

## Targeting the procedures that create problems and deciding on aims for change

We have been seeing throughout this book how we can name early beliefs such as 'Only if I behave in a certain way (please others, avoid action) will I survive' and that these early beliefs keep us in a placation trap and possibly depressed. Whilst pleasing may have been an important survival mechanism, these old beliefs and procedures shape our everyday behaviour and restrict us.

This chapter is devoted to naming the restricting procedures that we take for granted and setting realistic goals for change. We will look at how Sylvia, Janet and Alistair made charts of their problem procedures and developed their aims for change. In Chapter 13 we will see how Alistair, Martin, Freda and Susannah also made use of diagrams to focus upon the way their procedures grew into the sequences that led to problems.

You may choose to make either a chart for rating procedures and aims for change, or a diagram of the problem sequences as you recognise them. Once they have been created, it is useful to carry these diagrams or charts around with you, so that you can turn to them when you feel stuck, or feel the old responses and problems coming on. Recognising where we are in our learned sequences is the beginning of change, however far down the sequence we have travelled. **It is never too late to stop, revise and reverse!** When you have read Chapters 11 and 12, choose the best way to set about focusing on the areas in your life that need revision and change.

It is important to remember that what we seek to change are the **learned procedures that maintain the traps, dilemmas, snags and unstable states that limit our life and cause problems. It is essential to focus upon the learned procedures rather than the problems the procedures create.** For example, our problem may be an eating disorder, but the procedure underlying it may be that we bottle up feelings for fear of making a mess, or we stuff down anger for fear of being rejected. It is the procedure we need to address and change. We must stay off the symptom hook!

It's important too to be realistic and to start small, to start with what we *can* do rather than go for trying to sort out something large. Once we begin to change even the simplest thing, other changes follow, like the ripple effect of a stone on water.

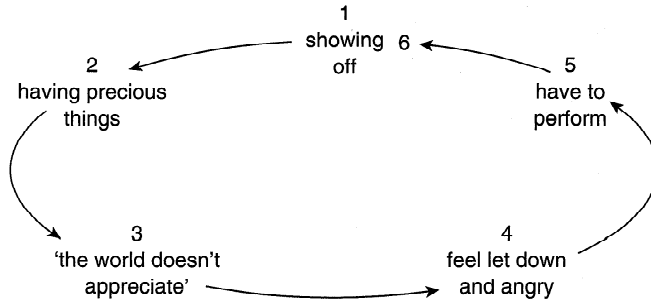
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### Sylvia's target problems and aims

Problem procedure: *Either* in touch with the child and feeling and being in pain; *or* using my telescope to avoid.

Aim: To feel safe enough to let the child come out from behind the chair and be part of adult Sylvia.

Problem procedure: The 'Telescope' a 'performance trap'.



Aim: To value and love my whole self and listen to myself, first.

Problem procedure: *Either* controlling by being rigidly intolerant and tough on people; *or* being controlled and feeling I'm having my hair pulled.

Aim: To be aware of and trust my own strength, and not to take the wrong things too seriously ('tiger energy').

Figure 11.1 Sylvia's diagram of her problem procedures underlying her angry outbursts

Sylvia decided to look at her life when she began to have angry outbursts with people at work. She had also been aware for some time of feeling depressed and sad, and of a sense of meaninglessness in her life. As she worked with her reformulation (p. 167) she became aware of her inner creative spirit, her 'tiger'. Being in touch every day with her tiger has helped Sylvia to feel more 'whole', to become less depressed and to give up her 'performance' self. She has been much less frustrated and is less likely to burst out angrily (Figure 11.1).

Janet's chart (Figure 11.2) targets her problem procedures and aims. She monitored them over a period of a few weeks and they all changed dramatically. Janet had sought help from her GP because of her panic attacks, and was referred for short-term therapy. She identified with the 'doing what others want' trap and the 'I'm bound to do things badly' trap, also with the keeping things bottled up or making a mess dilemma. She also identified with intense, extreme and uncontrollable emotions and with swinging into emotional blankness.

After four months of working with her story and her target procedures and aims Janet was able to do without her valium! Her focused therapy helped to free her from the guilt which had led to her fear of death and panic attacks. In her final 'goodbye' letter to her therapist she wrote that she 'had a bad day now and again' but was always able to say what she felt and was enjoying the release and freedom after years of never having her say.

## Targeting problems, deciding aims

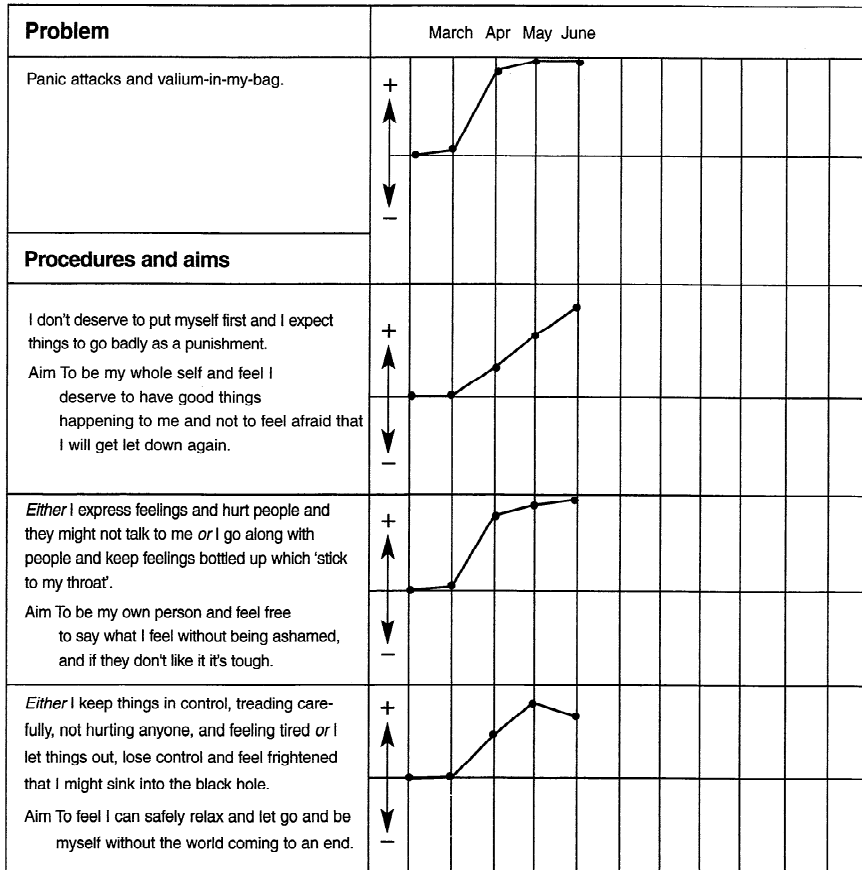


Figure 11.2 Janet's chart of her target problem procedures and aims

**Alistair's** target problems procedures and aims were as follows:

- Problem 1:* High blood pressure and exhaustion.  
*Procedure:* Overwork to stave off anxiety, fear, illness, death; no time for myself, anxiety leaks out, in the car, at weekends.  
*Aim:* Make space for some anxiety and fragility to be accepted. Practise five minutes of relaxation.
- Problem 2:* Eternal treadmill and depression.  
*Procedure:* Constantly striving in order to win, to cope with feelings of failure and inadequacy.  
*Aim:* (a) To recognise 'can of worms'. Recognise when activity is accelerated in order to cope with 'can of worms'.  
 (b) To find a container for these feelings (therapy).

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*Problem 3:* Can't let go and relax in any way.

*Procedure:*

*Aim:* Take half an hour every day for reflection, and writing in the journal.

Alistair also made a diagram for himself (p. 186), which describes his main traps. His story is recounted on page 170.

