained. It might easily happen that the recurring trauma of abuse makes the client "freeze" instead of fight or flight. In either case rational problem solving is far away, and pre-wired reactions take over.

When the stress in a situation increases, usually there is a pressure on the client to somehow release this stress. It often ends up in a self-hurting behavior – which is often a way of getting back a feeling of control of their bodies, or in substance use – to release stress. To create an easily accessible other line of action for the individual is therefore an important crisis-management role.

By creating a set of possible actions, and help the client to divert from the maladaptive chain of reactive behavior, and formulate and adaptive one. Also it can be an important source for information in any crisis situation for the client about where she can turn.

Can the emergency kit as a method be used offline and how?

In counselling practice, yes. We can use the same steps as described in the online tool, and we can also use real-life objects for the symbols.

Materials used

- Paper for drawing up an emergency list (blank or template further back)
- A small toy case, a box or the like for at home. A belt bag, a pencil case - if possible something light - is ideal for travelling. - As an alternative, you can also carry items directly with you (clothing, trouser pocket).
- Symbols representing crisis intervention (see also example below)

Intervention procedure

1. brainstorming - create list: First, a list is created for different situations, what you can do if you feel bad or if someone gets into a crisis. To do this, you take a blank sheet of paper or a template and find ideas for the following questions: What would do me good now and what is also available (often the instinct knows what would be good right now)? What can I concretely do to help myself? Was there anything in the past, an action or a plan that helped me back then? For instance: In the past it has always been good for me to go out, so now I take my jacket, the key and go down to the river and walk there. The short word would be:
Walking - a symbol can be a mini sneaker. Many clients already have useful strategies.
2. Select 10 - 15 items from this list and search for symbols (or real items) associated with the activity.
3. Do not throw away the brainstorming list, but keep it and add to it every now and then when you think of something.
4. Keep symbols available in an easily accessible place (fixed place in apartment).
5. Post-its in multiple locations can remind you of the emergency kit.
6. The development of such a suitcase / kit needs time and constant checking whether it is still appropriate, new helpful things can be put into the suitcase while others are unpacked or replaced. **IMPORTANT:** Do not overfill. max. 10 - 15 objects. There's a note in the suitcase saying, "Last revised on...".

Additional information

Categories of the emergency kit and contents:

- Things to feel and hold (when thinking is hardly possible). Example: Stones, hedgehog ball, something soft, ...)
- Things to feel oneself (Often the body feeling gets lost in severe crises. In order to avoid self-injury, it is helpful to counteract strong stimuli that appeal to as many senses as possible. Example: elastic band for the wrist, pointed stones, coolpack (mini - the right one is in the freezer compartment), ...)
- Things to distract and calm (which addresses the mental level and requires activity). Example: Miniature dog as a reminder that going out is good, ...)
- Self-obligations, letters of motivation (the letter to myself, antisuicide contract (made with therapist) like an antisuicide contract, letter to myself, etc.).
- Help from outside: Who exactly can help? Professional on site with office hours, type of contact etc. And private (who/when) possibly expansion of a social network, discarded mobile phone, telephone list, ...)
- For extreme emergencies - the emergency medication (Attention: NOT in case of drug dependence. Here it has proved to be a good idea to entrust this emergency ration to a trusted person). Ammonia (available in pharmacies).

At this point we would like to point out: In the emergency case belong only those things, whose goal is to prevent destructive behaviors. For this reason, there should be no razor blades or bandages in the emergency case, for example, because these things act as so-called -information stimuli". Comparable to someone who tries to give up smoking but immediately feels a desire for it again when he sees a cigarette.

Wheel of Feelings and Emotions

Why and when to use the Wheel of Feelings and Emotions?

Let us begin by noting that the terms 'emotions' and 'feelings' are very difficult to separate. The most common distinction is that feelings are consciously perceived emotions. Emotions determine many of our actions, but talking about them is one of the most difficult issues in guidance.

Emotions are often stronger, more intense, and shorter, leading to reaction, to action to release the tension they create. Feelings are often less strong, but above all they do not require action. And as it often builds over time, it also lasts longer, it stays. Emotions are rather instantaneous, whereas feelings are built up from emotions and thoughts.

Moreover, when certain feelings hurt, to learn how to deal with them, you need to understand the underlying emotions. For example, if we feel hatred, we can manage it better if we understand that there is anger, or fear about our values.

Why are feelings so important? Sometimes they help us to recall our experiences in a fraction of a second and to judge people and situations in order to achieve our goals faster and easier. But often we are not aware of our emotions. This can block further developmental steps and decisions and usually this is very difficult to change without help.

In situations where ambiguities, confusion or misunderstandings arise, The Wheel of Feelings and Emotions can be used as a technique of support. These misunderstandings occur mainly when thoughts, self-assessments, physical perceptions or physiological symptoms are called feelings. By clarifying these terms, it is easier to achieve a uniform language in the consultation. The Wheel of Feelings and Emotions is suitable for group and individual work and its use is not restricted by age.

