What is a metaphor?
Metaphors are an inherent part of our daily life, both in our waking and sleeping states. We use them consciously to convey a feeling, description or situation quickly and accurately. Unconsciously, during sleep, our dreams string together metaphors and symbols, some of which are easily attributable and others so obscure that they remain a mystery.

Common metaphors include the following:
- A mountain round my neck.
- Flat as a pancake.
- I’m freezing.
- I’m boiling.
- Throw some light on ...

Less obvious metaphors are these:
- What’s your view?
- I’m under pressure.
- I can’t get through to you.

Use of metaphor as an aid in therapy and healing
Metaphor has played a significant part in therapy and self-development for many years, contributing to Jungian therapy, Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), transpersonal psychology, psycho synthesis and, for thousands of years, healing rituals and techniques.

Development of Metaphor and Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language
In recent years a new technique has been developed by therapists Penny Tompkins and James Lawley of the Developing Company, based on groundbreaking work initiated by trauma therapist David Grove two decades ago. Known as Symbolic Modelling, the process focuses on honouring and exploring a client’s own metaphor using language, which will have the least possible influence on the client’s content.

Use of metaphor in coaching
The technique fits smoothly into a coaching session and is particularly effective when a client seems stuck, or trapped in repeating behaviour patterns. By the use of metaphor, issues are tackled at a far deeper level than the conscious mind can reach, and changes in behaviour start immediately. Benefits can include increased confidence, reduced stress and depression and more clarity on the client’s direction in life. The process is safe, easy to learn and a joy to experience. Being 100 per cent client led, it is non-invasive and can be performed safely by relatively inexperienced practitioners.

A common description of coaching is “holding up a mirror”, where the coach enables the client to see themselves and their lives in a new perspective. This is often achieved by use of open questioning, clarifying and mirroring techniques.

In a Symbolic Modelling session, the client will describe their issue as a metaphor. The practitioner then repeats the metaphor back to the client using the client’s exact words, and asks a question of the metaphor, thus enabling the client to move forward as the metaphor evolves. This is the basis of Symbolic Modelling using Clean Language.

The structure of a session
As the client describes the metaphor, it changes: new metaphors appear and are explored. Frequently the client will describe something restricting or unpleasant in the metaphor, and will be able to see a different form or place they can move to which is far more pleasant. They may move directly to this place and stay there, in which case the deep-seated problem is resolved; or they may find it impossible to stay in the good metaphor, and be stuck back into the bad. When the coach keeps the client focused on the metaphor, a device will often appear to enable them to make the transition.

For example, the client may see themselves as seated on a horse on a merry-go-round, but the structure is not able to start moving. Eventually a key appears in the client’s metaphorical landscape, then a hand which is able to turn it. The merry-go-round starts to turn and the client can change.

The benefits are immediate. The results
- The benefits can include increased confidence, reduced stress or depression and more clarity on the client’s direction in life. The process is safe, easy to learn and a joy to experience. Being 100 per cent client led, it is non-invasive and can be performed safely by relatively inexperienced practitioners.

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The results
The benefits are immediate. The client will start to feel different and to behave in new ways at once. The clarity attained is extraordinary and changes take place at the deepest level.

The future
Working with metaphor can bring about extraordinary change at soul level. The techniques, which Penny Tompkins and James Lawley have developed, and continue to refine, have taken the practitioner to a new level in terms of personal change, performance and physical health.

References
1. Penny Tompkins and James Lawley’s works are available through their website www.cleanlanguage.co.uk
4. Brandon Bays. 4 http://www.thejourney.com

Carol Wilson is managing director of Results Coaching Systems Europe, a keynote speaker, has appeared on television and radio, and writes articles about coaching. She coaches and trains individuals, executives and teams, and specializes in coaching live in front of an audience. Carol is honorary vice-president of the Association for Coaching.

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Metaphor and symbolic modelling for coaches

The subconscious mind uses visions and symbols to communicate with the conscious mind

The researchers Meredith Sabini and Valerie Hone Mafliff have followed the dreams of cancer patients and observed how closely their dreams follow the course of their illness.

Brandon Bays’s “The Journey” reports extraordinary results in healing patients by metaphorically tracking what is happening in their bodies.

Traditionally, working with metaphor involves the practitioner providing the symbols or helping to interpret the client’s own representations. Symbolic Modelling enables clients to explore their own metaphors without influence or distruption from the therapist.

How Symbolic Modelling works

The practitioner facilitates the client in identifying the client’s own metaphors by using Clean Language to avoid contaminating the metaphors with the practitioner’s own vision. For instance, a client might say:

- My fear is like green bile: it’s everywhere – on the walls, floors, ceiling.
- An unclear question would be:
- Can you see a door you could go through to get out?

Here, the therapist is offering something from their own metaphorical landscape, which may not correspond to the client’s.

The trauma that is holding them back may be too unsettling for the conscious mind to face. Symbolic Modelling is effective because the metaphors appearing in patients’ dreams.

More recently, many therapists are exploring techniques for a lifetime can subside in one session when they are studied as a methodology that could be taught to and practised by others. They organised David’s original questions into a set of 12 which are reproduced in Figure 1.

The technique works exceptionally well in removing blocks and breaking down repeating behaviour patterns.

Unique elements of Metaphor and Symbolic Modelling

Previous forms of metaphor therapy, such as those developed by Jung, sometimes stop short of resolving an issue because the client is asked to interpret the metaphor. The trauma that is holding them back may be too unsettling for the conscious mind to face. Symbolic Modelling is effective because the client can develop their own metaphor, of its own accord to the point where it is resolved.

The use of Clean Language questions honours and reinforces the client’s own metaphorical landscape.

The whole of the client’s inner landscape is explored, including the position of the symbols in relation to the client. Sounds, signals and the body language of the client are taken into account. As the client focuses on the metaphor, it evolves, bringing about corresponding changes in the day-to-day life of the client.

The first metaphor to appear may relate to a block or repeating behaviour with which the client is struggling. As it is explored, new metaphors appear and each is explored in turn. As in coaching, a key starting question is “What would you like to have happen?”, shifting the focus towards a positive outcome.

Why it works

The subconscious mind does not have language: it communicates with the conscious mind through visions and symbols, and during sleep in dreams. Focusing on a metaphor enables the client to communicate directly with their subconscious.

The repeating behaviour patterns that hold us back are often formed very early on in life – even during time in the womb or during birth itself. Behaviours are formed as a defence, and can persist for many years after the original threat has evaporated.

During the process of Symbolic Modelling, the client does not have to identify the trauma in order to see it and move on. Fear and anxiety that have been carried for a lifetime can subside in one session when they are studied as metaphors.

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