When you have worked out your own three or four target problem procedures and aims for over the next few months, copy the rating sheet in Appendix 4. The chart is divided into five sections which can be monitored weekly for twelve weeks as if you were in a CAT therapy. The chart begins after writing the life story. Each week, mark on the chart how you have managed, first in terms of **recognition**, then, secondly, in terms of **stopping and revising**, and lastly, the **aim**. **The symptoms or problems are not our primary aim at first.**

Remember, the aim may be simply to be more aware of the procedure itself, or it may be just to give yourself half an hour a day for self-reflection. Once your recognition of the issues is stronger you may find yourself able to be more specific about the aim, or to add to how the aim is brought about. For example, Susannah found that whilst her initial aim was to bear the anxiety of 'longing to merge' in relationships and her fear of hurting the other by being separate, she found that after a few weeks of practising awareness, she was able really to listen to what her own feelings and intuition were telling her. She said, 'I can just feel right now that I am not ready' and the value she could place on her own authentic feeling was vitally important. This is what happens when we start to recognise and challenge old habits: our healthy island starts expanding. The space and awareness we gain helps us in ways we could not anticipate.

Alistair is aiming to move from his half-hour a day reflection to allowing a space for the feelings he has never had time for. He has chosen to use music and poetry to help him with this and to keep writing about what happens. His next step will be to accept these feelings and find ways to integrate them and use them creatively in his everyday life, and ultimately to live more harmoniously with them.

# 12

## Putting a diagram in your pocket

This chapter looks at how to make diagrams of the way you cope with inner conflicts. Having written about your life, you can find it very useful to create a working diagram of exactly how you have learned to cope with difficult feelings and core pain.

To make the diagram we need to find words to describe first the problematic reciprocal roles we have understood that we tend to bounce around. Then we need to put in the ways we have tried to cope with early care patterns, patterns such as striving or placating. And alongside this we need to remember what our core pain is and see how each of the traps, dilemmas, snags or unstable states often maintains our core pain and that we are caught in a management loop that does not release us from the deeper emotional pain.

Start your diagram by imagining trying to explain to me your findings from the psychotherapy file and Personal Sources Questionnaire. Together we will find the best words to describe your reciprocal roles and the procedures that maintain the pain caught up in them. Make a start by drawing out two or three boxes that look like the example in Figure 12.1. Choose two or three of what you feel are your main problematic reciprocal roles. Draw out one box for your 'healthy island' and healthy reciprocal roles, such as *listening* in relation to *listened to*, *giving kindness* in relation to *receiving kindness*, *caring* to *cared for*.

You might like to consider how you would describe the core emotional pain. Freda described her core pain of worthless/rejected as being maintained by the reciprocal role of *'deprived* in relation to *depriving'*. And *'feeding off* in relation to *fed off'*. She received no unconditional love from either parent and very early on took the position of the 'parental child', taking responsibility and magical guilt for her mother's loss and depression. She also recognised the *tyrannising/controlling* in relation to *tyrannised/controlled/restricted* role where her anger was turned against herself and the only way to express this was in her eating disorder. Here she was in a cycle of *rejecting* in relation to *rejected as worthless* and *controlling via placating* in relation to *controlled/kept guiltily caught*.

To find words for your core pain you need to feel into what, inside you, is your greatest fear and also your most overwhelming feeling of emotional pain. If you imagine being once again in the world of your childhood, you

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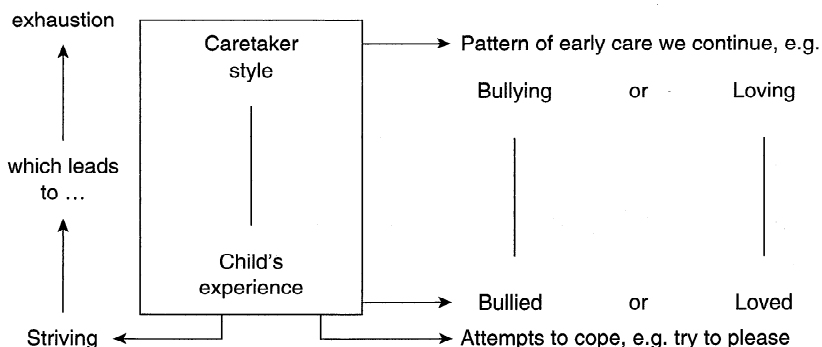


Figure 12.1 'Caretaker style and child response' example of learned reciprocal roles

might find the words to express your painful core feelings. These would describe the feelings you have worked hard to get away from through the learned procedures.

Some of the following examples might help find your own words:

afraid, terrified, lost, abandoned, forgotten, deprived, abused, left, rejected, lonely, in pain (physical, mental and emotional), angry, furious, in a rage, spitting, shrieking, yelling, crying, screaming, dropped, teased, tantalised, tyrannised, longing, waiting (to be held, loved again, picked up, nurtured, for Mum/Dad/other), hungry, starving, empty, needy, intense

Spend time feeling into the words that best describe what you might be carrying inside. There will be other words you will wish to add to describe how you feel. If this does not come easily to you, ponder on this page and its ideas, and let your unconscious inform you of how to address your core pain. A sense of the reciprocal role procedures that maintain the pain may emerge naturally. An image, word or dream may come to you. Or you may just come across the word you need by keeping in touch with the feelings you have and by letting them indicate the right description.

Sometimes we are able to describe the nature of our core pain by first outlining the learned reciprocal roles that maintain it. For example, a demanding perfectionist role may be our way of coping with, but also maintaining, a harshly judged self, where core pain is experienced as humiliation and worthlessness.

The next stage in making your diagram is to describe the means of surviving the core pain which often lead to forming traps, dilemmas or snags, and to use arrows showing the sequence of what tends to happen. The self-survival procedures tend to loop back again to the core pain. You will see illustrated in Freda's diagram (Figure 12.2) that she coped with her inner pain of rejection and deprivation first by pleasing others, and later by overeating when placation no longer relieved her feelings and the core state feelings included depressed

