



Deep Release
TRAINING & COUNSELLING



HOLDING THE HIDDEN SELF: NESTING DOLLS AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

A MINI E-GUIDE FOR COUNSELLORS



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WHY WORK CREATIVELY?



Many clients don't initially have language for what they are feeling. Experiences such as trauma, grief, shame, dissociation, neurodivergence, childhood experiences and attachment wounds may be experienced somatically, emotionally or symbolically, rather than as clear, coherent narratives.

Creative resources can offer another pathway into these experiences. They invite clients to notice what resonates, rather than searching for the "right" words or feeling pressure to explain themselves. A picture, object, metaphor or simple drawing can often express something that feels difficult to articulate.

Rather than analysing or interpreting what a client creates or chooses, we can remain curious alongside them, trusting that meaning will emerge from their own experience. Sometimes a client recognises themselves in an image or draws a feeling long before they can describe it in words.



WHY WORK CREATIVELY?



Creative approaches can also help clients move beyond purely intellectual or "heady" processing, allowing them to connect more directly with feelings, bodily sensations, memories and unconscious material that may not yet be fully conscious.

Sometimes the image comes first; the words follow.

It can make difficult conversations feel safer

Some clients find direct questions overwhelming or exposing. Being asked to explain feelings, describe painful experiences or give a clear account of events can feel too much, especially early in therapy.

Creative resources offer another way of communicating. By focusing on an image, object or activity, clients often feel less pressure to find the "right" words. This creates space for thoughts and feelings to emerge at a pace that feels safe.



WHY WORK CREATIVELY?



This can be especially helpful for:

- children and young people
- people who have experienced trauma
- clients with alexithymia (difficulty in processing or describing one's emotions) or clients who otherwise struggle to identify emotions
- clients from cultures where emotional disclosure is less familiar
- clients who tend to intellectualise their experiences

Rather than pushing through a client's self-protection, creative approaches work alongside it, offering an invitation to explore rather than a demand to explain.

Pause for Reflection

We all have times when words don't come easily.

Reflect on a moment when you found it difficult to explain something important.

- What would have helped you feel less under pressure?
- How might that influence the way you work with clients?

WHY WORK WITH NESTING DOLLS?

Nesting dolls offer a simple yet powerful metaphor for exploring the complexity of human experience. Their layers invite clients to reflect on many aspects of themselves, including:

- different parts of self
- identity
- vulnerability and protection
- family relationships and roles
- past and present selves
- growth and change over time



WHY WORK WITH NESTING DOLLS?

Unlike abstract discussion, clients can physically open, arrange and move the dolls, often making internal experiences feel more visible and easier to explore. There is no "correct" way to use them; each client's meanings and associations are unique.

At their heart, nesting dolls offer a compassionate reminder that we are all layered. We adapt, protect ourselves and are shaped by our experiences. Yet beneath those many layers is the same person - someone deserving of understanding, compassion and care.

Pause for Reflection

Consider the metaphor of the nesting doll.

- Which 'layers' do your clients most often present to the world?
- Which layers seem more protected?
- How might exploring these with curiosity, rather than trying to remove them, deepen your work together?

THE CHINESE PUZZLE BOXES

Long before Russian nesting dolls appeared, Chinese craftsmen were creating beautifully made nested boxes. These sets of progressively smaller containers fitted one inside another, inviting curiosity as each layer was opened to reveal the next.

According to tradition, the smallest box sometimes contained a single grain of rice. Although of little material value, the grain symbolised the idea that even the smallest things can hold significance. The pleasure was not simply in reaching the end, but in the gradual process of discovery itself.

This image of uncovering one layer at a time has endured across cultures. It reminds us that understanding rarely arrives all at once. Instead, it often unfolds slowly, revealing new insights with patience, curiosity and care.



FROM CHINA TO JAPAN TO RUSSIA

The idea of nested objects travelled across cultures. In Japan, there were sets of nested wooden figures, including representations of the Seven Lucky Gods, which were associated with wisdom, good fortune and longevity. One such figure, Fukuruma (also known as Fukurokuju), is thought to have inspired the next stage in the story.

