THERAPY TODAY

" **"She's my wife, not my counsellor!"** " **Page 33**

Who are THE MILLENNIALS?
(And why are they flocking to therapy?)

Post-cult counselling // Selfies, citizens and social justice
Pushing the boundaries with schema therapy // **Psychosynthesis: the art of re-creation**

Mr Freeze & the lion

Catherine Ann Lombard describes how psychosynthesis works to release a client's potential

Rudy arrived reluctantly for his first counselling appointment. His colleague at work had been seeing me for therapy and had insisted Rudy do likewise - to the point of taking hold of Rudy's mobile phone and making the appointment for him. Rudy, aged 31, had been feeling stuck, both in his bioengineering research and in his personal relationships. For the past six months he had been struggling with a particular experiment that he 'couldn't seem to make happen'. In addition, he had broken up with his girlfriend 16 months previously, but felt unable to start dating again.

During our first meeting, he admitted: 'I feel like [the relationship] never ended or [that it] ended unsatisfactorily because I couldn't fix it... Since grammar school, I've always had goals and I always worked towards them. But, when my girlfriend left, I felt lost. Nothing seemed to work any more. I lost interest in my life.'

Rudy appeared to be stymied both professionally and personally, to the point of needing someone to call me for help on his behalf. His creativity appeared to be blocked, leaving him feeling lost, lonely and depressed.

Therapy as a creative process

Creativity can have many positive outcomes for health and wellbeing.[1] Surprisingly, notions of creativity are, nevertheless, not widely found in the counselling literature. However, research has shown parallels between creative training processes and counselling methods.[2-4] Similarly, studies have shown that both creative training and counselling enhance participants' personal growth, enjoyment and self-confidence, resulting in improvements in functioning in relationships, communication, problem-solving and capacity for divergent thinking and feeling.[5,6]

Divergent thinking is a central feature of creativity. Divergent thinking tends to be tentative, exploratory and oriented to multiple possibilities. It includes the ability to hold contradictory ideas simultaneously in one's mind while incorporating and modifying new ones. In fact, for many counselling clients, learning and practising divergent thinking and feeling can be their first step toward positive growth and change.[7]

In line with this assumption, Milenković has stated that 'psychotherapy is a scientific discipline but also an art of re-creation for people, their personality and behavior... implying new attitudes towards oneself, others, and the future, that involves awakening the creativity in the client'.[8] Rogers also argued that 'the mainspring of creativity appears to be the same tendency as the creative force in psychotherapy'.[9] As such, the counsellor and client can be seen as co-producers of ideas and solutions that are both novel and useful, in that they create a new way of being for the client that is more satisfying, empowering and, ultimately, creative.

My aim in this article is to show how the subpersonality model in psychosynthesis provides a framework and therapeutic approach to help clients unblock and release energies that allow them to rebuild their personal identities and become actively creative in their daily lives.

Psychosynthesis explained

Psychosynthesis is an integrative, transpersonal psychology that provides a universal framework for incorporating one's body, feelings, attitudes and behaviour into a harmonious, synthesised whole that includes all the human dimensions - physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Psychosynthesis differs from psychoanalysis in that it emphasises personal and spiritual synthesis, not analysis.[10,11] The subpersonality model is one of the fundamental theories of psychosynthesis therapy.

Psychosynthesis assumes that we all have multiple subpersonalities that help us to function in the world, mostly without much reflection or conscious choice - roles such as ▶

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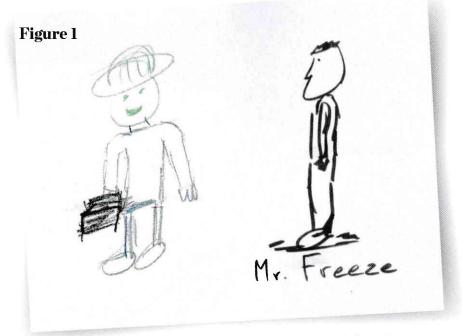
mother, father, teacher and leader. Often these subpersonalities are polar: for example, we might be carefree and spontaneous in one situation and frozen in another. The aim of psychosynthesis is to enable clients to work towards wholeness, to synthesise or harmonise these subpersonalities into a unifying centre of authenticity.

Underpinning the subpersonality model is the notion that a higher quality - truth, strength or courage, for example - lies at the core of each subpersonality, no matter what its external manifestation might be. These higher qualities are considered to be universal and timeless. However, they can be degraded or distorted when expressed through a subpersonality. The challenge for the individual is not to repress or eliminate the subpersonality's behaviour but to recover its higher quality, so they can express that gift in a more positive and holistic way.

Psychosynthesis techniques include guided visualisation, daily self-reflection, role playing, drawing and dream work. One technique specific to psychosynthesis is the self-identification exercise, also referred to as the disidentification exercise or the body-feeling-mind meditation. The aim of the self-identification exercise is to help clients systematically bring awareness and affirmation to the physical, emotional and mental aspects of their personality, and then guide them to disidentify from each aspect. For example, during the 10-minute meditation, which is led by the therapist, clients are asked to first acknowledge that they have a body. Then they are asked to acknowledge that they are not their body - that they are, in fact, much more than this single component of themselves.