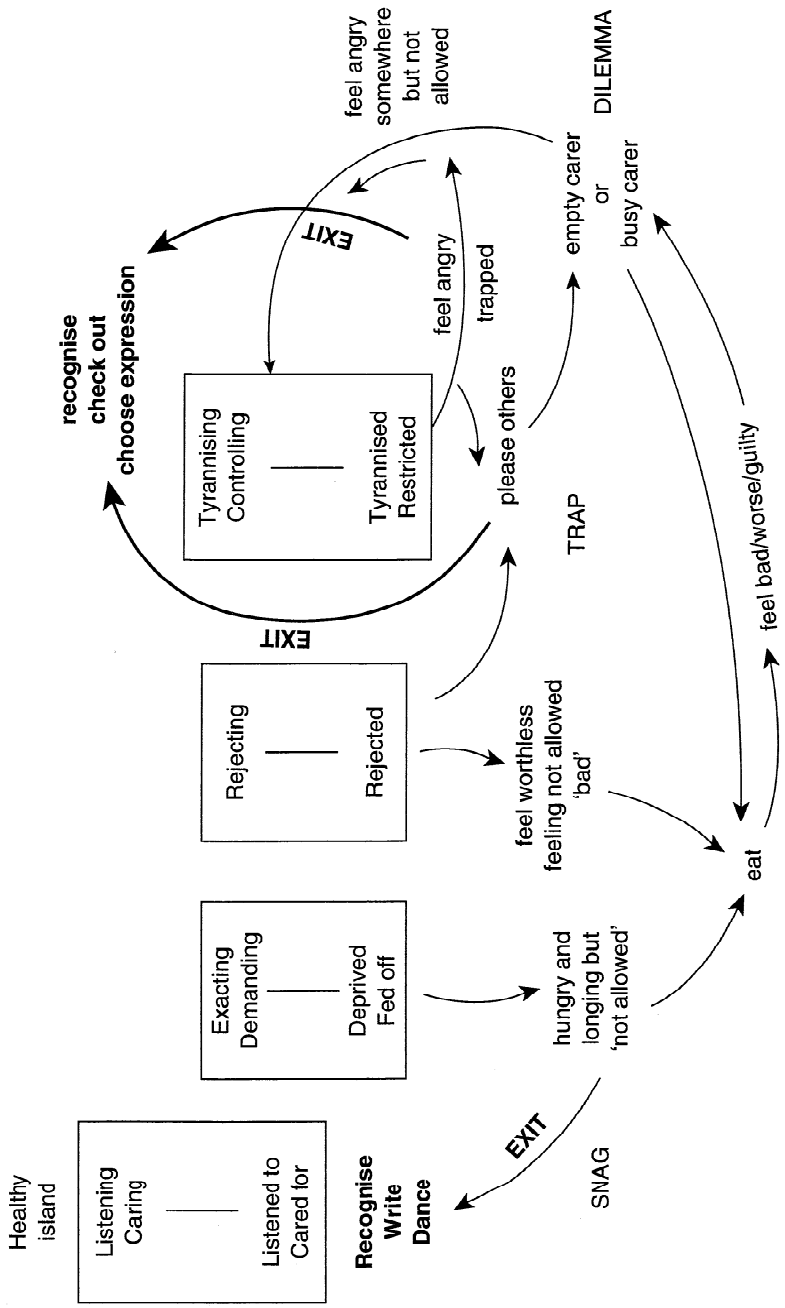


Figure 12.2 Freda's diagram

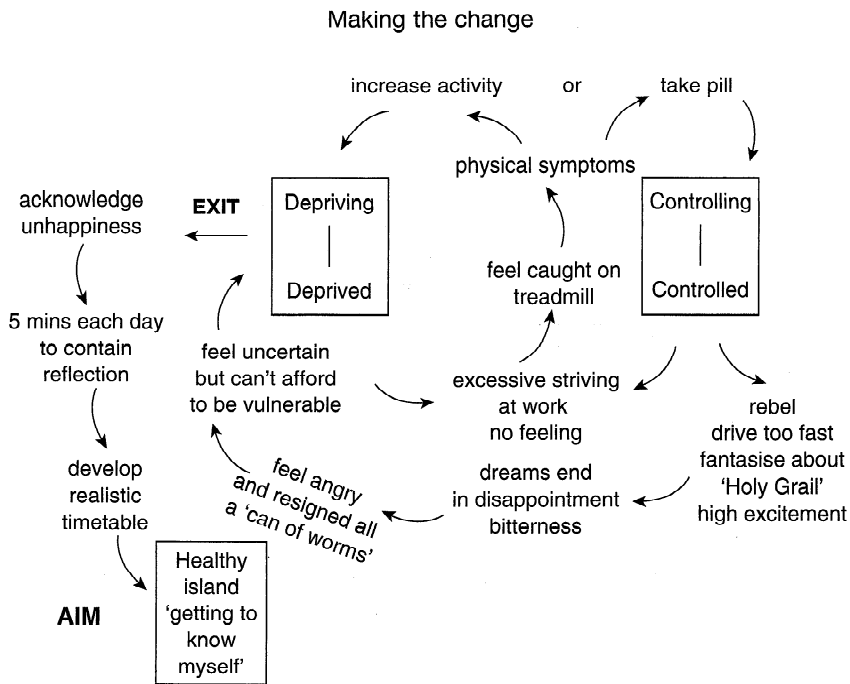


Figure 12.3 Alistair's diagram

and worthless. The diagram shows how each of her procedures, or coping tactics, while useful when she was small, in adult life trapped her in an actual circular trap, or were split into a dilemma. Each old coping pattern ultimately led her back to her inner pain.

Freda could see how the 'doing as others want' trap led to the perpetuation of her depression and restricted her own life. By using the diagram every day she could see exactly where she was at a time of difficulty or conflict. The eating to cope with the emptiness and feeling 'bad' made her guilty, for which she was self-punishing, and then felt alone. She 'snagged' her life in a way that deprived her of using her own creative skills. Her way out of the map, the exit point, was through recognising her ability to be able to cope, as she had done all her life. But instead of using it in a placatory way for others, she began looking at it as a natural skill that could be used to create a better framework for her attitude to herself and for her life practically.

**Always try to keep your diagram simple. The most important thing is for it to work for you.**

If you recognise that you avoid things, work out the feelings you are trying to avoid and plot the way you continue avoiding them in your life, as shown in Figure 12.4.

Alistair is currently working on his life story and diagram (see Figure 12.3). Because he has organised his life through excessive striving and control he has had no time for reflection, for letting his natural, spontaneous thoughts



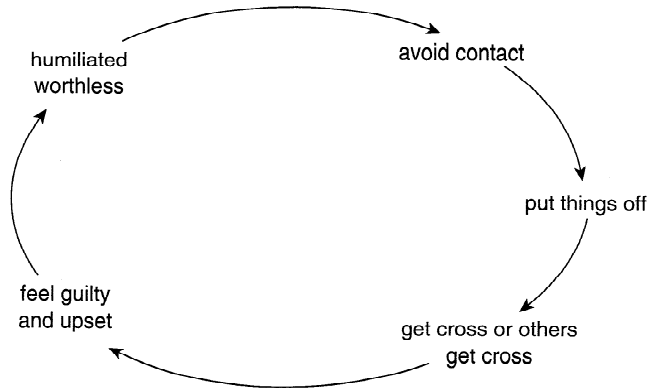


Figure 12.4 Martin's avoidance diagram

vulnerability early on in life, mainly because of a very tense family situation and because both his parents were largely absent. He had a very clever older brother, and he picked up early on that if he did not strive to win he would be left behind and regarded as a 'failure'. Thus, any feeling of which he was not in strict control has come to be seen as a failure. When we met he was so afraid of the out-of-control feelings that he had shut them off completely. They would 'leak' out, through 'odd' thoughts, dreams, irrational fears for his own health and a great flood of fear when two close friends died suddenly.

Alistair is now able to acknowledge how unhappy he has been and to look at what this means in terms of his life. This acknowledgement alone has allowed him to review the job he does (he works a fourteen-hour day every day, starting at 5 a.m.). Previously he had been 'on automatic', and his internal needs had reflected themselves in health problems such as a duodenal ulcer and abscesses. He could not allow himself proper time to take care of these matters, or to look holistically at the implications of his symptoms for his general stress level. Had he continued to deny his needs and difficulties, he may have developed an even more serious health crisis.

**Martin** had great difficulty with swings of mood and with obsessional thoughts, in particular his preoccupation with the word 'baptism'. He had been baptised a year before the onset of his depression, something he came to understand that was very important to him and an expression of his own need and devotional attitude. But he had always felt guilty about it because he believed it went against the wishes of both his wife and his mother. His chart shows how his survival-self mode was either to please others he considered 'perfect' and strong, or to work excessively hard to meet 'perfect' standards. Both survival modes restricted his healthy island and natural development and contributed to making him dangerously exhausted. He was caught between his desire to be himself truly and the guilt he felt when this conflicted with the two most important and powerful people in his life, his mother and his wife. The most intense period of his depression began after his mother died. Although free of her very tight hold, it was still inside him in his self *restricting*

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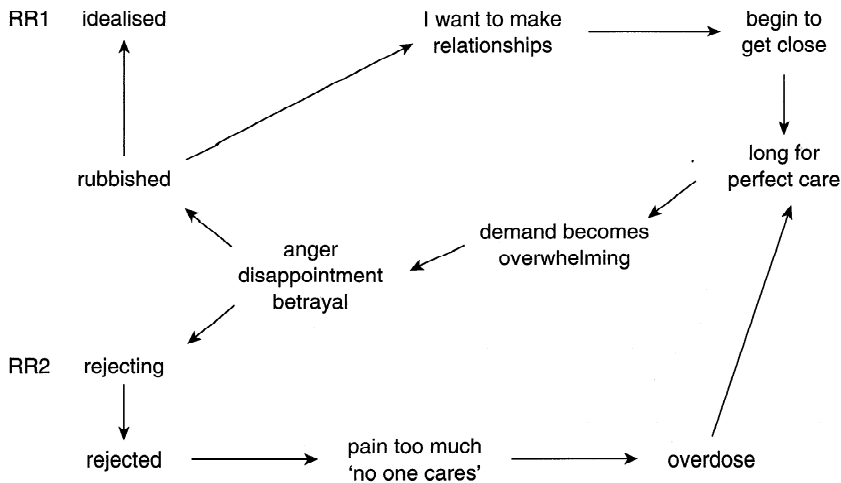


Figure 12.5 Karen's diagram: two reciprocal role patterns

in relation to *restricted* reciprocal role. This contributed to panic and guilt for wanting freedom to be himself. His guilt was unconscious and his map helped him see how much guilt he carried for every negative thought about anything or anyone. Every time he had the tiniest negative thought he would punish himself with feeling bad or by tormenting himself with the word 'baptism'.

