



Deep Release
training counselling

FIVE to integrate **WAYS** artwork in counselling

a mini e-guide for counsellors



deeprelease.org.uk

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ENGAGING THE CLIENT

For many clients, the idea of using artwork, imagery, symbols, or creative activities in counselling can feel a little uncomfortable at first. It is very common for clients to say things like:

“I’m not creative.”

“I can’t draw.”

“I’ll be terrible at this.”



Often these responses are not really about art at all. Creative work can tap into old feelings connected to judgement, perfectionism, shame, or experiences from school and home.

Some clients may remember:

- being criticised or corrected
- feeling compared to others
- pressure to “get things right”
- feeling embarrassed showing their work
- being told creativity was childish or pointless

Even simple activities can sometimes bring up fears of:

- getting it wrong
- being analysed
- looking silly
- revealing too much
- not being “good enough”

Because of this, introducing creative work gently and collaboratively can make a big difference.



CREATIVITY IN THE COUNSELLING ROOM



Keeping it Safe & Accessible

Creative work does not need to be deep, intense, or complicated to feel meaningful. Sometimes the simplest activities open up the most reflection.

It can help to reassure clients that:
there is no right or wrong way to do the activity
artistic ability does not matter
simple sketches, colours, shapes, or words are enough
they can pause, adapt, or stop at any time

For example:

“This isn’t about making good artwork - it’s simply another way of exploring things together.”

Or:

“We can just experiment and see what feels useful for you.”
A relaxed and non-pressured approach often helps clients feel safer to engage creatively over time.

Going at the Client’s Pace

Some clients enjoy creative activities immediately, while others may need time before they feel comfortable enough to try them.



CREATIVITY IN THE COUNSELLING ROOM



It can help to begin with gentler approaches such as:

- picture cards
- choosing colours
- simple symbols
- guided imagery
- very rough sketches
- adding words or labels rather than drawing in detail

There is no need to rush into deeper symbolic work. Often the most important thing is helping the client feel emotionally safe, accepted, and not judged.

Staying Curious Together

Clients can sometimes worry that the counsellor will “analyse” their drawing or assume hidden meanings.

A warm and curious approach can help reduce this fear.

For example:

- “Tell me about this part.”
- “What stands out to you here?”
- “I’m wondering what this feels like for you.”

The focus is not on interpreting the artwork correctly, but on exploring it together at the client’s pace.

Creative work works best when it feels collaborative, flexible, and emotionally safe - not like a test or something the client has to get right.



1. WORKING WITH SYMBOLS

“DRAW YOURSELF AS A PLANT/FLOWER/TREE”

Symbolic exercises allow clients to explore themselves indirectly through metaphor and imagery. Working symbolically can sometimes feel safer, gentler, or less exposing than speaking directly about emotions or experiences.

Drawing oneself as a plant can support exploration of:

- identity
- emotional wellbeing
- relationships
- resilience
- vulnerability
- belonging
- personal growth

This exercise is simple, accessible, and entirely client led. The counsellor does not need specialist knowledge about symbolism or artistic interpretation. The focus is not on analysing the image, but on staying curious about the client's own experience and meaning-making.

The Activity

Invite the client:

“If you were a plant, what kind of plant would you be? Draw yourself in whatever way feels right.”



1. WORKING WITH SYMBOLS

“DRAW YOURSELF AS A PLANT/FLOWER/TREE”

Rather than assigning meaning, the counsellor simply invites reflection.

For example:

- “Tell me about this part here.”
- “I notice you spent time on these roots.”
- “I’m wondering what this area is like for you.”
- “What stands out to you when you look at it?”
- “I’m curious about this part you haven’t mentioned yet.”



The aim is not to “work out” what the image means, but to create space for the client’s own associations, emotions, and reflections. Sometimes clients immediately know what a symbol represents. Sometimes they don’t. Both responses are valid.