Through disidentification, the individual learns to become the observer and director of all their subpersonalities so they can function in a harmonious and balanced way. The process follows five stages: recognition, acceptance, co-ordination, integration and, finally, synthesis of one's numerous subpersonalities.

Recognition occurs when, along with the therapist, the client assesses what subpersonalities might be playing a dominant role in his or her presenting issue(s). These subpersonalities are revealed through the different roles clients play in different situations with different people (including the therapist). Once the subpersonality is recognised, the next step is to give it a

Figure 1

Mr Fix-It (left) and Mr Freeze

name - for example, The Rebel or The Joker. Humour is used during this stage to facilitate disidentification and allow the client to engage more playfully with the subpersonality. Having named the subpersonality, the client then creates its character sketch, including a drawing of it.

The next step is acceptance of the named subpersonality. The client is asked to observe what triggers each subpersonality's appearance and to watch and allow that subpersonality to simply exist. This exercise helps to strengthen the client's ability to become aware of and observe the subpersonality without harsh judgement.

Co-ordination is a complementary stage to acceptance, where the client learns what the subpersonality wants and needs in order to ultimately find acceptable ways in which these desires can be fulfilled. First, the client must identify how the needs of a subpersonality are

typically fulfilled. Then they can try to imagine how they might fulfil their subpersonality's needs in a new, objective and creative way, in order to transform inner conflicts.

At this stage, the client can be invited to explore their childhood histories more deeply in order to uncover the aetiology of their subpersonalities. This allows them to more easily observe and disidentify from the subpersonality and decide how to meet its needs. However, this step is not mandatory and depends entirely on a client's psychological maturity and what he or she thinks would be helpful.

The final stages of the subpersonality process - integration and synthesis - are lifelong endeavours. While co-ordination deals with the development and understanding of specific subpersonalities, integration is concerned with the relationship between subpersonalities, as well as each one's activity

'The next step is to give the subpersonality a name... Humour is used... to allow the client to engage more playfully with it'

within the personality as a whole. Synthesis involves the culmination of individual growth that allows for balance and harmony of the entire being. As a result of synthesis, the life of the individual and their interactions with others become 'increasingly characterized by a sense of responsibility, caring, co-operation, altruistic love and transpersonal objectives'.[12]

To initiate these final stages, the client is presented with an opportunity for their subpersonalities to interact. Numerous techniques are used to allow for such interactions, including guided visualisation, role play, imaginary meetings, and/or letter writing from the observer to the subpersonality (and vice versa). Throughout these interactions, clients are encouraged to strengthen their role as the observer and, consequently, to consciously and more creatively fulfil any conflicting subpersonality needs.

Last, clients are guided to assess, appreciate and come into relationship with the higher quality held by each of their subpersonalities. Once the need of each subpersonality has been met in a new, creative way, clients are asked to reflect on, practise and observe their expression of the subpersonality's higher quality in the world.

Mr Freeze and Mr Fix-It

Returning to Rudy, by the seventh session he had identified a subpersonality he called Mr Freeze (figure 1), who wanted to connect to others but needed space and time to feel safe enough to do so. In unfamiliar company, where he felt unsafe, Mr Freeze would immediately disengage and remain 'frozen' outside the group. For example, at a friend's recent wedding party, Mr Freeze couldn't join in the dancing, even though he danced well and enjoyed it.

During the following sessions, we discovered that Mr Freeze had also helped Rudy 'freeze' any anger he had felt during his lifetime. Unpacking and dealing with Rudy's past and present anger took some time, but by session 18 (Rudy had a lot of frozen anger to work through), we discovered and named another, more dominant subpersonality, called Mr Fix-It. Mr Fix-It wanted everyone to be happy but (like Mr Freeze) he also needed to feel safe. He was happy when he could fix everyone's problems but became angry and frustrated when he couldn't. Whenever conflict arose around an unresolvable problem, Mr Fix-It would become angry. He would then immediately 'fix' this anger by repressing it and, in order to feel safe, disconnect from the person whose problem(s) he could not fix. Rudy was able to recognise this subpersonality in the unexpressed anger he had felt in his relationship with his former girlfriend. For example, in an attempt to 'fix' his relationship with her, he had bought a house and 'fixed it up'.

Rudy's overall feeling of being stuck was a manifestation of his blocked anger. This connection between his unexpressed anger and feelings of inertia became clear after I led him through a visualisation during which I asked him to imagine his anger was an animal. Rudy visualised his anger as a lion, waiting to be let out of a door that Rudy was unable to open, even in his imagination (figure 2). After this visualisation, Rudy remarked: 'It was just a visualisation, so why couldn't I even visualise opening the door? I even felt a bit stupid! What is this? If my imagination can't open the door, how can I myself open the door?'

Two weeks after Rudy first identified Mr Freeze and Mr Fix-It, he was able to identify each subpersonality's higher quality. Mr Freeze's higher quality was a deep and sincere commitment when in a relationship; Mr Fix-It's higher quality was caring for others. As Rudy said, referring to the drawing and the box that Mr Fix-It carried: 'Care is the biggest and strongest tool in Mr Fix-It's toolbox.'