One of the most wonderful experiences about the nature of suffering is that within the nature of the suffering is the key to the way out. Although the word 'baptism' could be used obsessively and as a punishment for not being 'good enough', Martin also needed to be 'reborn' into his real self and initiated into the adult freedom of choice about feelings in full range, without guilt.

Martin has managed to contain the extremes of his mood swings, and has been able to explore with his wife ways in which he restricts himself within their relationship and how she can be invited into the restricting role initially occupied by his mother. Restricting can make him feel contained and safe, and he panics when he is apart from his wife or with nothing to do; but restricting also makes him feel furious and trapped and he once again becomes the 'little boy'. Over time he has processed this change and now has a wider range of feelings without guilt. He does not have to be 'perfect' or centre stage in order for life to be meaningful.

Karen's diagram is shown in Figure 12.5. Karen was recommended for focused therapy after taking a number of overdoses. She had a pattern of making intense and immediate relationships with men that ended explosively after just a few weeks, when she would then make an attempt on her life. Karen was only eighteen, but had had five admissions to casualty over the previous two years. Her family background was unsettled. She had been fostered at age four, then adopted by a couple who split up when she was eight. She was 'parcelled round' to family and friends, but never settled anywhere. Two 'uncles' had sexually

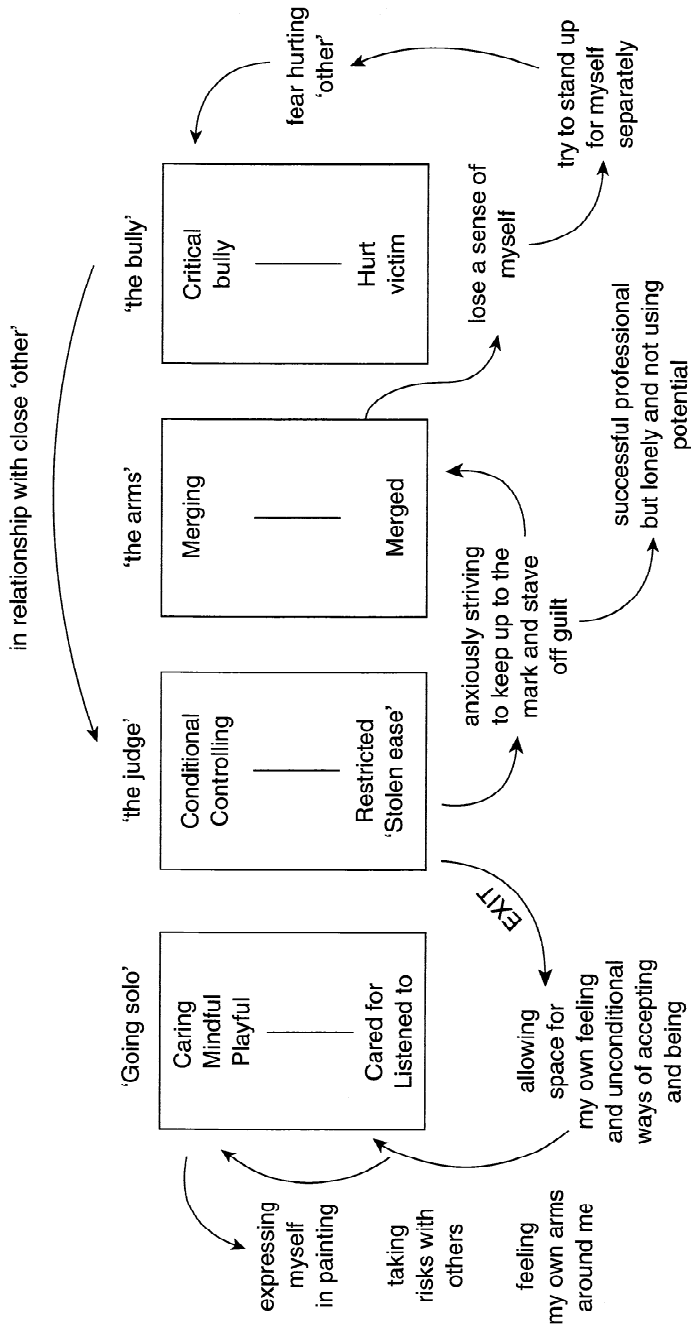


Figure 12.6 (a) Susannah's first diagram

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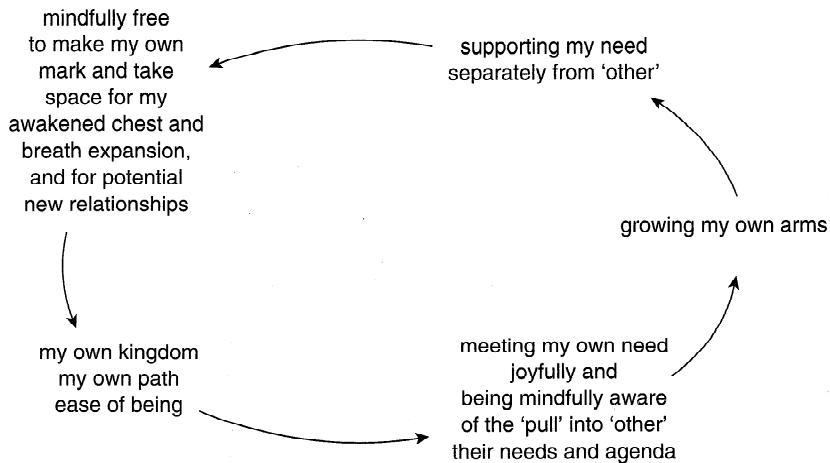


Figure 12.6 (b) Susannah's post-therapy diagram: the healthy island

abused her and she had also developed a pattern of bingeing and starving as a way of trying to control her confused feelings. As a result, by the time she began secondary school, and all her peer group were pairing off, she felt worthless, unlovable and that no one really wanted or loved her. All she could identify with were stories from romantic novels or an idealised longing for what we called 'perfect care'.

A diagram helped her to see the pattern of her responses to relationships which had led to her overdoses. This gave her a certain degree of stability, so that she could see why and how the patterns had emerged and begin the work of receiving 'good enough' care for herself. This diagram helped Karen see what patterns were involved in her starving/bingeing routines. What she began to work through in her therapy was how her idealisation had become a substitute for her grief at the loss and deprivation of her early life, and how it prevented her from receiving something that was 'good enough' for her needs.

We read Susannah's story in Chapter 10. In diagram (a) we see what she worked on in her therapy. Diagram (b) reflects how she was now exploring and nourishing her healthy island through mindful awareness, and using 'her own arms' symbolically to care for her emotional need.

Go over each of the diagrams in this chapter again and see if you can follow them clearly. Each stage should result in the next one by following the arrow. In a trap, the way of coping leads back to the core emotional pain, sometimes after quite a detour. A dilemma (the either/or, or if/then) results in a lopsidedness that also causes a return to the core pain. And a snag tends to keep the core pain as it is all the time. The exit point begins when we simply stop and recognise the old patterns. Revising the old patterns and trying something different follows. The exit point allows us time for space and self-reflection. This is also the beginning of nourishing our healthy island.

## Techniques for working through the process of change

So far, we have described how to write the story of your life, how to make a chart of problems with aims for change, and how to make a diagram with exits for change. Also, we have talked about looking at these charts or diagrams each day and monitoring yourself in problem areas.

What we need to look at next is how we process the change we are looking for. How do we actually go about making change when some of our habits are lifelong and set? Please be encouraged by three things:

1. The human mind is capable of far more journeys, explorations and disciplines than is generally understood. Once you make a start on self-awareness and on the mindfulness practices designed to consolidate awareness you may travel further than you ever imagined.
2. The ripple effect – throw one small stone into a pond and the ripples are far reaching. Once you begin to change the smaller things – often the traps or dilemmas – other changes follow naturally.
3. Philosophical thinking such as ancient Taoism and modern psychology both share an understanding that nature – and humans are part of nature – abhor a vacuum and that the principle of homeostasis – meaning movement and balance – operates to prevent rigidity or lopsidedness. Life prods us to keep in balance. It gives us wake-up calls to keep aware. If we 'go with the flow' in respect of this principle we find ways to embrace dark and light, sun and shadow, the greys, blues and bright colour of different phases.

