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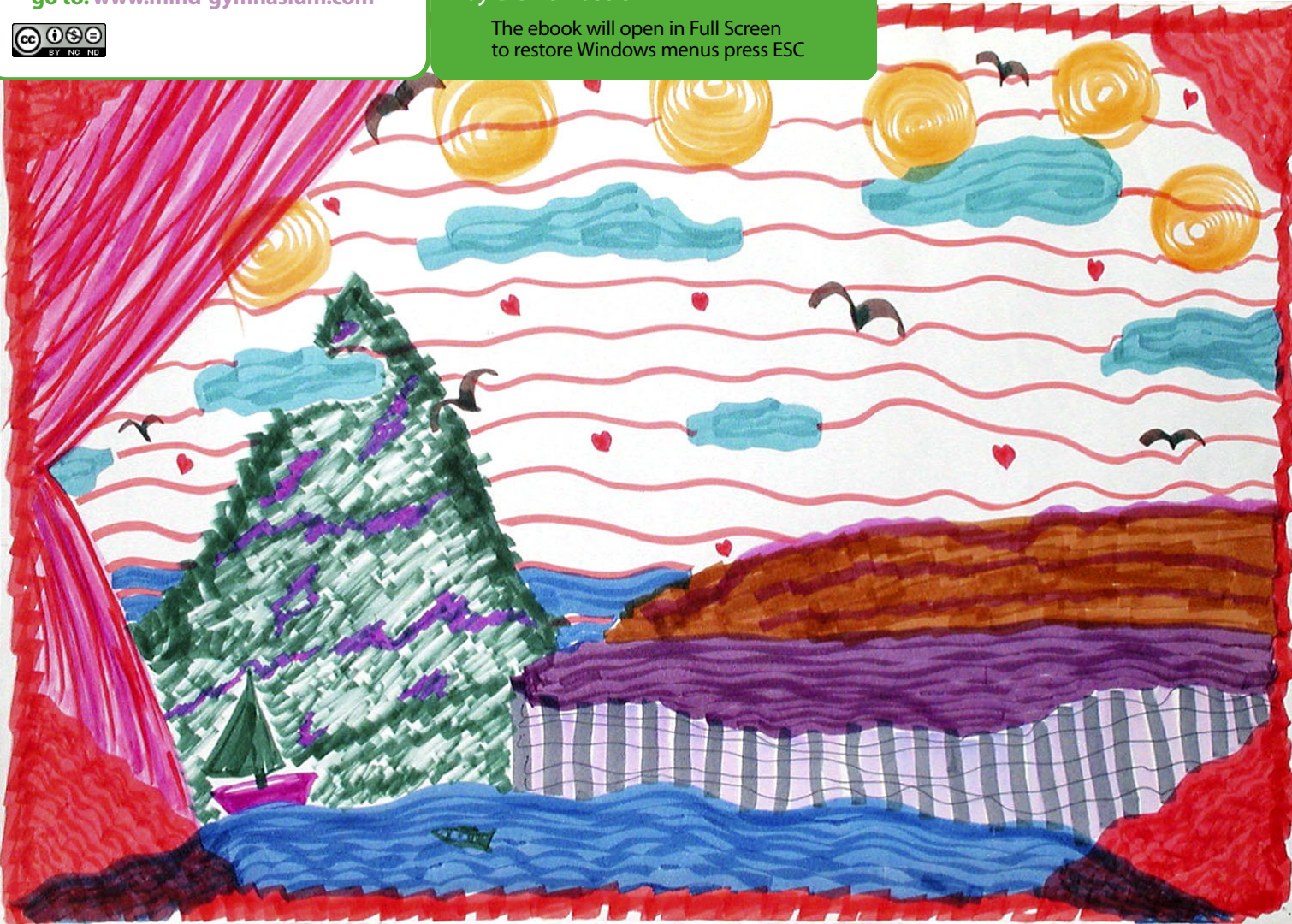
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KNOWHOW> CARING FOR YOUR MIND> PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



PERSONAL
DEVELOPMENT
more

Caption

The notion of personal development is one of the foundations of *The Mind Gymnasium*. Personal development means taking ourselves seriously; it means trying to be intelligent about the choices we make; it means sharpening up our capacity to learn from experience—essential for a flourishing life.