Co-ordination and integration

Once Rudy was able to recognise and accept his two subpersonalities, he was also able to start to observe what triggered their appearance and explore how to meet their needs in new and more creative ways. For example, having accepted his Mr Freeze subpersonality, Rudy was able to consciously choose not to attend large social gatherings that required quick and spontaneous connections with other people, which triggered his feelings of being unsafe. Instead, he went only to smaller, more intimate functions where he could take his time to connect to others. He also began to invite friends to come with him, to provide the social safety net he felt he needed.

The more dominant Mr Fix-It subpersonality was more difficult to integrate as it required that Rudy also recognise, accept and co-ordinate his feelings of anger when Mr Fix-It was unable to manage or repair a social situation. The key to learning to fulfil Mr Fix-It's need for safety in a new way was to learn how to manage and express (that is, 'to fix') his anger other than by disconnecting.

Gradually, Rudy was able to learn to stay connected to other people and to express his anger in a manner that felt safe for him. For example, as Mr Fix-It, he had volunteered to maintain all the laboratory equipment for his department. During one session, we explored together how he was unable to express his anger in an appropriate way with a colleague who had broken a scientific instrument.

The lion is waiting for the door to open

Figure 2

-I do not know how to open the door.

Immediately after the session, when he returned to the lab, the same colleague broke the same instrument again, providing Rudy with a new chance to express his anger with this colleague. Rudy later told me that, despite initially feeling extremely angry, he had been able to have 'a good talk [with his colleague] and things are good between us now'. He also observed: 'I know now that I can still become angry, but realise that it's because I cannot fix the situation or I don't agree with the ideas being talked about. I am learning not to judge my anger, but to judge how I express my anger.'

Activating synthesis

To work towards the ultimate stage of synthesis, I asked Rudy to reflect on, practise and observe the expression of his subpersonalities' higher qualities in the world.

Midway through the counselling sessions, Rudy had started dating again and had enrolled in a new dance class. A month before our sessions ended, he bumped into his ex-girlfriend at a party. He was able to approach and chat with her amiably, without feeling any anger, even though he sensed her aloofness. This encounter allowed Rudy to finally accept the ending of their relationship.

During Rudy's last meeting, he noted: 'I don't feel stuck any more. I thought the reason I was stuck was because I hadn't finished my relationship with my girlfriend. Then I found out I was really angry, and I didn't even want to say that word. Now I can recognise situations where I freeze and can work with them. This frees up space in my mind.

'I also learned that I was always trying to fix things. In some cases, I would do better to... just care about the person. Just to listen or say some comforting words. Now I recognise situations where I am not responsible for fixing things, but I can care.

'Coming into relationship with these subpersonalities and working with them gives me more confidence. I feel more connected to myself, my body and feelings. I really see that, when I am not connected to myself, I lose myself, and then I lose the connections to my work and to my relationships.'

This new connection to his work was evident in the fact that Rudy felt his research was also no longer stuck: 'I can now look at past data and actually see that they work. But I used to think these data were rubbish. They never looked good enough because I didn't trust what I was doing. I felt frustrated

> 'I also learned that I was always trying to fix things. In some cases, I would do better to... just care about the person'

and demotivated. Now I can see publications that I can write using these data. I even presented these data as a keynote speaker at a conference. The data didn't change. I changed!'

Davis asserts that emotional barriers interfere with creative thinking 'by making us "freeze"'.[13] This phenomenon is easily recognisable in Rudy's Mr Freeze subpersonality and the ultimate 'unfreezing' of his scientific data from being 'rubbish' to having actual value.
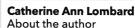
Finally, Rudy returned to the image of the lion waiting for the door to open. 'That was a very strong, striking visualisation. Now I am opening the door - wide open. I learned that, if I feel stuck, there are ways to get myself unstuck.' Thus, Rudy's story shows how, by working with the subpersonality model, creativity can be increased in one's relationships with others and in one's personal and professional life.

The subpersonality process is concerned with creatively bringing separate, often conflicting and opposite inner subpersonalities into relationship and ultimate synthesis. Rudy's story illustrates how the psychosynthesis model enables clients to move away from their old patterns and solutions for managing inner and outer conflicts and to learn, over time, new ways to engage more freely and creatively in the world. ∎

This case study draws on a recently published article: Lombard CA, Müller BCN. Opening the door to creativity: a psychosynthesis approach. Journal of Humanistic Psychology 2018; (58)6: 659-688.

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Catherine Ann Lombard
About the author

Catherine Ann is a psychosynthesis psychologist, practitioner and researcher. She received her MA in psychosynthesis psychology from the Institute of Psychosynthesis, London. She has published numerous scientific articles on psychosynthesis and specialises in multiculturalism, as described in her book *From Culture Shock to Personal Transformation: studying abroad and the search for meaning*. She is currently writing a book about the subpersonality model. You can follow her bimonthly blog at **LoveAndWill.com**