A client may say:

- “I’m not sure why I drew that.”
- “I don’t know what it means.”
- “It just felt right.”

There is no need to push for explanation or certainty.

The therapeutic value does not depend on fully understanding every symbol within the artwork.

An important part of this approach is letting go of any attempt to know better than the client!



1. WORKING WITH SYMBOLS

“DRAW YOURSELF AS A PLANT/FLOWER/TREE”

For many clients, this non-interpretive approach feels emotionally safer and less exposing, particularly for those who fear being analysed, struggle with perfectionism, feel anxious about creativity, find direct emotional language difficult or need time before deeper reflection feels possible.



STARTING WITH CURIOSITY

It can help to keep the tone light, collaborative, and invitational . These are the sorts of phrases we have found to be helpful:



“I tried this on a training course recently and wondered if you’d like to give it a try.”

“Sometimes people find it easier to explore things visually rather than only talking - we could experiment with that if you’d like.”

“Some clients find this helps them reflect differently - we can always stop if it doesn’t feel useful.”

“You don’t need to be artistic for this. Stick figures absolutely count.”

“We can keep it really simple - even colours, shapes, or a few words are enough.”

“Sometimes creative exercises help us notice things from a slightly different angle.”

2. WORKING WITH PICTURE CARDS

Picture cards can provide a gentle and accessible starting point for reflection, emotional exploration, and conversation within counselling sessions.

Picture cards may support clients to:

- identify emotions
- reflect on relationships
- externalise feelings
- explore internal experiences
- consider different perspectives
- engage creatively when words feel limited

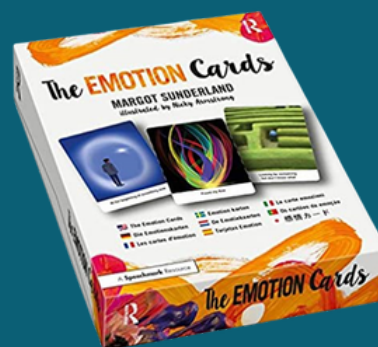
They can be especially helpful for clients who:

- feel “stuck”
- struggle to verbalise emotions
- become overwhelmed by direct questioning
- think visually or imaginatively
- feel anxious in traditional talking therapy

There are many sets of picture cards available online. our favourites include:

- The Heart's Whisper
- Dixit
- Margot Sunderland's Emotions and Relationships cards
- The Hard Feelings cards

You could also create your own using free (Pixabay, Unsplash) or paid images (iStock etc), or cut-outs from magazines.



2. WORKING WITH PICTURE CARDS

Introducing Picture Cards

Introduce the activity gently and collaboratively.

For example:

“Sometimes images can help people reflect on things differently. Would you be open to choosing a picture and seeing what stands out for you?”

Emphasise:

- there are no right or wrong choices
- again, the client does not need to explain everything
- there is no pressure to “understand” the image fully
- they can stop or change direction at any time

Allow clients time to browse slowly and intuitively. The process of choosing can itself be meaningful.

Clients may be invited to:

- choose a card representing how they feel today
- select an image reflecting their current situation
- choose a picture connected to safety, fear, hope, or change
- pick cards representing different parts of themselves
- create a story using several images

Some clients may speak openly about the image, while others respond briefly or uncertainly. Both are valid.



2. WORKING WITH PICTURE CARDS:

Extending the Image

Clients may also respond creatively to the card rather than only speaking about it. ✨

They might:

- sketch a rough version of the image
 - add a title
 - label areas with feelings
 - add speech bubbles or thoughts
 - draw what happens next
 - identify different “parts” within the picture
- ✨ ✨