So long as the medicalized, pharmacological, ‘mental illness’, approaches of psychiatry and psychology dominate mindcare, personal development provides a useful label that helps us side-step their narrowed vision of human potential. Personal development, at least here in *The Mind Gymnasium* implies an approach to the mind based on flourishing. Creating the life you want. Writing the menu. Collecting the ingredients. Cooking the meal. Or to slightly shift metaphor, baking the life afresh from day to day.

In this sense, personal development implies a shift in power in relation to our minds and how we care for them. The shift is away from excessive deference to professional expertise, toward seeking out and establishing a partnership with a skilled inhabitant of the vastly extended modern landscape of approaches to the mind and human potential. In this landscape, psychiatric, psychological, medical and scientific ways of working with the mind co-exist with hundreds of other equally good, and commonly much more people friendly, approaches to life’s challenges and our continuing need to adapt and survive.

Expertise still matters but it has moved to a different location. In a personal development approach to mindcare, your own resourcefulness, your own expertise, plus an

empathic, supportive companion who can help you make good use of your existing capabilities, counts for more than sophisticated technical skill, or academic knowledge.

If at the moment you are feeling very ‘human’—ie sad, despondent, oppressed; creatively inspired; seeking to find or express love; or trying to find your way out a corner into which you have painted yourself, or that others insist you occupy—keep in mind that your resourcefulness, your capacity to seek out and respond to help, is a key factor in embarking on the personal development that you might need. The whole of *The Mind Gymnasium*, and the following screens in particular, are intended to support that venture.

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Personal development essentials

What are the key elements of personal development and how much change is possible or desirable? The over-arching ingredient in the emerging new paradigms of mind, and thus of personal development, is a commitment to *reflexivity*, to paying attention to *process*—how we do what we do—how we do ourselves—how the institutions we live and work in, do themselves. If the new paradigm means anything this is it. For some people and some enterprises this priority leans strongly in the direction of *progress* and *improvement*—with seeing deficit in the present and abundance round the next corner. For others it is more a matter of being fully engaged, fully present in the here and now. And of course, very commonly, when we see how we do ourselves and our relations with others, there is a quite urgent desire to make changes.

How much change is feasible?

I often give the example of the person making a clay model of, say, a ballet dancer. Such a model begins with an aluminium armature that carries the form and gesture (and weight) of the final clay layer. Similarly our embodied genetic inheritance and personal histories form armatures around which our present time interests, needs, and preferences come to rest.

We clearly can't become someone else but some things such as language, attitude and believe, seem more susceptible to change than others, such as body posture.

The next sequence of screens builds on the notion, explored in more detail in **Becoming a person** and **Life events**, that as persons with bodies, we carry with us body memories of the significant experiences of our lives—whether this means a consistently delightful life, or one featuring events that we experi-

enced as more or less traumatic—that this previous experience shapes our present approach to daily life and that development and change necessarily needs to take account of this.

[more](#)

POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

When considering the possibilities for personal development—for changing our minds—it is useful to check out, how our life experience sits with that of other people. This graph can help you see how much room you may have for manoeuvre.

[more](#)



Graph based on the work of the British psychologist David Wasdell

At any one time a small minority of any adult population is likely to be relatively free from childhood distress **A**.

more



A similar number are likely to be severely distressed because so many of their childhood needs were left unmet **D**.

more



But most of us fall between these two extremes **B-C** and carry around a moderate amount of distress from the past.

more



Most of us oscillate, **E** between less access to distress on our best days and more distress on our worst.

more







By finding effective ways of working with our underlying distress we can settle around **B**, or even move toward **A**.

more

LIMITS TO CHANGE

Wherever we stand on the graph, effective personal development is likely to require that we identify the key elements of any distress we may be carrying due to unmet childhood needs and take steps to attend to it. Depending on the severity or otherwise of our history, different starting points on the graph are likely to respond to different strategies.

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Those who begin at position **A** seem exceptionally clear of early hurt. Personal development may focused on consolidating this valuable asset—finding a vocation or calling that enables you to live from it—and to convey to other people starting a family how you were brought up!

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Those who begin at **B** are in a strong position to undertake effective personal development and are likely to find exploring any 'unfinished business' from childhood both fruitful and not too onerous.

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If we start at **C**, we may need to work harder to reduce the distress from our childhood but the benefits will be considerable.

more



If we begin at **D**, we may need to start by learning to survive more efficiently from day to day, before we can create enough space in which to work on the underlying distress.