Perhaps you have had your jolt and this is why you are reading this book now; perhaps the book itself will act as a jolt. Perhaps it will work by confirming what you already knew somewhere but hadn't put into words. If you are seeking change and the change means making your healthy island more spacious, nourishing this space will help you. So often we get bewitched by the fear of change and allow ourselves to be limited by what others will think. Buddhist philosophy tells us that we already have all that we need, it's just that we don't see it. Clearing the mirror through which we look at ourselves is a good start to clearing space to get to know ourselves, freer of conditions.

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There are many different ways of bringing about changes and shifts in consciousness, and there are many therapeutic styles which can assist in this. In this chapter we will look at a number of these, and you may be drawn more to one than another. **There is no one way of working, the best way is the one that works for you.**

I have divided this next section into **active** and **reflective** ways of processing change.

## Reflective ways of processing change

### Self-monitoring

We have mentioned the method of self-monitoring throughout these chapters as a way to help us develop awareness of our different patterns. It is best to choose something specific to monitor, like depressed or negative thinking, or the 'doing as others want' trap. Buy a small notebook that you can carry around and refer to easily. When you recognise the trap or dilemma write down the time of day, place, who if anyone you are with, what else is happening and **what you are thinking and feeling**. Keep this notebook for a week before looking at your entries. Sometimes we have to keep up the monitoring for three or four weeks before we can see any kind of pattern emerging.

The main purpose of self-monitoring is to increase your awareness of your own patterns and tendencies. With increased awareness you can become more astute about how one thing leads to another in terms of your own and others' reactions, and in time you can halt or change the process, once you have understood how it operates.

What do you monitor? Unwanted thoughts; strange sentences; odd feelings; obsessional words or acts; physical symptoms such as headaches, tinnitus, chest pain, feelings of nausea; forgetfulness; depersonalisation (feeling I am no one ... losing my sense of self); anxiety; fearfulness; not wanting to go out; ways of eating. These can all be monitored so that you can look at this aspect of yourself more clearly.

When you have your notebook with its entries, read through and select one or more words or phrases that you use frequently, and identify a repeated theme, person, time or place that links the monitorings. For example, through self-monitoring one man learned that his tinnitus grew worse whenever he was unable to be assertive. It became a reminder to express himself and not be passive or placatory.

### Journal-keeping

Use a larger notebook or perhaps a special kind of notebook or hardback exercise book in which to write your thoughts, dreams and ideas. This is for the record of your inner life, what you are feeling and experiencing, what kind of thoughts you are having, what happens to you as you journey to know yourself more fully. You may like to keep your journal each day or just

At times of personal investigation or assessments, and particularly in times of crisis and despair, we often find that something in us tries to express itself in the form of symbol, metaphor or image. Some of us are drawn to write poems or pieces of prose; some write streams of consciousness with no particular process in mind, just letting what comes out flow; some like to doodle or draw, paint or colour what is happening to them. Whatever form it takes and however bizarre it may seem, don't be put off. Let whatever wants to, find form inside your journal. You may not understand it fully at first, but as time goes on, and certainly when you look back on it, it will give you a vital link with your inner world and to whatever meaning you might be seeking.

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness, which was mentioned earlier in this book, is an ancient practice rooted in the Eastern spiritual disciplines. Its contribution in modern Western life is growing. The practice itself involves our concentration. We choose what is to be the object of our mindfulness and we focus on it, just as it is, without trying to change or control it. The object of mindfulness may be a sound, an image, a feeling, the body or breath. The purpose of mindfulness is to slow down the mental processes and hurry sickness that often dominate us. In mindfulness practice we allow thoughts to come and go, we just notice them, recognising them as 'just thoughts' and return to the object of our mindfulness. We do not follow thoughts, we release ourselves from being slaves to our thoughts. The results of mindfulness may not appear significant, but over a period of time we may find calm and clarity.

Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh writes and speaks about the nourishment offered by mindfulness practice. He speaks of going back to the island within. In this practice we are nourishing our healthy island and we learn that in times of crisis we can maintain the practice rather than being swept away by our thoughts and feelings. This does not mean we are not affected by crises or that we do not feel. Mindfulness offers us a vehicle through which our experiences may be felt, processed and expressed. It can bring a quality of peace and relaxation into our lives, although this is not an aim in itself.

You will have read how Amanda and Susannah both used mindfulness as a way to help their more difficult feeling states.

In Appendix 3 there are mindfulness practices you might like to try: the Body and Chair Exercise; Mindfulness of Breathing; and the Unconditional Friendliness or Loving Kindness Meditation.

It's not possible to say more about learning mindfulness in this book, but some useful books are listed at the end of this book on p. 259.

### Focusing

Another practice, close to mindfulness, is focusing. The technique of focusing can help us to be present with a direct experience of our emotions. This technique was developed by Eugene Gendlin (a student of Carl Rogers) and honed by John Welwood, who recognised its close connection to mindfulness. Here, the core pain (or soft spot) is connected to through becoming aware of a felt

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sense. In its simplest form focusing offers us a way of staying with a body sensation, a feeling or a word in a particular way that allows us to explore more of the initial presentation and without judging it or trying to change it in any way. In *Nothing to Lose* Nigel Wellings describes it in the following way:

focusing can be done in a moment and brings our awareness close to our experience. Right now I am feeling a tightness in my throat which is best named with a sort of growling word. If I stay with it I find that it reveals a more hidden panicky emotion which then slowly fades away. Thus with only a minute spent on the technique I have gained two things: knowledge of what was really bothering me and an experience of allowing myself to experience it directly and witness it passing away. (Wellings and Wilde McCormick, 2005)

The following are steps that can be used for focusing, either on your own or in co-counselling:

1. **Clearing a space.** We ask: How are you/am I right now? This often evokes something of the 'story'. Concentrate upon what is underneath this by mentally scanning the body, particularly torso, chest, solar plexus, to see if a felt sense comes forward. If there is more than one, just stay with the one that demands more attention.
2. **Felt sense.** It's alright if the felt sense isn't clear. Just stay with it being diffuse and fuzzy. Go right up to it, but not so close as to become it.
3. **Handle.** Next we try to find the quality of this diffuse sense. Allow a word, phrase or image to emerge from the fuzzy felt sense. A word that describes the quality, such as sticky, tight, growling, shrinking, full. Stay with the felt sense as long as it takes for the word to emerge. (This is different from conceptually finding a word and labelling.)
4. **Resonating.** Then hold the word, phrase or image against the felt sense to check that they really resonate with each other. Changes may occur during this process. Continue carefully until there is a fit. An indication of this may be a small sigh or a feeling of 'yes'. Give it time, feeling it completely, the physical felt sense and its expression.
5. **Asking.** Sometimes the release of energy as we consciously connect with what is really going on in us gives us a deeper understanding of our situation. We can also try asking 'What does this felt sense need?' It is important that the answer comes from the felt sense itself and not the rational mind. Give lots of time. A real felt shift comes when the answer emerges from the felt sense and there is a sense of physical satisfaction and connection.
6. **Receiving.** Acknowledge the process that has just been experienced or shared, however large or small. Be still at this point so that true receiving has time to take place.
8. **Returning.** Give time to return to everyday consciousness. In co-counselling check that your colleague is ready to do so.

Imaging, visualisation, active imagination and body drama

There is no situation to which the creative use of your imagination cannot be applied usefully and safely. We all have this capacity even though so many



minutes and lean back in your chair. Imagine yourself picking up a lemon from your fruit bowl. Place the lemon on a board and take a sharp knife out of your drawer. With the knife cut the lemon in half. Pick up one of the halves and put it in your mouth. Notice what is happening. Is your mouth watering, are your eyes tightening or squinting, is your tongue curling? If it is, then you have just imagined yourself eating a lemon with a full body reaction. There is no lemon in sight, so where did that reaction come from? Imagination!

Negative thoughts and damaging internal views are perpetuated by the combination of our thoughts and the power of the imagination to make them more concrete or more dramatic. In phobic disturbance and anxiety the most infectious negative thought is that 'It will happen again'. Many people who are fearful and seek to avoid their fears have images of what might happen to them 'if'. They will tell you, 'Oh I can't do that ... I'll be sick ... I'll fall off ... someone will come after me'. The range of our imaginings can be from imagining the worst questions as a schoolgirl in an exam to the pathologically jealous wife or husband who sees the imprint of the non-existent lover wherever there is a space.