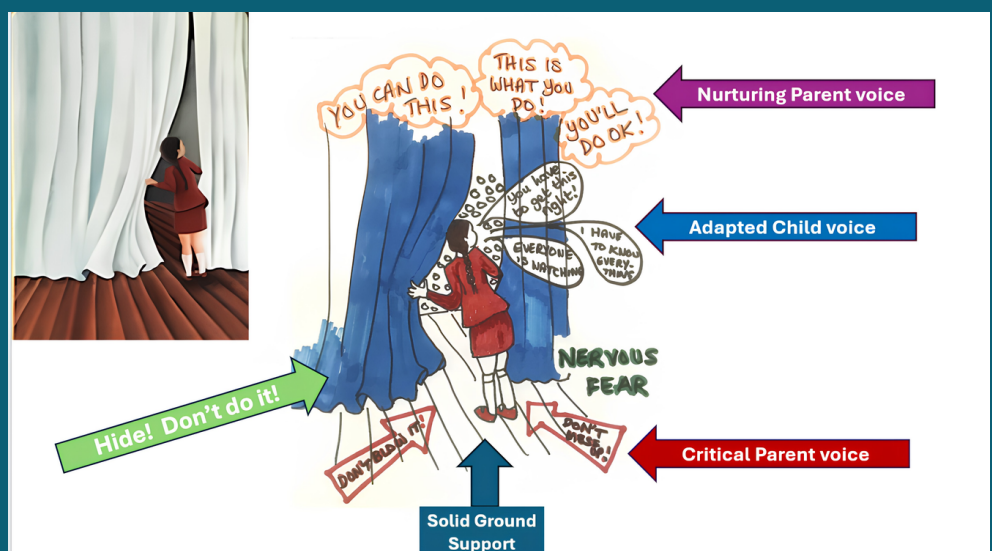
This does not need to be artistic. Simple words, colours, or symbols are enough.

For example:

“You could sketch this image roughly and add any words or feelings that seem to belong with it.”

Or: “If the different parts of this picture could speak, what might they say?”

Speech bubbles can be particularly helpful when exploring different parts of self, emotions, or internal conflict.



3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)

Many counselling approaches now use the language of “parts” to describe the different ways people experience themselves internally. This can include approaches such as Internal Family Systems, ego state work, transactional analysis, compassion-focused therapy, and person-centred theory through the idea of configurations of self.

From a person-centred perspective, configurations of self can be understood as different emotional organisations or aspects of experience that develop in response to relationships, life experiences, and unmet needs. These parts are not viewed as pathological or separate personalities, but as understandable aspects of the self that often develop protectively.

Clients may recognise:

- a critical part
- a frightened part
- a people-pleasing part
- a withdrawn part
- a younger part
- an angry part
- a highly capable part
- a hopeful or nurturing part



3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)

Often these parts developed in response to emotional experiences, relationships, or environments where certain feelings or needs could not be fully expressed safely.

An important aspect of this work is recognising that even difficult, critical, withdrawn, or self-destructive parts usually serve some kind of protective function.

For example:

- a critical part may try to prevent rejection
- a withdrawn part may try to avoid overwhelm
- a perfectionist part may try to create safety or approval
- an angry part may protect vulnerability

The aim is not to remove or “fix” parts of self, but to develop awareness, curiosity, compassion, and understanding towards them.

A Relational Person-Centred Approach to Parts

Mearns and Thorne’s person-centred understanding of configurations of self emphasises the importance of the counsellor being willing to meet each aspect of the client with equal relational acceptance and curiosity.



Mearns, D., & Cooper, M. (2005). Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy. Sage Publications.

3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)

This means resisting the urge to:

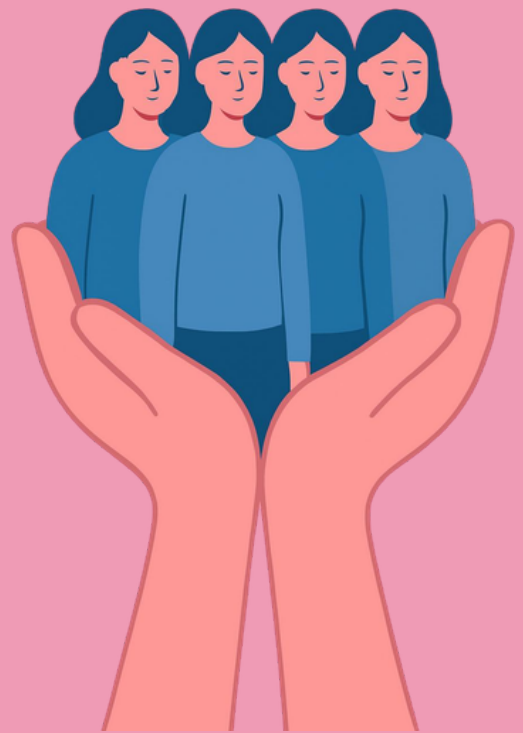
- “take sides”
- favour one part over another
- align only with the more vulnerable or socially acceptable aspects of the client
- treat some parts as problematic or unwanted

For example, it can feel easier to empathise with a frightened or wounded part than with a critical, hostile, defensive, or self-destructive part. However, within a relational person-centred approach, all configurations of self are understood as meaningful attempts to survive, protect, adapt, or cope.

The counsellor therefore holds an attitude of openness towards each part, including those that may initially feel uncomfortable, contradictory, or difficult to understand.

This does not mean approving harmful behaviour, but remaining curious about the emotional function the part may serve.

The counsellor’s role is not to decide which part is the “real” self, nor to force resolution between conflicting aspects of experience. Instead, the therapeutic relationship creates the conditions in which the client can begin to self-organise naturally.



3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)

This process cannot be rushed or controlled. Often it is through the experience of all parts being emotionally welcomed - rather than judged, interpreted, or rejected - that movement and integration begin to occur organically.

Working with Parts through Guided Meditation

One way of exploring parts of self creatively is through guided meditation and imagery work. Rather than talking directly about different aspects of themselves, clients are invited to encounter parts symbolically and reflectively through imagination, image, and emotional experience.

For example, a client may be guided to imagine entering a house and noticing which room they feel drawn towards. Within that room, they may encounter a figure, presence, or aspect of themselves representing a particular configuration of self.

Working symbolically in this way can sometimes feel gentler and less exposing than direct discussion, while still allowing important emotional material to emerge gradually and safely.



3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)

It can help to present guided imagery as an invitation rather than something the client is expected to “do properly.”

For example:

“Would you be open to trying a short guided imagery exercise together?”

Or:

“Sometimes people find it helpful to explore things through imagination or imagery rather than only talking. We can stop at any point if it doesn’t feel right for you.”

Parts of Self Guided Meditation

Just begin by settling where you are... letting your body arrive... noticing your breath, without needing to change it...”

“And when you’re ready... I’d like to invite you to imagine your inner world as a house at dusk...”

“The light is soft... not fully day, not fully night... a time where things can be seen a little differently...”

“You’re standing just outside this house... and in some way... this house represents you...”

“There’s no right kind of house... you don’t need to focus too much on how it looks...”

“When you’re ready... you find a way to enter...” “Inside, there are different rooms... and each room holds a different aspect of you...”

3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)

“You don’t need to explore the whole house... just notice... which room you’re drawn to...” “And as you move toward that room... the focus isn’t so much on the space... but on who... or what... is there...”

“As you come to that room... just gently notice...” “Are you aware of a presence there?” (pause)

“Someone... or something... that represents a part of you...” (pause) “It might be very clear... or just a sense...”

“There might be someone working hard... an angry person cleaning... a frightened boy or girl hiding... a protector standing guard... a performer... a part that feels tired... or something harder to name...”

“Just let that presence be as it is...” “You don’t need to change it... or understand it fully...”

“Just notice...” “What is this part like?” “How does it seem to feel?”

“Even if it could speak...”

“What might it be saying?”

Transition to Drawing: “We’re going to pause the image there... and I invite you to bring that part onto paper... You can include the room if it helps... but the focus is really on the person... or presence... you noticed... Just draw them in whatever way feels right... It doesn’t need to be detailed... just enough to capture something of what you experienced...”