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The 'mental illness' barrier

The concept of mental illness draws a clear dividing line between the 'mentally ill' and the 'healthy'—the line between **C** and **D** on the graph. Until recently, this has tended to prevent the supposedly 'healthy' majority to acknowledge their own distress. It is now clear that everyone carries an underlying spectrum of distress, not least those who decide who is mentally sick and who is healthy—the doctors, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and social workers.

[more](#)



The means to change

Professional approaches to the mind—psychiatry, clinical psychology, psychoanalysis, and medical research—developed almost exclusively from work with very distressed people, i.e. the **D** segment of the graph.

In the last 40 years or so non-medical approaches to the mind have emerged that give high value to well-being, such as **humanistic psychology**. Personal development based on them gives us the means to understand the origins of our individual difficulties, to learn how to resolve them, and to move toward greater flourishing.

[more](#)

Change on a large scale

Looking at the graph as a whole, it's easy to see that there is a clear priority for the whole population to move toward greater well-being. And this involves minimizing the amount of early distress that gives rise to difficulties in adult life.

This can be done through increased sensitivity to mother and baby during pregnancy, as proposed by the Canadian psychologist Thomas Verny, among others; through reducing the traumas caused by birth difficulties, as proposed by several people, including Frederick Leboyer; and through a wider understanding that newborn babies are intelligent, know what they need, and can communicate these needs from birth on.

The general trend, according to the American psychologist Lloyd de Mause, seems to be toward lower distress levels caused by upbringing. Whether he's right or not, we need to support this already accelerating process.

Everyone can contribute by learning to work with, and resolve, their own distress—the less we have, the less we pass on. It's not hard to imagine a time when our insensitive attitudes to bringing up children and our surprise at resulting adult distress will seem as curious as not seeing the link between sexual activity and childbirth.

[more](#)

[See also ▾](#)



STARTING POINTS

more

Caption

Where to start

You have already started. This CD-ROM, the dozens of books in the self-help tradition, and the millions of conversations and points of contact on the Internet are one way to gain the information and impetus to go out and find a class, a group, a therapist, or a counsellor. Learn meditation or try a class in intuitive massage, relaxation and stress management, or assertiveness. Any of these will provide a good, non-threatening introduction to working with your mind in a new paradigm way.

[more](#)

Is it dangerous?

In my experience, personal development is only dangerous if a teacher/facilitator/trainer/therapist has a significant amount of unworked early material and fails to notice that this is driving some, or all of their work. Such a person may be inclined to lead people into doing more than they are ready for. See the **Client guide** later in this section for suggestions on how to pick this up. Another possible danger comes from being compulsively ambitious—where you want to make a lot of progress very fast.

If you have been unaware that you were carrying around a lot of painful early distress, you may feel very uncomfortable when it first surfaces. If this happens, it's helpful to remember that the defences, or 'comfort zones' that kept you feeling all right before, are still sitting in your body ready to come back up and shift your attention away from distressed feelings.

However, if you feel frequently or constantly upset, you will probably need to find a companion to help you build up your strength before attempting to explore your early history. If you feel so wobbly that your attention is poor, you won't be able to learn much. **Attention out** in the Exercises section of *The Mind Gymnasium* has some helpful suggestions about how to restore your usual perspective.

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See also ▾

What is reasonable progress?

I'm inclined to say, slow. But this may not be true for you. People who have come to a personal crisis and are well prepared through reading or other experience may, for example, be ready to plunge into working on themselves immediately. But a more reasonable expectation of progress is that within a few months of actively exploring your mind, you will have uncovered a number of aspects of your personality that leave you feeling much more at ease with yourself. There are also likely to be less comfortable findings, that may be painful or embarrassing at first, but become transformed by the sense of relief when you discover the origins of concerns that have been bugging you for years. 'Oh, that's what it is! That's why I've always... or couldn't... or never dared to.' Other benefits might include learning to trust your feelings, being able to express them more freely, becoming more in tune with your body, and generally becoming more accepting of all sides of yourself. An important benefit of this is that you are likely to be much more 'present', much more available to other people.

[more](#)

When this ultimate crisis comes...when there is no way out—that is the very moment when we explode from within and the totally other emerges: the sudden surfacing of a strength, a security of unknown origin, welling up from beyond reason, rational explanation and hope

EMILE DURKHEIM

Is it self-indulgent?