Around 1890, Russian industrialist and patron of the arts Savva Mamontov brought one of these Japanese figures back to his workshop near Moscow. Inspired by its design, artist Sergey Malyutin sketched a new version, while woodturner Vasily Zvyozdochkin carved the first Russian nesting doll.

Unlike the Japanese figure, the Russian doll portrayed an ordinary peasant mother dressed in traditional clothing, holding a black cockerel. Inside her were seven children—girls and boys - with the smallest figure being a swaddled baby.



THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY

The dolls quickly became known as matryoshka, a name derived from the popular Russian female name Matryona, associated with motherhood, family and fertility.

The dolls made their first real appearance at the 1900 Paris World Exhibition, where they earned a bronze medal. Since then, nesting dolls have spread across the globe, evolving into countless designs and styles. Yet the heart of the nesting doll has remained unchanged. Each layer invites us to look beyond first impressions and discover something more beneath the surface - a simple but powerful metaphor that continues to resonate in therapeutic work today.



BUILDING A COLLECTION OF NESTING DOLLS

There is no single "perfect" set of nesting dolls. Over time, you'll probably find yourself collecting different styles, each offering something unique in the therapy room.

Dolls with the Same Design

In these sets, each doll is a smaller version of the one before.

They work well for exploring:

- layers of self
- identity
- continuity across different stages of life
- the idea that the same person exists beneath many layers



BUILDING A COLLECTION OF NESTING DOLLS

Dolls that Change Through the Layers

Some sets tell a story as each doll is opened. Characters, clothing, expressions or roles change from one layer to the next.

They work well for exploring:

- family roles and relationships
- life stages
- different perspectives
- changing identities
- the client's story



BUILDING A COLLECTION OF NESTING DOLLS

A Few Tips

- It's ok to get less expensive nesting dolls, but you may find they don't fit together so well and can be squeaky! Use petroleum jelly (eg Vaseline) to ease them.
- Don't worry if a doll gets chipped or worn - it often adds to its story and can even become part of the conversation.
- When thinking about which nesting dolls to invest in, remember that animals are wonderful symbols for humans!



- Always check each layer before buying! One of our trainers happily ordered what seemed a lovely set, only to discover that each successive doll had fewer clothes on than the last. Needless to say, those dolls never made it into the therapy room!

WORKING WITH PLAIN NESTING DOLLS: DOWN THROUGH THE LAYERS

Plain nesting dolls offer great flexibility because they arrive without a story of their own.

Rather than responding to painted characters or predefined meanings, clients can decide what each doll represents, allowing the work to remain deeply personal and client-led.

A simple set of plain nesting dolls (widely available online) works well.

Clients can add words, expressions, or drawings - using sticky notes with sticky tack works well - to attach to the different layers.

Their simplicity also makes them easy to adapt for different themes, age groups and therapeutic approaches, while reusable additions such as labels, stickers or emojis allow the dolls to evolve alongside the client's journey.



WORKING WITH PLAIN NESTING DOLLS: DOWN THROUGH THE LAYERS

The intervention

Begin with the 'outer layer' the client shows to the world

Gently explore what may sit beneath

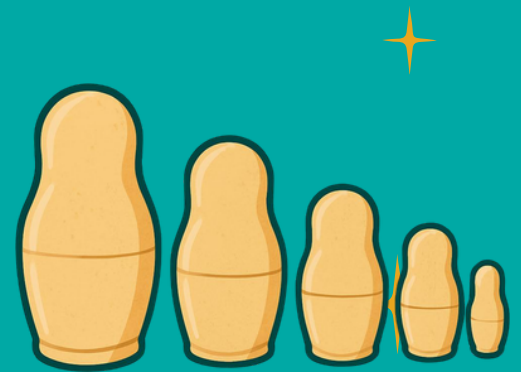
Move at the client's pace, noticing shifts as you invite them to explore the layers

Reflective questions

What does this outer layer do for you?

