

# Psychological Strategies

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Column Editors**

This column focuses on counseling, clinical issues, and psychotherapy, including innovative strategies for aiding clients. Potential contributors are encouraged to submit manuscripts to Michael Maniacci, 444 N. Michigan Ave., Ste. 2950, Chicago, IL 60611-3902.

## **Metaphoric Expressions of Lifestyle: Exploring and Transforming Client-Generated Metaphors**

**Richard R. Kopp**

### **Interpreting Lifestyle Using Therapist-Generated Metaphors**

Shulman and Mosak (1988) noted that Adlerian therapists often describe lifestyles using a word or phrase. For example, these authors suggested that a person whose image of self, image of life, and conclusions about behavior could be summarized as "I am small and weak; life is dangerous; therefore, others must protect me" might be described as having the lifestyle of a "weak baby." Similarly, someone with the lifestyle convictions that "I am the rightful heir to my father's power; life is here to appreciate me and to serve me; therefore, I have to be the center of attention" might be referred to as having the lifestyle of a "crown prince" (Shulman & Mosak, 1988). In these examples "weak baby" and "crown prince" are metaphors that are employed because they capture the essence or unity of the lifestyle. Metaphors are ideally suited to the task of describing one's lifestyle because lifestyle is a holistic pattern of living (Mosak, 1977) and because metaphors are word-pictures that convey holistic, nonlinear meanings.

## **Lifestyle Expressed Through Client-Generated Metaphors**

Therapists can also grasp a client's lifestyle by tuning in to the client's metaphoric language. *Client-generated* metaphors can be grouped into six categories: metaphors that represent one's image of self, those that represent one's image of others, those that represent one's image of situations (life), and those that represent one's understanding of the relationships between self and self, self and others, and self and situations (life; Kopp, 1995). Each of the metaphors described in Table 1 expresses the person's lifestyle movement and his or her view of self, an other, or a situation (life) or his or her view of self in relation to himself or herself, a relationship with another, or a particular situation.

## **A Therapeutic Strategy for Working with Client-Generated Metaphors and Lifestyle**

Identifying client-generated metaphors offers the therapist an opportunity to help the client explore the meaning of the metaphors and to invite the client to change those metaphors (Kopp, 1995; Kopp & Craw, 1998). This procedure allows clients to access their creative imagination to explore new possibilities in the domain of metaphoric imagery and then to relate this metaphoric problem-solving to the problem situation represented in their original metaphors (see Appendix A).

### **Case Example**

TJ, a 29-year-old woman, sought individual therapy to help her deal with symptoms of depression. She reported feeling sad and anxious, having difficulty sleeping, feeling lonely, and having difficulty engaging in and maintaining social and romantic relationships.

*Step 1: Noticing metaphors.* TJ discussed her feeling of depression in an early therapy session, stating that she was doing a great deal of school work but feeling like she wasn't doing enough. She said, "I feel like I'm barely treading water." The therapist chose to explore this metaphor because it was a vivid representation of TJ's experience and because TJ used it several times to describe her experience and feelings in different situations. The repeated use of a metaphor suggests that it is likely to reflect a lifestyle pattern.

**Table 1**  
Categories of Client-Generated Metaphors

Category	Example
Self	"I'm a teakettle about to explode!"
Other	"My husband's a locomotive, barging in the house."
Situation	"My life is a barren wasteland."
Relationship of self to self	"I keep beating myself up."
Relationship of self to an other	"Dealing with him, I'm trying to tame a wild lion."
Relationship of self to a situation	"I'm slowly sinking in quicksand."

*Note:* Adapted from Kopp, 1995, p. 104.

*Step 2: Describing the metaphoric image.* The therapist asked TJ, "When you say that you are barely treading water, what image comes to mind?" TJ replied, "Well, [pause] it's like I'm out in the middle of the ocean, treading water."

*Step 3: Exploring the metaphor as a sensory image.*

Therapist: While you're out in the middle of the ocean, treading water, what else do you see?

TJ: Well, there's a lot of water all around me, and I'm trying to swim in it, but I feel like I'm barely moving. The water is cold, and I think it's pretty deep.