Some people may feel that giving attention to our inner life is ‘navel-gazing’ and, in some way, selfish or indulgent. If, after reading this, you still feel that you shouldn’t be giving this much attention to yourself then perhaps you learned at some point that it was much more acceptable to care for other people. But does the attention you give them perhaps help to keep your own disquiet under lock and key? Is it keeping you from making decisions, or being more creative?

Exploring your mind might confirm that giving your attention to others rather than yourself has always been your conscious personal choice and that it is in your own best interests, as well as other people’s. But unless you examine your assumptions, there’s no way of being sure. This is the point of the exploration that new paradigm personal development makes possible.

Elsewhere in *The Mind Gymnasium*, in **Emotional Competence**, I argue that, from a client perspective, becoming adequately emotionally competent is a professional obligation for people who have a helping role—police officers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, and social workers etc.,—and if you want to avoid burnout—a practical necessity.

[more](#)

'I'm in business. What will people think?'

If you think of yourself as a hard man or woman who needs to remain invulnerable in the face of any challenge, then the new paradigm of mind has great benefits in store for you.

While you are young, the macho life—swallowing disappointment, choking back rage, fending off criticism, smiling at bullies, being patient with people who are a 'pain in the neck'—can lay down patterns of health-damaging stress that can play out later as depression, alcoholism, and general ill-health.

Luckily, there are lots of professional self-development courses in the field of staff training which can help you keep your head above water and make enlightened choices about when enough is enough. More enlightened companies are introducing mentoring, shadowing, and in-service training that sustains a business focus but which draws on the personal development tradition that *The Mind Gymnasium* represents.

'Staff development' is, however, often a euphemism for 'productivity', or for selecting people for promotion. But if you search for them, there are many professional development courses that offer an element of personal development at the same time. Two examples of the professional/personal link appear in mediation/conflict resolution and interpersonal skills training.

One of the bridges between the old paradigm and the new has been the recognition of the harm that excessive stress and challenge do to people in management. Increasingly, good management includes conservation of its 'human assets', along with the 'bottom line' and market share.

[more](#)

‘How do I know if it’s right for me?’

If you are in doubt about the value of a class, workshop, training, or technique, ask what the learning objectives of the course or session are before you enroll. If, when you start, you find the organization or the training is run in an authoritarian style, ask yourself if it is for them or for you. If you have doubts about the competence of the facilitator, refer to **Facilitation**. If it seems to be working for you, if you can see real benefits in day-to-day life, then you are probably successfully beginning to explore your mind, to resolve old difficulties and move toward the new paradigm mindcare.

[more](#)



FINDING HELP
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Caption

What counts as help varies tremendously. It can mean help with changing something in how we think, feel, or behave that gives us concern. It can mean help with unravelling knotted relationships, obligations, or guilt feelings. It can mean finding help with the task of extricating ourselves from staleness, boredom, or dullness and re-discovering meaning and delight and zest.

Depending on your **creative style**, what counts as help for you may need to be gradual, an evolution of your present state of mind, or it may only feel like help if it promises radical mould-breaking change. Matching your need and the help available is an important priority.

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Finding a guide

Finding a guide who can accompany you on your journey is a major step on the road to changing your mind. There's no guaranteed way of doing this. You may prefer to try out several individual practitioners who may call themselves counsellors, psychotherapists, trainers, coaches, or, as I prefer, **facilitators**. What they call themselves and their qualifications, if any, are much less important than their ability to establish and sustain a working rapport with you around the tasks you jointly define, and a 'facilitative' rather than 'expert' style of practice.

If you prefer to be with others on the journey of exploration and development, patiently attending a range of classes or groups with different teachers will give you experience of the varying styles of facilitation/mentoring/training/development. The one where you feel you are making the most progress, where you are most in charge of your own progress, and where you are persistently being challenged to creatively pursue your own process of self-inquiry, is likely to be of the most enduring value.