What might it be protecting?

What feels different as we move further in?



Notes for practice

- Work slowly and with attunement. Inner layers may connect to vulnerability or shame
- The aim is not to "reach the centre," but to support awareness and integration at a pace that feels safe
- Don't use too many nesting dolls for 'Down through the Layers' - five can be fine
- Keep a set to use for this intervention

FURTHER RESOURCES

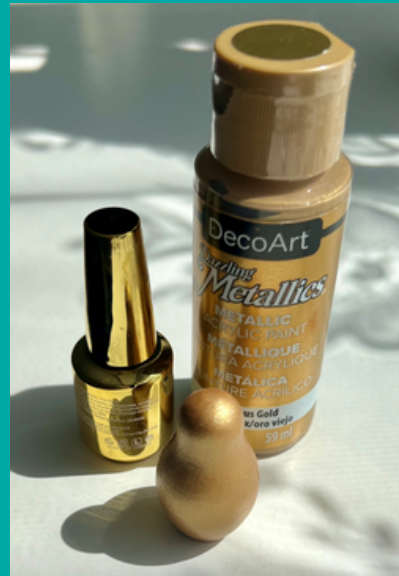


Book



WORKING WITH PLAIN NESTING DOLLS: FROM SMALL TO LARGE

It can be useful to paint a small gold nesting doll to represent the core self. This smallest doll can symbolise the client's sense of self before trauma, life events or difficult relationships began to shape their self-concept.



Take the next-sized doll and invite the client to reflect on what they may have done to cover or protect that smallest one.

Perhaps they decided to become "good", compliant or submissive so as not to invite further hurt or trouble. The next layer might represent working very hard to be successful, to win praise or to be noticed.

As each layer is added, clients often begin to recognise how experiences, relationships and conditions of worth have gradually shaped their self-concept. The exercise offers an opportunity to reflect on which aspects of that conditioning were once protective and necessary, and which no longer reflect who they are today.

WORKING WITH PLAIN NESTING DOLLS: DOWN THROUGH THE LAYERS

You can also get creative and paint your own nesting dolls.

- Chalkboard paint can work well - and the dolls can then be drawn on with chalk or chalk pens ✨
- You could also print emoji faces, either on sticker paper, or on paper and attach with sticky tack ✨
- A 'shame' nesting doll (as shown below) can help counsellors gently meet a part of the client that may have been hidden from others - and sometimes even from themselves. ✨



WORKING WITH ASPECTS OF SELF

Many therapeutic approaches recognise that we are not one fixed, unchanging self. Instead, we experience ourselves as having different aspects, parts or ways of being that emerge in different situations.

Carl Rogers described configurations of self—different ways we experience ourselves depending on our relationships and circumstances. Gestalt therapy reminds us that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, encouraging dialogue between different aspects of ourselves. Transactional Analysis explores the interaction between Parent, Adult and Child ego states, while approaches such as Internal Family Systems (IFS) also work with a rich inner world of parts.



WORKING WITH ASPECTS OF SELF



Although the language differs, these approaches share a common understanding: we all experience different aspects of ourselves, and psychological distress often arises when these aspects come into conflict, become hidden, or feel disconnected from our lived experience.

Nesting dolls provide a simple but powerful way to make these inner experiences visible. Clients can choose dolls that resonate with different aspects of themselves, arrange them in meaningful ways, and begin exploring how these parts relate to one another with curiosity and compassion.



WORKING WITH ASPECTS OF SELF



The Intervention:

This simple exercise invites clients to identify and name different aspects of themselves. It can be completed using nesting dolls, plain doll outlines (as shown opposite), or even simple circles drawn on paper. It works particularly well in online therapy, where clients can annotate digital templates or write directly onto printed outlines.



WORKING WITH ASPECTS OF SELF

Invite the client to begin with the outer doll or largest outline.

"How do people usually experience you?"