Imagination, except in the world of the arts and music, is often dismissed or trivialised as in: 'It's only imagination ...'. Others consider it dangerous and, because it's non-scientific, it has had only a shadowy place in medicine or psychology. The power of the imagination is often feared. In the past ten years we have seen a debate in psychology and psychotherapy about 'false memory'. This centred on whether images and experiences raised in therapy represented literal 'truth' or were the product of an imaginative process misinterpreted by therapists. Memory is always selective, and it has a mercurial quality. Images and sensations, as we have seen from the section on focusing, have an individual world of their own meaning. We need ways to use its gifts to release us. We need to make sure we do not over-identify with the products of our imagination and harden down or take literally those images and sensations that emerge. These are just stepping stones to information.

**If you discover through the exercises in this book that you have difficult painful memories or flashbacks, particularly of violence and abuse, please go very slowly and find someone safe, respectful of your needs and well qualified to work with you.**

Imagination has the power to bring forward hidden images from years ago that return when something triggers them. We have seen how imagining a lemon can make us salivate, we have seen that imagination can recapture the original fear of agoraphobia or the terror of a panic attack. If imagination can do all these things it can also be used as a resource and work for us positively.

Take your notebook and look at the number of images and descriptive words you have used, the number of times you have written, 'I feel like a ...' or 'It's like a ...'. You have created images and are already in the world of the imagination. When you are out walking, let yourself look at the shapes of the landscape rather than seeking to name trees and plants or count the number of bird species. When people are talking to you, whether on the television or in your life, see if you can find an image for them – something they remind you of, or a shape or colour. When you listen to music, lie on the floor and let the music conjure up images. When you are reading, read fiction, romance, poetry, fairy tales, children's stories, texts that are fun and full of

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simple wonder, that make you laugh. Getting into the realm of the imagination means getting out of the rational, logical, overfocused way of thinking. When you go to sleep at night, ask yourself for a dream.

## Using the powers of the imagination positively and safely

### Reframing problems through visualisation

You will already have used your imagination to create your life story and your diagrams. Choose now one or more of the difficulties you have. If you have identified with the 'doing as others want' trap, imagine yourself in a situation with someone you have always felt you had to please, and imagine yourself saying 'no' to them. Set the scene for yourself – a room, a place – and decorate it in your mind, giving it colour and shape. Choose where and how you will stand or sit, what you will wear. Watch what you do with your hands and feet. Place the other person where you can see their eyes. Make sure that your eye level is either equal or that yours is slightly above. (If we've found earlier that we tend to be always looking up at others, it might be that we always place others above us and ourselves in an inferior position.) Have an easy conversation with this person, speak to them as if you were in charge: say the things you would really like to say, rather than waiting to respond to their needs or questions. Then visualise that they ask you to do something you do not want to do. Smile at them and say, 'I'd love to be able to help out but I really can't at the moment.' Practise it out loud. Say it several times. There will doubtless be many other versions of things you would like to say which you can bring in here. Watch the other person's face. Notice what kind of look or gesture would normally trigger off your placatory response. Say 'no' to this gesture and look. Say it again. Practise it with a real person.

If you identify with the 'I'd rather be on my own' trap, imagine the most fearful situation you can create. Be the observer in this image and take note of all the ingredients. Who is in the image, where is it, what is the nature of the frightening quality, what is going on? Add to it as much as you want. Draw it in your mind with full colour and horror. Remember you are a fly on the wall. When you feel you have understood the full reality of the image from your observer position, prepare yourself to enter the frightening space. Choose a friend or special object, a 'talisman', to accompany you if you wish. Dress yourself for such a fearful journey (some people choose armour, skins, fancy dress, the dress of heroes) or find images for the qualities you would like to have – courage perhaps, or attractiveness, relaxation, humour. Imagine yourself dressed or armed with these attributes, and visualise how you would look. When ready, go forth in the changed image. Remember you are dressed appropriately for the encounter. Let yourself into the part. Do what you have to do. Experience what would be the most useful aspect you could bring back from this image to use in everyday life. Just one thing will help you to begin the change from having to be on your own because of fear

## Using images

The 'either/or' dilemma gives us two quite specific images to work with. Take the dilemmas you have identified in your life and ponder on them using your imaginal level. See if you can find images, shapes or colours for how you feel at each end of your dilemma.

TRACEY identified 'bottling-up feeling or making a mess' with 'having to give into others', and with 'having to do what others want', and found that her main dilemma in terms of relating to other people was that she felt she was either a *battering ram* or *modelling clay*. She felt that she had been modelling clay all her life, giving in to others, doing what they wanted. But if she expressed some of her feelings or was assertive in any way, she felt as if she were a battering ram. One week she spontaneously reached a middle position which married the positive value of each pole of her dilemma. Her image and her new position and aim was to be 'like springy steel'.

Once we have realised the images, we need to explore them. There are several ways to do this.

### *Imaging*

Stay with the image in your mind's eye, either sitting or lying down with your eyes closed. Just let the image be there before you and ponder on its shape, colour, size, what it is made of, what, if anything, is around it, the age, sex, function, feeling, description and every possible detail of the image. Even if you just get a red blob you can still explore it: what kind of red; what shape is the blob; is it moving or still; is there anything else around it; does it have a name; does it remind you of anything? Each answer might lead to something else. In each case **let the image tell you**. Give it time. Do not force it to do anything.

If you are co-counselling someone, just let them stay as long as they can with the image by quietly encouraging them: repeat the name or sense of the image in the same voice they used to describe it to you; ask simple questions that will help amplify the image and expand its meaning.

With imaging techniques we may stay just with one image at a time, or we may see where the image wants to take us. We may put two or more images together, either imagining them side by side, or feeling first into the language of one and then moving on to the other, seeing how they may change or what they may need from each other.

### *Painting and drawing*

Images may be anchored by painting or drawing. Keep these as spontaneous and natural as possible. Do not judge your spontaneous drawings as if you were in an art class and looking for an exact replica. Many people are upset

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that their drawings do not represent the richness or vividness of the images they carry inside them, but what we are looking for by anchoring the drawings is a reminder of the nature of our images and their details. Make the paintings or drawings as soon as possible after the encounter with an image whilst it is still fresh with all its detail. Interpretation or meaning can come later. Sometimes we don't understand the exact nature of an image until later, when something happens and the impact of the image becomes clear. Once we become accustomed to using our images creatively, as part of our lives, we are rewarded by other images and other insights into the potential use and meaning of our images, and we realise that we have inside us a rich resource for future assistance with struggles and difficulties.

Drawing and painting are best done on the floor, as if we were playing, using colours freely without constraints. As well as painting or drawing we may like to model something in clay or Plasticine, Play-doh, papier mâché or whatever is handy. One woman made masks for the different parts of her and used them to help her be aware of their impact.

We may also use magazine or newspaper pictures to conjure up the images or feelings of what we experience inside. They may not be images we have created ourselves, but sometimes seeing a photograph or picture can trigger or inform us of memories and feelings, and we may prefer to use this method. You might like to cut out pictures and stick them onto paper as a collage, or as a wheel with different segments to portray the nature of your dilemma or trap.

When you have arrived at the image that suits you, keep it somewhere where you can look at it every day – in your wallet, diary, over the cooker, by the bathroom mirror, etc. Be proud of what you produce. Do not judge it or take notice of anyone else's judgement.

## Exploring traps or dilemmas through the body

Images or feelings may also be enacted by finding a body posture to capture those feelings or images. Stand, sit, lie or get your body into a position that describes your image or your feeling. Stay with the posture and let your body tell you something of the nature of this posture as you hold it.

One woman wanted to use this technique to get in touch with the tremendous tension she felt. In letting her body tell her about it by forming itself into the position that would encapsulate the feeling best, she found herself literally trying to climb the wall. She was shocked to find how extreme this was and how evocatively her body behaved when asked to express itself.