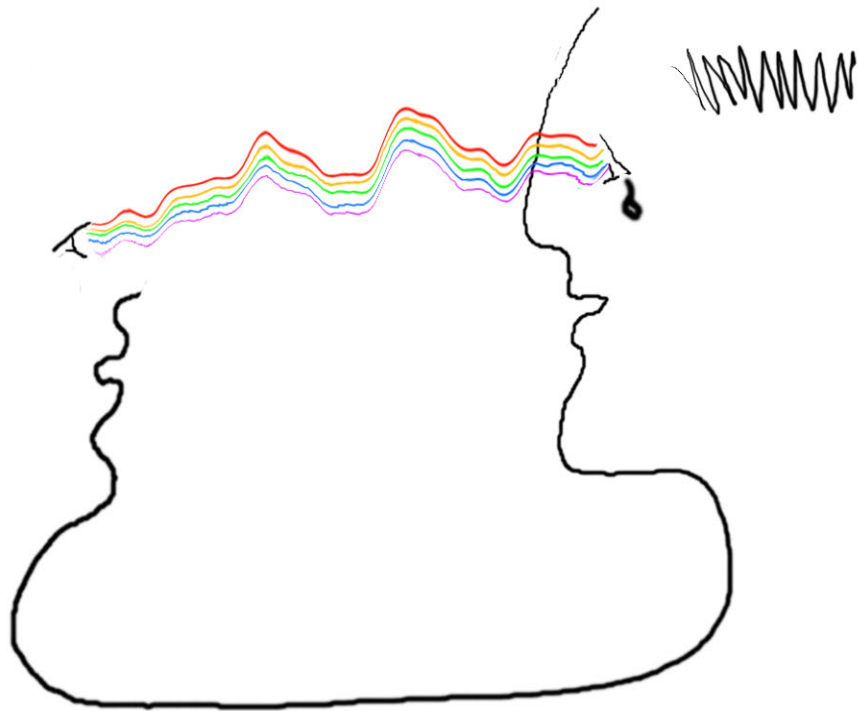
A good rule of thumb is—work with someone who is well on the way to developing a new paradigm mind for themselves. She or he may invite you to take risks and persistently confront you about chronic patterns of behaviour, but will not take you further and faster than you feel ready for. High-quality facilitation will create a place of safety where it is possible to feel whatever it is you have within you. It may be terror, anxiety, delight, or love, but any feeling can be frightening if it has been held out of reach for a long time. But whether you should dip in and out, or plunge in, should be

your choice alone. A good facilitator will also be able to interrupt any tendency in a group to push one member into taking a risk that they do not feel ready for. If you do find that people are hectoring you and dumping their negative feelings on you, don't be afraid to resist this group pressure. Working with feelings has a different quality to dumping them. It may be loud or vicious in tone, but to be effective it requires some element of adult awareness. See **balancing attention** in the exercises section for more on this.

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...healers who are effective have always themselves been wounded. Our wounds, our illnesses, our mistakes, our pain are our roads to a healer's power, for unless we have been vulnerable we cannot approach someone in pain as an equal.

STARHAWK TRUTH OR DARE



Caption

[CLIENT GUIDE](#)
[more](#)

Starting psychotherapy, counselling, mentoring or coaching means above all beginning a relationship. Unfortunately, qualifications provide little guarantee that any particular *psychoprac-titioner will be right for you. This is because the breadth and depth of their lived experience matters as much as their techni-cal and academic knowledge, and what matters most is their ability to get into rapport with you and your concerns.

If you have been in a psychotherapy working relation-ship for a while and are having difficulty seeing significant benefits from it check out the **Psychopolitics notes** or **Survival, Recovery and Flourishing** later in this section of *The Mind Gymnasium*.

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* psychopractitioner is intended to include people who offer personal development, counselling, facilitation, coaching and mentoring.

Hiring a psychopractitioner

Hiring a counsellor, or psychotherapist can be a daunting task and the need to find someone often occurs at times of stress or distress when we are least able to choose wisely. Deferring to the power of an expert is tempting and may be unavoidable but it is anyway prudent to be adequately informed about what to expect from the relationship with your psychopractitioner and what sort of commitment it is likely to require from you. If possible choose someone on the basis of direct personal recommendation.

If you have already found a practitioner, or are contemplating beginning to work with a counsellor or psychotherapist, these guidelines are intended to help you with your initial choice of practitioner and with getting the best from the psychopractice relationship, whether it is new, or a continuing connection.

[more](#)

Clarify your intentions

Work with your practitioner to reality test what you want out of your time together. In this sense, 'paths', 'directions' and having maps and nourishment for the 'journey', may be more relevant than destinations.

Be aware:

That counselling/psychotherapy meets a wide range of needs in many different ways. For example, there is fire-fighting/rescue work, helping you get through/survive tomorrow/next week; recovery work, letting go of redundant learning; and flourishing work, re-inventing yourself, or creating a new piece of life.

That your practitioner is not there primarily to meet your needs but to help you identify your needs and help you find ways of meeting them yourself.