As you move through each layer, continue with gentle curiosity:

- I wonder what lies beneath this?
- What might this part protect?
- Who gets to see this part?
- What happens when this part takes over?
- How does this part feel about the others?



WORKING WITH ASPECTS OF SELF



Sometimes, clients naturally begin a dialogue between different aspects.

Fearful: *"You always get us into trouble."*

Ashamed: *"It's all my fault."*

These conversations can reveal long-standing patterns, internal conflicts and protective strategies.

Finally, you might invite gentle reflection:

"Is there another aspect of you that isn't represented here?"

Or, as in the example below:

"What happened here?"

Sometimes the smallest, unrepresented doll tells the most important story.



WORKING WITH ASPECTS OF SELF



Working Online or Without Dolls

You don't need physical nesting dolls to use this approach.

Many counsellors use:

- simple nesting doll outlines
- printable templates
- sticky notes
- digital whiteboards
- PowerPoint or Canva templates
- annotation tools in Zoom or Teams

The focus is not on the resource itself, but on the conversation it makes possible.



EXPLORING FAMILY AND OTHER 'SYSTEMS'

Nesting dolls provide a simple but powerful way of exploring the difference between what is visible and what is hidden. We all present certain aspects of ourselves to the world, while protecting other thoughts, feelings and experiences beneath the surface.

This exercise can be used with individuals, families, friendship groups, workplaces or any other system. It encourages curiosity about both the outer story and the experiences that may be hidden within.

Clients can explore:

- themselves
- family members
- couples
- friendship groups
- work teams
- support networks
- spiritual/religious community



EXPLORING FAMILY AND OTHER 'SYSTEMS'

For each person, invite the client to consider two questions:

What do they show the world?

What might they be carrying beneath the surface?

The emphasis is never on guessing the "correct" answer, but on exploring the client's own perceptions, memories and beliefs.

Example

In the example below, members of a childhood family were explored.