3&4. WORKING WITH PARTS OF SELF (WITH GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE)



Clients then may:

- create speech bubbles or dialogue between parts
- position parts in relation to each other
- give parts names, ages, or roles
- draw different parts of themselves
- use colours or symbols for different emotions
- explore what each part fears, needs, or protects

The counsellor's role is not to interpret the parts, but to remain curious and collaborative.

For example:

- “Tell me about this part.”
- “I’m wondering what this part might need.”
- “What role does this part have?”
- “How does this part try to help?”
- “What happens when these parts meet each other?”

As always, clients do not need to fully understand or explain every part immediately. Meaning may emerge gradually over time.

5. WORKING WITH FAIRY TALES

Fairy tales, myths, and stories can provide powerful symbolic ways of exploring emotional and relational experiences within counselling. Themes such as abandonment, belonging, fear, power, identity, transformation, survival, and hope are often reflected through story and metaphor.

Stories can create enough emotional distance for clients to explore difficult material more safely, while still remaining emotionally connected to the experience.



Clients may identify strongly with:

- particular characters
- repeated themes
- relationships within the story
- feelings of danger, rescue, exclusion, or transformation
- the role they tend to take within stories

Fairy tales can also support exploration of:

- attachment experiences
- internal conflict
- parts of self
- resilience
- unmet emotional needs
- life transitions



5. WORKING WITH FAIRY TALES

A Simple Fairy Tale Exercise

1) Invite the client to think of a fairy tale.

This may be:

- a childhood favourite
- a story they remember vividly
- a character they relate to
- a scene that feels emotionally powerful or uncomfortable

2) Once they have chosen a story, invite them to notice:
“Which scene stands out most strongly for you?”

3) Encourage the client to draw the scene very simply. This does not need to be artistic or detailed - stick figures, shapes, colours, symbols, or rough sketches are completely enough.

The focus is not on creating accurate artwork, but on exploring what feels emotionally important within the story.

Clients may then:

- add speech bubbles
- title the image
- label emotions
- identify with different characters
- describe what is happening in the scene
- reflect on what feels familiar or significant



5. WORKING WITH FAIRY TALES

Gentle questions from the counsellor might include:

“What stands out about this moment?”

“What feelings are present in the scene?”

“Which character do you connect with most?”

“Is there a part of you somewhere in this picture?”

“What do you notice as you look at it now?”