[more](#)

Questions for your practitioner

Feel free:

—to check out your practitioner's life experiences that may be relevant to your issues.

—to ask your practitioner where, and how, and with whom they trained. Remember in listening to their response that one of the functions of a psychotherapist or counsellor is to model being fully human. Zest, vigour, love, delight, wit, and even vulnerability may matter more to you in the long run than their Ph.D.s, psychology degrees, or other formal qualifications, including psychotherapy and counsellor trainings.

[more](#)

Questions to ask yourself

Is there a clearly enough defined contract between you for the work you are doing?

Is the work you do with your practitioner being driven by your needs?

Is the work confined to your sessions, with no homework between them? The effectiveness of the work is dramatically improved by you carrying it into your life. And in the long run it costs less.

Does your practitioner encourage you to take yourself seriously? To regard yourself as a project?

Does your practitioner hold a good balance between supporting you and challenging you?

Does your practitioner negotiate directly and openly?

Does the room you meet in unnecessarily limit the kind of work you could do together? Is it full of valuables, or so cramped, small or public, that you wouldn't feel able make loud sounds or vigorous body movements?

[more](#)

THE SHAPES OF HELP: survival, recovery and flourishing

The needs, wishes, dreams, or curiosity that lead us to seek out help from a guide such as *The Mind Gymnasium* are often indistinct, and they may be urgent. A relative is in obvious trouble; how do we support them in their difficulties? How do we avoid the life-labelling of conventional psychiatry? Would support only prolong their difficulty? How do we find help for our own troubles?

The mind, with its infinite extensions of meaning and feeling driven sometimes by a fiery intensity of emotion, can leave us buffeted and feeling adrift. Even in the calmer seas of a working life glued to others by financial and family commitments, the life of the mind can be hard work. Shall I leave this job/relationship? What do I tell the bank when they call? How come my boss doesn't seem to care that I have a sick child at home?

In seeking help from friends, or whomever might count as help, in this section I suggest that the notions of a *survival* mindset, a *recovery* mindset, and a *flourishing* mindset can aid in cutting through the confusions and misunderstandings that may arise when you need help with your mind.

Of course each is likely to be interlinked and thus working with them overlaps. Still, it's good to know that giving, or being given, help that is relevant for example to flourishing when we are struggling to survive the next day, or the next week, can often make a bad situation worse, or simply further burden an already overloaded mind. The same would be true for mis-matches between the other mindsets.

[more](#)

Survival

A long and disabling illness in ourselves or a partner can put us into a survival mindset, and so can financial difficulties, whether expected or un-anticipated, marital separation, bereavement and loss, or promotion that takes us out of the familiar into demands for which we are out of our depth or untrained. A survival mindset means that our coping capacity, perhaps undermined by deep fatigue, is at full stretch. We don't have any slack. Tiny extra demands push us into confusion or panic. Our attention becomes scattered; we are accident-prone; focus is lost, tasks are begun and dropped; Recognize any of this?

What kinds of help might we seek or give ourselves if we realize that we are struggling, or in danger of being overwhelmed, in a survival mindset?

If this is presently your normal or most common state of mind, then the help that is most urgently needed is any way of breaking into the chronic pattern. Is it, for example, one of demand and compliance? '...To make the kind of money that my life-style and status demands I have to travel three hours to work each day and work most weekends too....' Is it fed by a chronic pattern of guilt, feeling that whatever I do it is never sufficient, or never good enough?

All this is not to argue for the elimination of the survival mindset—a whole range of honourable and deeply satisfying life tasks may require that we push ourselves to physical and mental limits—and highlight previously hidden strengths. The key question is has it become chronic? Have we drifted into survival without noticing or assenting to it?

Interrupting chronic patterns often requires help from someone outside the situation such as a counsellor or therapist. Someone who can help us reality-test the survival mindset we inhabit.

A key question to ask yourself is... Is it sustainable? Do you really expect to be living like this in 2, 5, 10, 20 years time? If what you are up to is obviously not sustainable, then the range of choices about what to do often widens quite quickly.

Breaking into a chronic pattern of survival may not require anything more elaborate than rest. A holiday perhaps. Too often, because employers don't argue with sick notes, the break comes as illness, or sickness.

Beyond rest there is finding the time for physical exercise. As the military know well, surviving extended periods of stress requires matching levels of physical fitness.