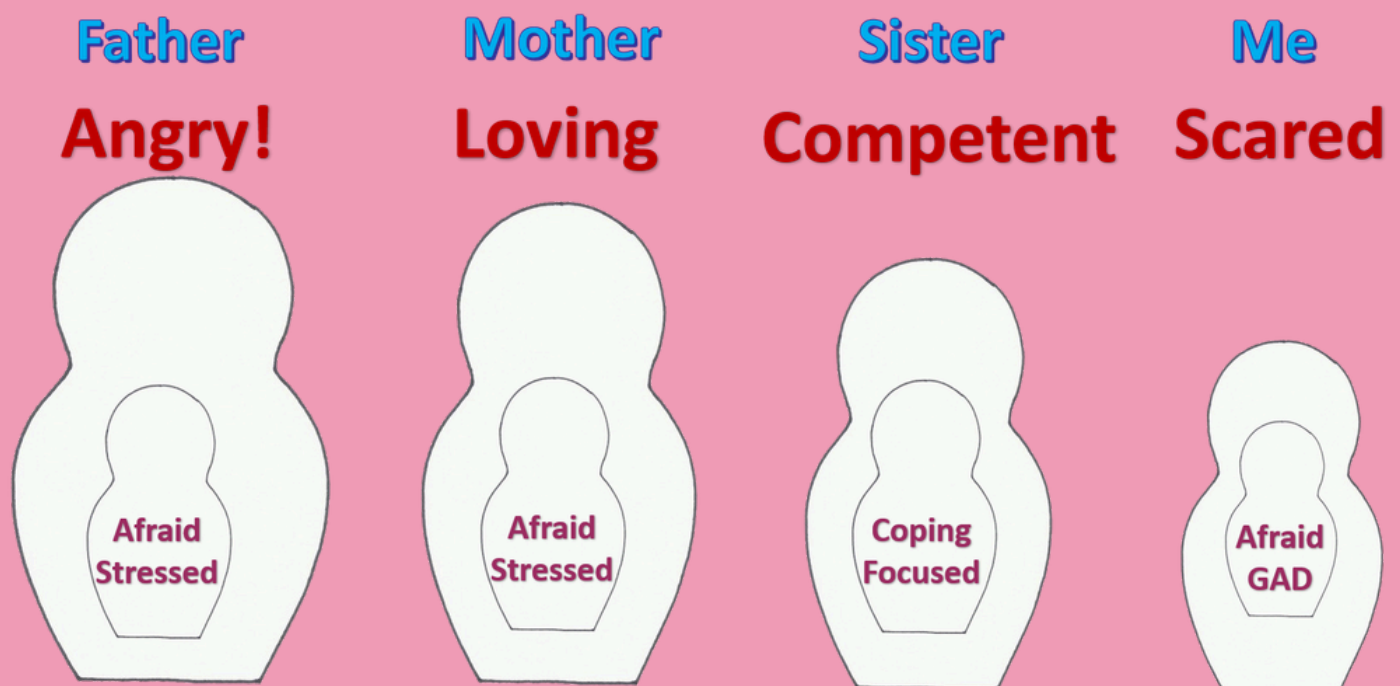


EXPLORING FAMILY AND OTHER 'SYSTEMS'

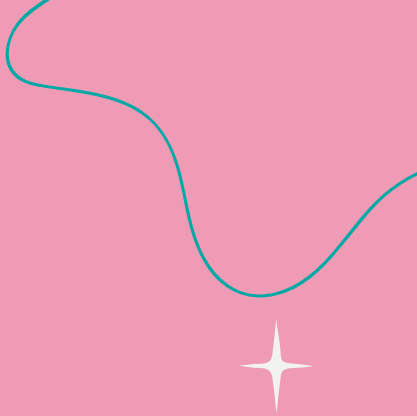
Each family member initially appeared very different on the outside - an angry father, a loving mother, a competent sister and a frightened child. As the layers were explored, the picture became more complex. The client began to wonder what each family member might have been carrying beneath the surface and how these hidden experiences may have shaped their behaviour.

Rather than changing the client's story, the exercise helped them look at it from new perspectives. It created space to explore both the outward behaviours they had witnessed as a child and their own emotional responses to them.

Family dynamics



EXPLORING FAMILY AND OTHER 'SYSTEMS'



Sometimes this deeper exploration leads to greater understanding or compassion; at other times it simply helps clients make sense of confusing or conflicting experiences.

TIPS FOR PRACTICE

- Encourage clients to choose their own words rather than offering labels for them.
- Remain curious about both the outer and inner layers-avoid assuming what lies beneath.
- Remember that the client's perception is what matters. You are exploring their experience of family, not objective truth.
- Be mindful that discovering hidden layers does not mean excusing hurtful behaviour. The aim is to deepen understanding, not rewrite history.
- Move at the client's pace. Some layers may feel too vulnerable to explore immediately.

EXPLORING FAMILY AND OTHER 'SYSTEMS'

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As much as feels safe, reflect on your own experience.

- Which feelings or experiences were visible in your childhood family?
- Which were hidden, ignored or never spoken about?
- Did some family members show a different face to the outside world than they did at home?
- Were there parts of yourself that you learned to hide?
- Looking back now, has your understanding of any family member become more complex over time?
- How has your family experience shaped the way you view yourself and others?

EXPLORING LAYERS OF ANGER

Intervention:

Invite the client to bring to mind either their experience of anger or a situation that leaves them feeling angry. Explain that there is no right or wrong way to use the dolls - the aim is simply to explore what emerges through the exercise. Trust the client's own meanings rather than searching for a particular interpretation or outcome.

Anger often exists alongside other emotions. For some clients, it may sit alongside hurt, fear, sadness, shame, disappointment or helplessness. For others, anger may be experienced as a healthy response to injustice, boundary violations or unmet needs. Rather than assuming what lies beneath, remain curious about the client's unique experience and allow understanding to emerge at their own pace.

Invite the client to choose whichever dolls they are drawn to. Some may select traditional nesting dolls, others may prefer animals, characters or plain dolls. The choice itself can be meaningful.