**Stupid
Chair!**

**It's not
my fault!!**



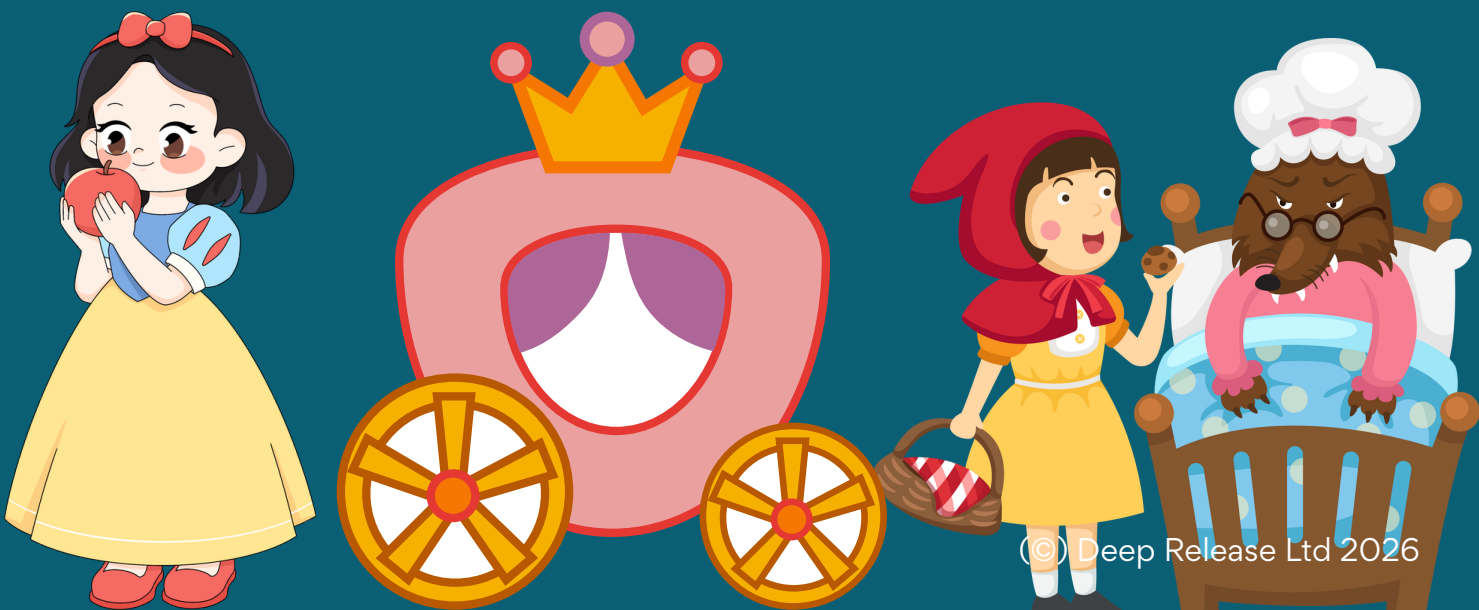
5. WORKING WITH FAIRY TALES

Important Considerations

Fairy tales and symbolic stories can access deep emotional material unexpectedly. Themes within stories may connect strongly with trauma, attachment wounds, grief, fear, shame, or vulnerability. Some clients may find symbolic story work emotionally overwhelming, confusing, too exposing or difficult to separate from lived experience. Others may engage very deeply and meaningfully through metaphor and imagination.

Reflective Questions for Counsellors

- Is this client emotionally resourced enough for symbolic work?
- Could this story connect with unresolved trauma or vulnerability?
- Am I introducing this collaboratively or too quickly?
- Am I remaining curious rather than interpretive?
- Can I stay alongside the client without trying to “decode” the story?
- Does this work feel containing and supportive for this client?



FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether using picture cards, symbolism, parts work, guided imagery, or fairy tales, the counsellor's role remains the same: to stay alongside the client with openness, warmth, and curiosity.

Creative approaches can sometimes access deep emotional material, so it is important to work gently, collaboratively, and with awareness of each client's emotional safety and readiness. Not every activity will suit every client, and that is completely okay.

If you are beginning to use creative approaches in your work, allow yourself permission to experiment slowly and find what feels authentic to you and your way of working. Creative work does not need to be complicated to feel meaningful.

Good supervision is particularly important when working creatively, especially when symbolic work, imagery, or parts work begins to access deeper emotional experiences.

Used thoughtfully, creativity can become a flexible and relational way of supporting, self-awareness, emotional expression, reflection, compassion and connection.



Above all, creative work in counselling is not about getting it “right,” but about offering clients another way to explore and understand themselves within a safe therapeutic relationship.

CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY WITH US

We hope you've enjoyed engaging with this resource and that it has offered something useful to take into your practice.

You might choose to revisit these interventions over time, bring them into supervision, or begin to integrate them into your work with clients in ways that feel natural to you.

If you're interested in exploring this approach more deeply, we offer:
We offer a range of CPD opportunities, including:

- In-depth online and in person training courses exploring many different areas of counselling - theory made easy to understand and apply
- Therapeutic card sets to support creative and relational work
- Books on working creatively
- Training videos
- Tools for working online

For courses visit: deeprelease.org.uk

For resources visit: pact-resources.co.uk

we look forward to staying in touch!

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