Ah—you may think this is very easy to say, survival is a tough place to be. That's right. It can be very difficult to haul ourselves out of a mindset where the lack of slack means that there is no time or energy for the other choices, other perspectives. And where, if hidden personal strengths were to emerge into the light, we wouldn't necessarily recognize them let alone put them into practice.

Key points:

A survival mindset is likely to be associated with a chronic pattern of behaviour: lack of 'slack'; scattered attention; lack of focus; accident proneness.

Unless a survival mindset is life-threatening it may be initially more helpful to interrupt it, than trying to overturn, or halt it.

Check out how sustainable your survival mindset is.

A survival mindset is often unhelpfully sustained by recurring sickness/illness.

See also ▼

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Recovery

While a survival mindset suggests immersion in life's demands and opportunities—a loss of perspective—a recovery mindset arises from a perceived need to heal, transform, or transmute some traumatic event. The difference being that while we may not understand the effects that the event is having, we are aware that it occurred. So a recovery mindset is a more conscious one of inquiry and research, even psycho-archaeology.

An example would be my own need to recover from growing up in a household where there was very little social contact. We rarely had any visitors and then only close relatives, there was hardly any contact with neighbours, no parties, or celebrations. Recovering from the effects of these missing social comings and goings is a continuing project for me and of course it is a minor matter compared with some recovery projects.

A recovery mindset is likely to be relevant, either now or at some point in your life, if you have suffered any of the following **life events**: loss of parents, siblings or partners through fatal accidents, active participation or involvement in wars or rebellions; or prolonged hospitalization while a child; sexual or other abuse; mugging or other street violence; involvement in a near fatal accident; persistent bullying or mobbing. The extent to which such events cast a shadow over later life is dealt with in several sections of *The Mind Gymnasium*, check out 'see also' opposite.

A recovery mindset to match such experiences can be adopted, built or perhaps more often, developed, and this is exactly the kind of task where it makes sense to engage the

help of practitioners such as counsellors or psychotherapists who have the knowledge and experience to accompany you in the inquiries that recovery entails. Not infrequently and usually beneficially, such practitioners themselves have deep experience of recovery.

Keep in mind that all work with our minds benefits from community. While for survival a community of me and a helper may be all there is slack for, recovery often seems to benefit from a larger range of contacts with others recovering from similar difficulties. A good example is the 12 Step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous and its related organizations which bring substance abusers together, both in direct conversations and in networks of support. They have had remarkable success in supporting recovery, or 'Recovery' as I guess AA would call it.

A recovery mindset has both value and potential limitations.

Drawbacks

Psychotherapy and counselling often correctly focus on the traumatic events that have shaped our present preferences and aversions, or in the full-out version—our obsessions and phobias. Exploring and working through these if they have skewed or distorted our lives can bring a remarkable sense of freedom. If the person(s) who helps you explore are able to share some of their own experience of recovery, this may be helpful but is probably not essential.

However, if the basis of such work depends too much on a notion of cure in the medical sense of symptom—diagnosis—treatment—cure, you may indeed be 'cured' but only of

your ignorance. So that after years of effort and expense you end up knowing everything there is to know about what happened to you and how it has affected your present life but none of this has been resolved into new actions, new choices, new, more fruitful, behaviour. If the form of counselling or therapy you follow precludes 'education', 'learning', or 'skills development' I suggest you be actively sceptical of the recovery mindset to which it subscribes.

Why so? The danger is that a recovery mindset that doesn't actively support behavioural change, may open up your story so clearly and powerfully that it subtly but decisively supports the notion that you are a powerless victim *now*. That you were a powerless victim at some time in the past may not be an issue, but that was *then*, this is *now*. And *now* is a different territory, rich with different opportunities, challenges, and ways to move on, if the recovery mindset you inhabit is open to them.

Benefits

The value of a recovery mindset can be incomparable as I hope you will already have found from *The Mind Gymnasium*. Discovering, if this is your story, that much of our present time behaviour is contaminated, and thus driven, by the **re-stimulation** of early distress can lead to an exploration of formative experiences that hugely increases our capacities for **love, understanding and choice**.

The first stages of this can be a bit shocking and often lead to a morass of emotional reactions and memories that may not feel like progress. However, persistence and skill and love from the companions we choose to accompany us can

help us emerge from the swamp of mere survival on to the dry ground from which the swamp is visible but we are not in it. Not only that but we are in a position to appreciate that beneficial change often opens up of itself once we make a start, to switch metaphor, on extricating ourselves from whichever corner we have become painted into.