EXPLORING LAYERS OF ANGER

For example, one client may choose a lion because their anger feels fierce and protective, while another may select a robot because their anger feels cold, detached or controlled. A client may leave a plain doll blank because the feeling is confusing or difficult to describe. There is no expectation that clients will use the dolls in any particular way.

You might then invite the client to begin exploring:

- I wonder what this doll might represent for you?
- What drew you to choose this one?
- If this doll represented your anger, I wonder what might lie beneath it?
- Do you notice any other feelings sitting alongside the anger?
- I wonder what the anger might be protecting—or perhaps making space for?
- As you open the next layer, do you notice anything different?
- Does any layer feel older/younger than the others?
- Is there a layer that feels particularly vulnerable?
- Does one layer feel especially familiar or recognisable?

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIP TIMELINES

Intervention:

Nesting dolls can provide a powerful way of exploring how a relationship has developed over time. Rather than representing layers of emotion, each doll represents a different chapter in the relationship's story.

Invite the client to choose a significant relationship. This might be with a parent, partner, sibling, child, friend or another important person.

Nesting dolls can be selected to represent events and/or emotions:

- when the relationship began
- a period of closeness
- a difficult or painful chapter
- a significant turning point
- where the relationship is today
- hopes or fears for the future



The dolls do not need to represent equal periods of time. One doll might represent many years, while another captures a single conversation or event that changed everything.

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIP TIMELINES

As the client explores each chapter, you might ask:

- What stands out about this part of the story?
- What was happening in the relationship?
- What changed between this doll and the next?
- Were there any turning points?
- Which chapter still feels unfinished?

Different styles of dolls can enrich the exploration. A client may choose traditional dolls, animal or character dolls, or plain dolls, depending on what feels most meaningful. Blank dolls can be especially helpful when a chapter feels confusing, fragmented or difficult to describe.

Notice not only the stories clients tell, but also how they arrange the dolls. Which chapters are placed close together? Which are kept apart? Are some turned away or left out altogether? These choices often open up valuable conversations about how the relationship is experienced today.

Pause for Reflection

Think of a relationship that has been significant in your life.

- Which chapters would you include if you were creating a nesting doll timeline?
- Was there a particular moment that changed the relationship?
- Which chapter still feels unfinished?
- Are there parts of the relationship that you now understand differently?

FINAL TIPS AND PRACTICAL IDEAS

Make the Most of Your Space

You don't need a large table to work creatively.

A simple lap tray provides a stable surface for arranging dolls and can make creative work much more comfortable, particularly in smaller counselling rooms or when working in armchairs.



Don't Be Limited by Size

Sometimes the largest doll in a set isn't quite big enough for the role you have in mind.

A couple of simple solutions are:

- paint your own larger doll to match the set
- place a doll on top of the upturned base of another nesting doll to give it extra height and presence



FINAL TIPS AND PRACTICAL IDEAS

Personalise Your Dolls

Print and cut out the Inside Out characters in different sizes, laminate them and use tack to stick them on the required size doll.