Another person who described their dilemma as 'either I'm a doormat or one of the Furies' manoeuvred her body into the position of a doormat and experienced the sensation of everyone walking over her. When asked to describe the nature of the doormat, its colour and shape, she said, 'It's soft and brown and it's got WELCOME written on it'. In contrast, her body position for the Furies involved spinning, spitting, scratching, kicking, hissing and twirling. Her 'Furies' had never really been explored but remained hidden and

repressed, and this had frightened her, thus aiding and abetting her doormat side. In this exercise she moved between the two positions, spending a few minutes in each. Gradually a third position appeared, as her body spontaneously placed itself straight upright, looking ahead, arms swinging to and fro freely, shoulders back, knees supple. 'I'm ready for action,' she said. 'I can move fast or be still as I wish.' In this third position she felt in control, and in charge of her choices. In the other two positions she had felt trapped, caught, unable to respond in any other way than the limited and extreme nature of the dilemma demanded.

Sometimes we are able to explore how we feel by actually being aware of what our body is doing in different situations. Becoming aware of how we sit or stand when talking to difficult people tells us a lot about our unexpressed feeling. Being aware of how we use our body, either when we are on our own or with others, can help us to examine the feelings that are being expressed unconsciously through the body. Sometimes we tell two stories: out of our mouth may come 'I'm fine thank you' whilst our eyes are looking dead and sad and our body is as tight as a drum or heavy with pain, telling a different story.

From this section we have established there are two main ways of using our observation of body language: (1) by a general awareness of what we do with our bodies and what others do; and (2) the direct use of body postures to act out the drama of an image or feeling, to allow us to take on board the full extent of our feelings, and to bring about change. Sometimes the smallest body change, from arms tightly folded when talking about the narrowness of our life, for example, to those same arms opening out widely to embrace something new, can begin an actual change, as what is depicted by the body change is taken into life experience. The woman who got into the position of the doormat never did it again in quite the same welcoming way, nor was she hurled about inside by the Furies. Something memorable always happens when we work directly with the body.

### Exploring traps, dilemmas and other problems through objects

Make a box of small objects of a mixed kind, containing some you like, some you don't like, some to which you feel indifferent – shells, stones, toys, sticks, glass, ornaments, eggs, bits and pieces you have in your room or around your house. Clear a space on the floor for the objects you have chosen and place a rug or cloth in the space. This will be the boundary for your 'drama' enactment. Now get down on the floor, either on your own or with your co-counsellor. (This exercise can be fun to do, either alone or helping someone else.)

Decide which trap, dilemma, decision, family scene or relationship struggle you wish to depict. Choose first an object for yourself, to represent you. Don't think too hard, just go for something you really like that will stand for you as you are now (or perhaps as you were in the past, if you are depicting a past situation). Hold your own object for a while and get the feel of it; get to know it well. When you are ready, place it in the centre of your space on the floor. Next take an object to represent one of the people in your current drama.

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That could be father, mother, uncle, aunt, sister, brother, friend, colleague, lover, neighbour, animal – anyone you wish. After you have chosen the object, look at it and see why you have chosen it for this person, what qualities they have. If this is not immediately clear, the reason may emerge as you go on with the drama.

Go on choosing objects until you have one for everyone you intend to include. Place each one on the floor as you imagine them to be currently in your life, or as they were in the scene you are recapturing. Notice the spaces between each one and ponder on what they might mean. If some are close, how close are they? Notice if some block others in their closeness. If others seem far apart, ponder on this and the nature of the apartness. If you are depicting a scene from your past, for when you and your siblings were together, you might like to get the feel of what happened when the scene changed, as when someone left home or went into hospital, or when someone new entered. When you do this allow the objects to show you the whole scene, let the objects themselves take on the drama and give you the impact of what happens rather than concentrating upon which object is which person.

It is quite fantastic what strong feelings this exercise can evoke when the objects are allowed to unfold their story. For example: objects may be all of similar size or material and then suddenly something quite different is introduced; everything about the *gestalt* then changes. There may be distinct groups of very different substances; you may notice that, in order to communicate with certain members/objects, you have to make huge leaps across the floor.

Everything that happens in terms of the objects is useful in portraying family structures: pairs and triangles; sizes and shapes; who is easy to approach and who isn't; what is needed in terms of change or movement; what needs to happen for one object to reach another; how it feels for the rock that is your father to approach the tiny shell that is your sister or the piece of string that is wrapped around your uncle.

You might like to focus on a particular event and then ask the question: 'How should it have been different?' And let the objects show you.

Spend no more than half an hour with the objects. This is a powerful exercise. Let it inform you, and give you an idea of how you would like the patterns of things to be in your own life now.

## Writing letters you never send

This is useful when there are many things left unsaid to people who are perhaps dead or unapproachable. Start the letter, 'Dear Mum . . .' or whoever you wish to write to. Then begin with something of what you feel. For example, 'I am writing to you because I could never find the words to say what you meant to me', or 'All my life I feel you have put me down'. Go on into the letter and let out all the feelings you have never dared embrace. Write as if your heart would burst, that your aches, longing, griefs are so full they would spill over. Write as if this were your last chance fully to express what that

person has meant to you or brought out in your life. Do not flinch from any word or image that you use. Do not let guilt get in the way, or any moralising about blame or fairness or pride. You will never send this letter, but you need to write as if you were having a vibrant conversation with a living person. It may be gratitude and love you want to express, that you regret not passing on in the person's lifetime; or, it may be more painful and negative feelings, as in the following unsent letter, written by Stephanie from Chapter 10. Here is the letter she wrote to her father:

Dear Dad,

I tried to feel what life would have been without you; it was unimaginable except for the feeling of an immense weight lifting from me. Life without that burden. When I tried to imagine life without my mum, I could imagine some other good woman looking after me well enough.

I tried to think of an image to describe how it felt to be your daughter. What came to mind was that when I was small, over a period of time you slit me open, placed a box of maggots between my heart and my stomach and slowly and deliberately sewed the scar away. Your living legacy was that I could never again feel peace, goodness, satisfactions – just rotteness at the core. That shocks me. It is like hating and blaming my own limb to hate and criticise you. You seem old and often very pathetic, and nothing at all to do with the person who came and planted the maggots. I feel very sorry for you, but it becomes confused with feeling sorry for myself.

I do feel like I have been tortured enough, and I would like you to let me go now please. You and Mum tut-tut about the relationships with men that I form, but each is modelled on the way things were with you. I had to learn to trust and love somebody who hated parts of me, loathed others, merely criticised most and demanded that I thrive and flourish and serve their every need.

I was at Uncle Jack's house lately. He thinks you have been a pretty dreadful father to me. I was there for an evening and he wanted to do something nice for me. He offered me a drink and brought me a cup of coffee – no strings. It made him feel good because he had done a nice thing. It made me cry, because in twenty-seven years my own father has never done such a simple act of kindness for me.

Guilt and mixed feelings apart, I think that I have to tell you that you have been a complete bastard. It fills me with an anger which I transfer to many people, and in particular all of the men I meet. Every skill you gave me you used against me; you tutored my brain, then devoted yourself to undermining my intelligence. I have many an amusing story to tell on these subjects; if someone is treating me badly I can't call you in to protect me because you would agree with them, etc. But the humour is a thin veneer on top of hate and anger.

Such a small and pathetic man, not content with losing his own chance of happiness and satisfaction, you had to have mine too. I would like to destroy you. I would like to spit all that hatred back at you. Strange that I should think

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you smaller and more pathetic than your own child. Strange that I should believe that even a fraction of the hatred you gave to me could destroy you. And you had my mum completely devoted to salving your every need from the moment you met aged fifteen. She has become quite a contortionist to be able to constantly feed your every need and still remember to keep herself alive.

Life with you has been like living in a minefield. Allan picked his way through first, but you set a different pattern for me and threw in a few booby traps for good measure. Jane made notes and tiptoed round the edge. They have got to the other side now, but I find I am still searching for mine years after the fight is supposed to be over.

I wish I had had a different father. I hope I can trust enough to allow the manly half of the human race to make some positive contribution to me and my life.