Therapist: What else is going on in the image?

TJ: Well, there's just a lot of water. It's a really big ocean. And there's an island, but it's pretty far away.

Therapist: What led up to this? If this were a scene in a movie, what would the scene before it look like?

TJ: I was on a boat. A really big boat, a brown one.

Therapist: What was happening on the boat?

TJ: My family was there. I'm not sure what they were doing, but I wanted to get off. I'm not sure if the rest of my family even noticed that I was gone, that I wasn't on the boat anymore.

*Step 4: Describing feelings associated with the metaphor.*

Therapist: So you are in the ocean treading water. What are you feeling?

TJ: I'm scared to be trying to stay afloat because the ocean is so big and so deep, but I am happy that I am not on the boat anymore.

*Step 5: Transforming the metaphoric image.*

Therapist: If you could change your image in any way, how would you change it?

TJ: Well, . . . I wouldn't be staying still in the water, treading water. I guess I would be on the island.

Therapist: How would you get there?

TJ: I would swim.

Therapist: What would your image look like then?

TJ: I would be lying on the sand on the island, and it would be warm and sunny . . . and I would be drying off and getting warm. I wouldn't be so tired anymore.

*Step 6: Making connections between the metaphor and the original problem situation.*

Therapist: What connections do you see between your image of treading water and your original problem regarding your school situation?

TJ: [smiles and laughs; pauses] Well, I can definitely see some connections. Sometimes I feel like I'm working hard but going nowhere in school, just like I was working hard but going nowhere treading water.

Therapist: What about your "before" image of being on the boat and jumping into the water? Do you see any parallels there?

TJ: Well, yeah, 'cause I was with my family. I wanted to get out of that house so badly, just like I wanted to jump off the boat. I didn't feel like they really wanted me there.

Therapist: And about their not noticing your jump . . . ?

TJ: Well, I felt like they never noticed me while I was there, they never paid attention to me. So why would they notice me when I'm gone? They still hardly ever talk to me, except for one of my brothers who I talk to on the phone sometimes.

*Step 7: Relating the changed metaphoric image to the current situation.*

Therapist: And what about your changed image? How might the way you changed the image apply to your problems with your school work?

TJ: Well, I guess the biggest thing is that I have to try to stop wasting my energy on being afraid and on beating myself up and to work on moving toward or "swimming" toward my goal, which is a four-year college. I guess I'm just so afraid that my grades won't be good enough for me to get in.

Therapist: Could it be that treading water is a way of protecting yourself because it keeps you from getting closer to confronting your fear that you will be rejected from a four-year college?

TJ: Yeah.

Therapist: How might you help yourself move toward the island?

TJ: I've just got to stop being so frightened and look at my goals rather than trying to avoid thinking about them.

Therapist: From what you have told me, it sounds like you have a really good chance of getting into a lot of the schools that you are applying to.

TJ: Yeah, thanks. As long as I don't stop swimming.

*Results of the intervention.* TJ appeared to develop insight in the connections she made between her image and the original situation, and she was able to use her changed metaphor to help her focus on her goal of attending a four-year college. TJ was less self-critical in subsequent therapy sessions, and she reported being more productive in her academic work. She also began taking tours of universities that she has been thinking of applying to, and she met with a member of the admissions committee at a major university to find out more about its admission process.

TJ became more willing to explore the childhood origins of her fears and self-critical thoughts. The therapist reported that the biggest change was her discussions of her childhood experiences and family dynamics, subjects she had avoided in earlier sessions. For example, she began to explore her feelings about being alternately criticized and ignored by her parents, and she looked at how those feelings may have influenced her lifestyle regarding meeting the tasks of work, love, and friendship.

## Discussion

The metaphor, "I'm barely treading water," is a *self-situation* metaphor because the self is represented in the metaphor as the one treading water, the situation (school work) is represented in the metaphor by the water, and her feeling of working on her school work without making progress is symbolized by the activity of barely treading water. The metaphor expresses TJ's subjective experience, meaning, and movement of self in relation to her school workload. Vaihinger (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) noted that "all cognition is the apperception of one thing through another. In understanding we are always dealing with analogy" (p. 79). Vaihinger's *as if* philosophy is expressed in metaphoric language and metaphoric thinking. For example, TJ creates the metaphoric image of barely treading water to symbolize and communicate the apperceptive meaning of her school workload. Although TJ is not literally treading water, her use of this metaphor conveys a clear understanding of her sense of her self within the situation, of her frustration with exerting energy but not making observable progress.