The aim is that the client can distinguish between: I feel... / I think... / I sense ... / I rate...

In the online tool we give general advice for women users about how to deal with the occurring feelings and emotions. In counselling practice, however we can always work with a deeper level of understanding the feelings, such as with these questions:

- What feelings do I know/recognize about myself?
- Where are they located in my body?
- What triggers feelings in me?
- Which feelings do I evoke in others?
- Do I allow myself to have feelings?
- When do I push feelings away?
- What role do feelings play in my family?

- How do I experience feelings? Can I accept and use them?
- How do I deal with my feelings?

Can the Wheel of Feelings and Emotions as a method be used offline?

In counselling practice, yes. We can use the same steps as described in the online tool, and we can also use a real “wheel”.

Materials used

On the circular wood is a star with 10 different feelings. Each star tip has its own colour. The following terms can be found on it: Anxiety - anger - depression - serenity - happiness - love - shame - guilt -sadness - anger

We can replace it with the list of the previous emotions.

Intervention procedure:

The feelings are arranged alphabetically (and not by any projected value), and this is communicated to the client when explaining the material. Then, in relation to a concrete situation, all the feelings are addressed with the Wheel of Emotions in alphabetical order. This is done by turning the Wheel slowly and a point of feeling is thus directed at the client. They are then asked whether this feeling is relevant to the specific situation? Spontaneous "yes/no" answers without long reflection are requested. In this way a quick clarification of the feelings associated with a situation is achieved.

Islands of Emotions

Why and when to use the Islands of Emotions?

Feelings control many of our activities but talking about them is one of the most sensitive issues in counselling. What's the important role of feelings? They help us to recall our experiences sometimes in fractions of a second and to assess people and situations in order to reach our goals faster and more easily. But often we are not aware of our feelings. This can block further steps and decisions and is often not easy to change alone.

What makes me feel what? What feelings do I trigger in others? Do I allow feelings? When do I push feelings away? What role do feelings play in my family? How do I experience feelings? Who can name that so exactly? Feeling, accepting, arranging feelings connected with it? This often seems difficult, impossible to the client. This is particularly the case if a large number of triggering factors are present, if they are far in the past or if they cannot be related to the current situation. Often, it has not been possible for clients to present this verbally for a long period of time. Here the islands of emotions represent a good possibility for visualization, clarification and processing.

Can the Islands of Emotions as a method be used offline?

Actually it can only be used offline. This is not a self-help tool.

Materials used

A piece of blue denim (about 150x150cm) is used as a base to symbolize the ocean. There are 22 parts of plywood in the shape of islands. These islands are marked as follows:

Anxiety, anger, fear, depression, solitude, happiness, fright, serenity, luck, misery, love, lust, power, envy, guilt, worry, pride, shame, pain, yearning, grief, rage.

The backs of the plywood are painted in black slate. These sides can be written on with chalk and therefore used to add additional feelings or eg tasks, things, aims, etc.

Other items in this set include a small wooden ship, 10 tokens, chalk and a buoy in yellow and black. The yellow side of the buoy stands for pleasant feelings and the black side stands for unpleasant ones. The tokens are used to symbolize persons. The ship serves for transport.

Intervention procedure:

I.) Starting point: Goal setting

The client considers the objectives, discusses them with the practitioner, and afterwards a clear headline should be selected. The practitioner explains all available materials and the client prepares the denim (the blue ocean) as a working surface.

II.) Choosing islands and other material

After introducing all the material available, the client starts to go through all islands and to decide, whether they fit to the topic or not. After this, the client can use the backside of other islands, label them with chalk and add additional feelings, aims, properties, whatever is needed. Also the other items, like the small wooden ship and the tokens can be used.

III.) Counselling session – clarifying your own concerns

1. Presentation

The client presents the heading/ topic of her presentation.

If there is a group setting, the client chooses 2 or 3 'observers' as a 'supporting group'. These peers are actively involved in all steps of the counselling session. He talks about what he has displayed. The client always states which island or symbol he is talking about. (e.g. "this island stands for..."). He starts his explanations at any island he wants and explains all chosen islands and other symbols used.

The practitioner listens carefully to what is being told. She is aware of the client's presence. While he is speaking, the practitioner observes his gestures, mimicry, posture, breathing, the pitch of her voice. Does he show emotions, does he touch a symbol, which one?

2. Factual questions

The practitioner asks factual questions. These questions only refer to the symbols, to "what is visible". No "why"- or "how come"-questions are asked. This is not about interpretation but understanding only. The client answers to the factual questions

3. Perception

The practitioner addresses the young woman directly. She describes everything she as perceived and everything she has observed while she was told the story. If someone detects emotions, she should be able to explain how they were perceived. (Mimicry, gestures, pitches of the voice etc.) The client listens attentively.