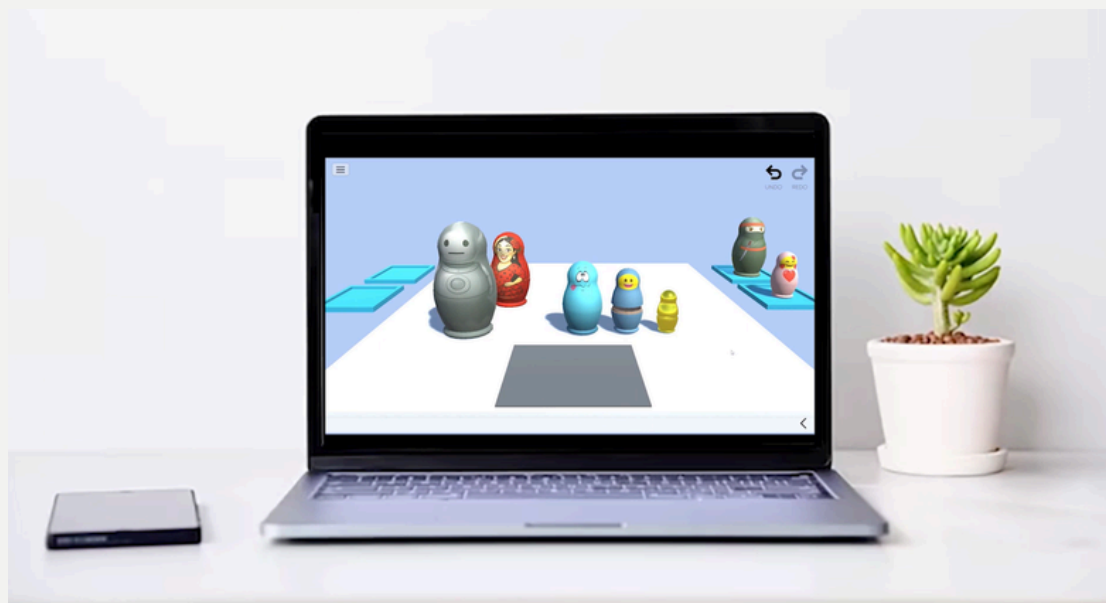
*Even less work –
use emojis!*

Working Online

Creative work isn't limited to face-to-face counselling.

If you're working online, you might use:

- printable nesting doll templates
- annotation tools in Zoom or Teams or digital whiteboards
- PowerPoint or Canva
- Our [Nesting Dolls Web App](#), which enables clients to explore layers, relationships and aspects of self together with you in an online session.



A FINAL THOUGHT

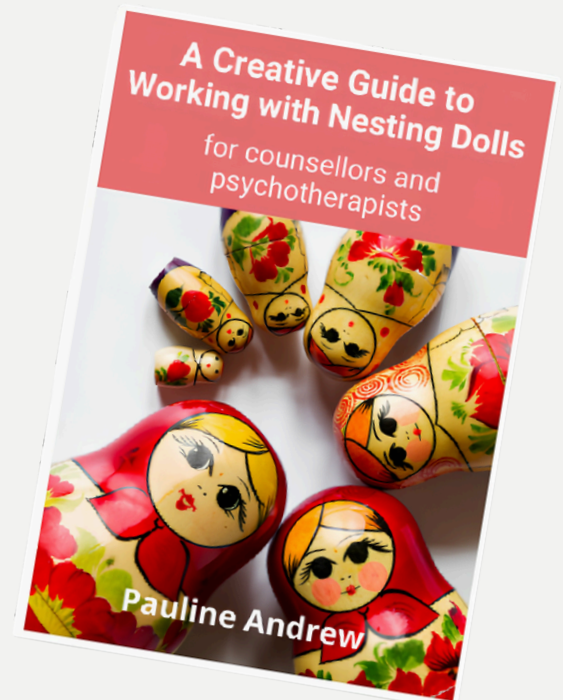
Nesting dolls are beautifully simple, yet they can open the door to surprisingly rich exploration. They invite clients to examine layers of experience, discover new perspectives and make sense of thoughts, feelings and relationships in creative and meaningful ways

If you're new to working with nesting dolls, give yourself permission to experiment. Try the exercises with a trusted colleague, in peer supervision, or even in your own personal therapy before introducing them to clients. Experiencing the process for yourself can help you become more confident with the resource and deepen your appreciation of the many ways it can be used. Above all, trust your client's creativity. There is no "right" way to work with nesting dolls - only an invitation to explore, one layer at a time.

Ready to Explore Further?

We hope this mini guide has inspired you to begin exploring the creative possibilities of nesting dolls.

For a much deeper dive, including additional interventions (for adult, young people and children), as well as case studies and ways of working with trauma and dissociation, discover Pauline Andrew's **[A Creative Guide to Working with Nesting Dolls](#)**.



Also available on **[Kindle](#)**.

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!