As TJ expands and develops her metaphor in Step 3, she draws on her creative imagination to create a story—a kind of waking dream—that starts

with and elaborates her metaphor of treading water. In Step 3 she is also invited to create a history to the current metaphoric imagery. TJ introduced the image of a "really big boat" and placed her family on it. By creating this history of what preceded her treading water, TJ linked the original metaphor to an earlier decision to jump overboard and escape her family. This addition reframed the meaning of being in the ocean and symbolized that her current experience in college was related to an earlier decision to be independent from her family. This reframing eventually led to a new conscious perspective, as expressed in Step 4: Although TJ was still "scared to be trying to stay afloat because the ocean is so big and deep," she had become aware that she was "happy that I am not on the boat anymore."

In Step 5 the therapist invited TJ to change the metaphoric image, thereby introducing the opportunity to create new possibilities for movement and problem-solving in the domain of the metaphoric imagery. TJ said that she would no longer be treading water, and then added, "I guess I would be on the island." The therapist wisely asked, "How would you get there?" encouraging TJ to create a visual image of how she might get from her current (metaphorically represented) situation of treading water to being on the island. In this manner, the therapist helped TJ create a solution to her problem *in the domain of metaphoric imagery* using her own imagination. Later in the interview protocol (Step 7), TJ was invited to use the metaphoric solution as a guide to exploring what she might do in the actual situation that was represented by the original metaphor.

In Step 6 the therapist encouraged TJ to gain deeper insight into the problem situation by drawing parallels between their imaginative exploration and elaboration of the metaphor on the one hand and her current situation on the other. TJ's images of being on the boat with her family and then deciding to jump off the boat become metaphors for her actual experiences with her family. Note that the images *become* metaphors as TJ creates connections between the images and her current life situation. For example, the image of jumping off the boat is not a metaphor in and of itself, but the image becomes a metaphor when TJ creates a resemblance between it and her decision to get out of the house. Thus, the client created a metaphoric meaning with each connection she described between the imagery she generated and aspects of her situation in life.

In Step 7 TJ created the image of swimming as an alternative movement to treading water. She also appeared to have developed insight regarding the relationship between treading water and her self-criticism, and she asserted that swimming represented movement toward her goal of attending a four-year college.

## Conclusion

Metaphors reflect a creative expression of one's lifestyle in relation to a particular problem, situation, or interpersonal relationship. Helping clients to explore and transform their metaphors can increase awareness of their lifestyle movements in relation to current problems. Further, encouraging clients to change their metaphoric imagery can lead to a new and more constructive solution to these problems.

## **Appendix A: Exploring and Transforming Client-Generated Metaphors: Interview Protocol (Short Form)**

*Step 1.* Notice metaphors!

*Step 2.* "When you say [the metaphor], what image/picture comes to mind?" or "What image/picture do you see in your mind's eye?" or "What does [the metaphor] look like?"

*Step 3.* Explore the metaphor *as a sensory image*:

(1) setting (e.g., "What else do you see?" or "Describe the scene or an aspect of the scene [associated with the metaphoric image].")

(2) action/interaction (e.g., "What else is going on in [the metaphoric image]?" or "What are the other people [in the metaphoric image] saying/thinking/doing?")

(3) time (e.g., "What led up to this?" or "What was happening [just] before [the situation in the metaphor]?")

*Step 4.* "What's it like to be [the metaphoric image]?" or "What's your experience of [the metaphoric image]?" or "What are you feeling as you [the metaphoric image]?"

*Step 5.* "If you could change the image in any way, how would you change it?"

*Step 6.* "What connections (parallels) do you see between your image of [the metaphoric image] and [the original situation]?"

*Step 7.* "How might the way you changed the image apply to your current situation?"

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