4. Interpretation

The practitioner and the group talks about the client. She is thinking aloud, asking questions like "what is the problem?", "What should be different?", "What would he want to solve, understand, do?", "Where could be difficulties? Where not? "The client listens attentively and does not respond for now.

5. Agreement on actions

This phase leads into a discussion between client and practitioner about needed support and further steps for the client to reach his goal. At the end, the client should be committed to agreed actions.

Additional step: working with the buoy:

As a conclusion all used feelings can be sorted. Unpleasant feelings are placed on the black side, pleasant feelings on the right side of the buoy.

Imagine a scale now, how are the feelings distributed? Is there a balance between positive and negative feelings? Every human being needs positive experiences to survive. If these are no longer perceived, there is an urgent need for support.

Then every feeling should be checked again to see if it stays in place or changes sides.

Examples for Symbols

(Source: Wilfried Schneider: Working instructions 2008)

Note: this list is not exclusive, it contains only tips. Your symbolcase can be / shall be different. All symbols shall be between the size of 1-10 cms (not precisely, but to be usable).

Alcohol bottles, ambos, angler weight, anchor, wrist watches, eye, exclamation mark (magnet), @ sign (magnet), Bear, trees, baby dolls (crawling, sitting, etc.), baby doll black, bananas, battery, cutlery, gasoline can, hatchet, beer glass, beer cork, bellows, tin box, pencil, lightning, flower, tub (wood), letter (magnet), letter box, iron, book, book small, castle, button "god, you're ugly", Wedding rings, Angels, Shopping (magnet), Shopping trolley, Iron saw, Ducks, Donke, Euro notes, € sign (magnet), Ticket(s), Rim, Fur, Fire extinguisher, Fire truck 112,

Fire truck with ladder, Finger ring, Fish, Bottle, Bottle crate, Fleece balls, Bat, Airplane, ? (Magnet) Frog, frog with crown cake, soccer, Fork, coin (abroad), ghost (small and large), watering can, grid, glass container, globe, bell, gold ingot, light bulb, gold, Chicken, hand (2 x), handcuffs, mobile phone, hair clip, harlequin, houses, house with tower, hearts, witch, witch on broom, wood, wooden bead, wooden man, wooden ring (red, yellow), horseshoe, helicopter, dog.

Chain with ball, cone (pointed), chain links (two), baby carriage, piano, button, compass, bone, saucepan, condom, spinning top, cross, crown, jug, cow, chick and egg, Lighthouse, lipstick, advertising pillar, spoon, Man (white from Playmobil), mouse, mousetrap, knife, girl, motorcycle, harmonica, shells (blue), shells. Saw, hourglass, coffin, siren, sunglasses, skateboard, skeleton, smiley, sun, sun with face, mirror, slot machine, game figures (nature), syringes, candy machine. Round box with lid, sheep, swing, rocking chair, clamp, scissors, ships, snake, sleigh, key, small key, butterfly, screw with nut, wrench, pacifier, shoe, satchel, black sheep, pig. Stones, stone with hole, stars, steering wheel (ship), boots, stinky finger, stopper, match box, bar code, Fir, torch, dove, devil, thermos, tiger, toaster, toilet, skull, funnel, trumpet. Clock. Bird.

Libra, Hot-water bottle (metal), Clothespin (small and large), Washstand with mirror, Water kettle, Water carrier, Alarm clock, Santa Claus, Wine glass, Tool box, Wine bottles, Wasp, Cube, Gear wheels, Index finger, Sewing machine, nest with chick and egg, "Say nothing, see nothing, hear nothing", rivet (lot), nun, clef, rolling pin, Fruit basket, bus. Package, cars, perfume bottles, pan, PC/keyboard, pipe, horse, mushroom, pistol, pistol balls, plus sign, trophy, Eraser, radio, calculation board, life ring, rings, knight, robot, backpack.

Bibliography

- Alvarado, V. and Cavazos, L. (2008) “**Allegories and Symbols in Counselling**” *Journal of creativity in Mental Health* 2(3) 51-59
- Geldard, K. et al. (2016) **Counselling Adolescents – The proactive Approach for Young people**. London: Sage
- GoodTherapy: **Learn about therapy: Abuse / Survivors of Abuse**;
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/abuse> (downloaded 13/12/2022)
- Jung, C. (1968) *Collected Work*, vol. 9, pt1. **The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious** Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Kegerreis, S. (2010) *Psychodynamic Counselling with Children and Young People* Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Levine, Peter A. (2005): **Healing Trauma : a Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body**. Boulder, CO :Sounds True
- Mate, Gabor (2022): **The Myth of Normal**. United States Penguin Young Readers.
- Schneider, W. (2019) **Arbeit mit Symbolen als Methode der Interventionen, Wenn Worte fehlen – Symbole als Dolmetscher**. Hamburg: Eigenverlag
- Van der Kolk, Bessel. A. (2015). **The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma**. New York, New York, Penguin Book