## Monitoring your progress with problems and aims

Make yourself a chart containing your problems and aims like the one in Appendix 4. Use this rating chart every day. Keep it in your diary or pocket-book so that each day you can at least glance at it to remind yourself particularly of the aims. Once a week have a concentrated look at the chart, and mark on it how much the aims have altered, if at all. There are lines for 'no change', 'better' and 'worse', and you will need to mark where you feel you are in terms of your aim according to these markings. As the weeks progress your marks will form a graph. Some weeks will be better and others worse. In a week when you mark the rating down be sure to understand why that is, what happened to put you off your aim and perhaps led to your being caught up in an old pattern. Don't be discouraged, but use the information to help you understand your need for change, and let yourself have some compassion for the struggle this part of you may well be having. Sometimes our progress with one aim drops as others are achieved, because we are testing out traps and snags. We may well feel 'snagged' by getting more assertive or stronger in some aspect. Marking this on your chart will help to highlight these problem areas and to focus upon them.

Do not judge how you are doing or be tempted to mark all the ratings as high as possible. Just stay with a realistic view of how things are. Make sure that the aims you have given yourself *are* realistic. If you begin with the more straightforward aims, such as getting out of the traps and becoming more assertive, you will be encouraged to challenge some of the more difficult problems, like fear of dependency, sudden mood swings and more embedded difficulties with anxiety or physical symptoms.

Change is best consolidated if achieved slowly and thoroughly. Take your time, quietly focusing upon your task. A major change may already be happening, that of self-reflection and self-observation. This change will already be bearing fruit. Once you have begun to accomplish small changes you might like to make a new chart, including other problems or a more detailed version of your existing problems and difficulties.



## Dreams

Dreams are the language of the unconscious, a rich symphony of yet undiscovered material which reaches the daylight of consciousness through imagery, motif, story and feeling. We all dream every night, but not all dreams are remembered. When an important dream occurs we wake up and we know that something has happened. The feeling evoked by a dream can stay with us throughout the day and beyond. Dreams can contain insights that are useful. They offer a balancing influence upon consciousness by making us aware of our unconscious longings, symbols and unfinished business.

### How to work with our dreams

Keep a dream notebook to record your dreams. Write them down as soon as you wake, even if it is in the middle of the night. If a dream wakes you it is important. If you go back to sleep thinking you will record it in the morning, it will slip back into the unconscious. If the dream message is important it will come again. Learning to listen to the language of dreams can help us release what is blocked and help to restore balance as well as offer us exits and third positions for traps and dilemmas.

When you have written your dream down, ponder on its general shape, on its images and motifs. Note the feeling of the dream. Notice the time and place in the dream – current time or past time, your age if you are represented in the dream. Note the time of day and consider its meaning. Morning or afternoon, evening or night.

The most important question when pondering on your dream is: **what does this mean to me?** If you appear as age seventeen in your dream and you are in fact thirty-five, what aspect of your seventeen-year-old self is being represented in the dream? What was this time about for you? What does it remind you of? Does the figure seventeen hold any other significance? What does the memory or meaning of being seventeen mean for your life as it is now? Why are you now having to think back to when you were seventeen?

It is helpful in the amplification of your dream if this approach is followed for all other aspects, symbols or images. If there is a house in your dream, what kind of house is it – colour, shape, size? Is it familiar? What country or place does it remind you of? Where are you, the dreamer, in relation to the house?

FREDA dreamed a great deal and was interested in her dreams, and so she began reading about them, and about myths and fairy tales. A number of animal motifs appeared in her dreams, and she became especially fond of a fawn and a frog. She saw that these creatures had been banished to the darkness of her unconscious because they represented aspects of herself that she presumed were negative. She used the words: 'jelly-like, slobs, pathetic, losers'. Because the dream had drawn her attention to them she looked at them afresh. She realised she liked their simplicity, their instinctive nature: they

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knew how to live naturally. As she got to know and welcome the energy and life in these dream animals she started to move her own body differently. We went to dancing class and started writing in her journals. The urge to binge because of emptiness lessened. She started feeling more content and started enjoying the countryside.

Another important aspect of amplifying your dream is to consider the order of events in the dream. There seems to be no ordinary linear time in dreaming, and death in dreams does not necessarily mean mortal death. Death in a dream is a symbolic death and may be interpreted on many different levels – as an ending, a transformation, a dying off, a falling away, as the death of a particular aspect of your life.

Look closely at the order of the events in your dream and see if you can understand some of the links between sequences, events or images. For example: 'In the dream an old lady rides a bicycle down a steep hill. At the bottom of the hill she is stopped abruptly by a small girl bearing a bunch of flowers. She wants to keep going, to use her downward speed to help her gain impetus to ride up the hill, but has to accept the flowers from the child first. She then begins her difficult ascent up the hill, but as she is going more slowly she sees the view of the fields more closely.' The order of the dream indicates that the old woman (an aspect of the dreamer) has to curb her irritation to stay with the child, and in doing so the dream shows how she gets another view of the fields as she travels on her way. The event of the child and the flowers precedes the climb and has to be encountered before the nature of the climb can be revealed.

Sometimes dreams come in series, and the series may occur all in one night. In these cases the series forms one whole dream which is trying to communicate a theme, a development and an idea over a number of dreams. This is one way in which the psyche alerts us to an unconscious process that is ready to be made conscious.

Dreams may produce images which are frightening, startling or powerful and which bear no resemblance to anything we know rationally. When this occurs, what is hidden in the image that is of importance to us wants very much to be noticed and understood before incorporation into our everyday living. Draw, paint or act out the nature of your dream figure, and share it with another person if you feel the dream content to be too disturbing or worrying. Although the figure in the dream may represent something you don't like, once explored and made conscious the figure and what it represents is never so frightening or overwhelming.

AMANDA (see p. 46) had two significant dreams during her depression that drew attention to her suicidal impulses. In one dream she is swallowing pills with people around her encouraging her to continue. There is a feeling of ease in the dreams of just continuing taking the pills and quietly fading away into

oblivion. The dream had such a powerful feeling that on waking Amanda felt terrified that it would be easy to go along with the dream. She remembers speaking to her therapist on the telephone who indicated she was in fact in control of whether she took her own life or not and the important thing was that she could be in charge of the choice. She was not being told what she should or should not do, although she writes that she remembers the therapist suggesting that she took all the pills she had stored in her cupboard into a pharmacy for disposal!

The other dream was of someone trying to smother her and was recurrent. She explored it through role-play in her therapeutic session with the therapist approaching her with a pillow and Amanda working at stimulating the muscles of her arm to push the pillow away. She was being encouraged to develop her own assertive resources and to say 'no' to destructive forces. For a while the dreams left her. Then about a year later the dream returned; she still could not resist or shout out except in her head and she realised that she was not frightened but very very angry. She also knew that she was stronger, that the dream in itself couldn't harm her. Amanda had been able, through her therapy and its work with her dreams, to acknowledge her angry feelings that were so deeply buried. In doing so she gained a sense of freedom from the destructive anger that was turned against herself, that could have led to her killing herself.

If you become interested in your dreams and in knowing more about how to work with them in your life, you may be helped by reading any of the selected books listed in the Further Reading section.

## Assertion and aggression

Changing always ignites all our traps, dilemmas and snags as well as our more unstable states! Be alert to this! See it as a chance to keep in there, to keep noticing, revising and trying something new. We may need to be more assertive about our ideas, thoughts, needs, wants and desires. It's easy to confuse assertion with aggression and thus hold back from expressing ourselves, and this confusion can get in our way. You may find, having got this far, that it is difficult for you to be assertive, and express your needs directly. You may have noticed your 'fear of hurting others trap', believing that saying just what you feel, simply, will be hurtful; or you may fear being seen as aggressive, as too 'pushy'. Keep on noticing the old beliefs. Keep trying to refine the way you express yourself with others so that you *are* clear and straightforward in what you ask for or how you express feeling. If we avoid being assertive out of unrevised beliefs, others may well ignore or take us for granted, because *they* actually do not know what we think or feel.

For all of us, being assertive is perfectly acceptable. People who do not respect us as human beings must either be stood up to or left out of our life.

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Learning the art of assertion may be an important part of your change. Once you realise this is a skill you lack and which you need to learn, there are many places where this can be achieved and practised. Joining a group or class to practise the art of assertion can really help to consolidate the changes you may wish to make. Having a living person or group to whom one practises saying 'no', or saying what one thinks, or with whom one tests out the new-found ideas or strengths, is a potent and lasting way of keeping hold of change.