Few of us are likely to be free of the need for some version of a recovery mindset; accidents, sexual abuse, street violence and illness are no respecters of social or financial status. What I hope to emphasize here is the value of acknowledging to yourself that at certain points in life, time and resource can very helpfully be put into actively seeking to recover from psychic damage. This is not to argue for life to stop while this occurs; more usually and usefully, the recovery mindset is one strand in the texture of a continuing daily life.

Key points:

Recovery from damaging experiences can be vital for health and well-being.

In the early stages recovery may seem worse than the previous state.

Recovery is helpfully supported by mutual aid.

An inadequate approach to recovery may unhelpfully set you up as a victim.

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Flourishing

I suspect that the mindset that most people wish for or dream about but yet feel least informed about, and are may be least equipped to pursue in an intelligent way, is flourishing and the corresponding notion of a flourishing mindset.

What I mean by flourishing is a state of being where detailed knowledge of our personal antecedents and continuing efforts to resolve any wounding or damage that may remain, become transformed into a less compulsive, more present base from which to create a life we want.

A flourishing mindset is intrinsically creative. It seeks to facilitate the unfolding of the creative intelligence that everyone, whatever their state of life embodies. A flourishing mindset is driven by *liking*. Knowing what we like; doing what we like; and liking what we do.

I'm not talking about padding out our comfort zones—of promoting a huge increase in retail therapy. Nor am I talking about eliminating everyone and everything from our lives that doesn't mirror us or adopt this notion.

In favouring and moving toward what we *like*, a flourishing mindset is synonymous with living-from-love and it presupposes that others may do the same. My flourishing cannot be at the cost of yours, thus a flourishing mindset values both distinctness and community, mutuality and co-operation, diversity and co-responsibility and bringing others with us.

A flourishing mindset also seeks to move living-from-love out of the domain of religiosity and the mood-making of too much spirituality into the lived experience of taking out the garbage, mending the roof, and cooking lunch.

What does it mean in practice? Here is a list of flourishing definitions that a group researching flourishing came up with.

flourishing requires participation in community

flourishing is fun

flourishing involves creating something that doesn't exist—
order—relationship—connection

flourishing requires that we (occasionally) dance chaos
thoroughly

flourishing means recovering lost intentions

flourishing is undermined by fear

flourishing is about identifying, owning and naming our
inner inklings

flourishing implies ruthless focus

flourishing requires courage. It is being yourself in the
moment and going for what you want with your whole
being all the time, using your will to be alive.

to regain your joy over and over again, however dire the
circumstances

flourishing is about taking care over whether, and how, we
name our experiences

flourishing is about grounding your dream

flourishing depends on an ability to dance between
distinctness and whole-hearted participation

pre-requisites for flourishing include preparation, rooting,
support, opportunity, climate, good psychic weather,
nourishment

flourishing is a value, a direction in life, an orientation, a myth
to live by

flourishing may be expected to be intermittent

when we see others flourishing we don't see the rest of the
iceberg of life and preparation or the courage or the
origins that precede it.

flourishing arises in a life that is awaredly created
 the grain of our flourishing may run parallel to, or be congruent with, early learning, or maybe in a different direction altogether, even in a different psychic universe
 flourishing may not apply to all, or even much of life, but it reminds me of the possibility that I can extend flourishing to more and more of my life
 flourishing is dancing on the edge of precipices
 flourishing is hopping about
 flourishing is daring to be different
 flourishing is knowing what I want and seeing who congregates around it.
 flourishing requires planning, the minimum needed to take us forward to the next choice point.
 flourishing is a cyclic process. The iris bulb, invisible in the bog, becomes the flower we see, and the scattered seed, following which it shrinks back into its bulb. If we are connected to this flourishing cycle then we won't despair at being in the dark quiescent part of the cycle.
 life lived as an inquiry would really loosen up life.

because feeding the zizz of life as we find it necessarily involves confronting that which is soul-destroying in ourselves and others. This may often mean standing aside from the herd, a difficult and sometimes risky thing to do. Not least in the face of the churning culture of positive feedback, where the broadcast and print media tend to claim the moral high ground of 'giving people what they like', while omitting to mention that this is not out of love but out of desire for profit.

Key points:

flourishing is intrinsically creative

flourishing runs on liking

flourishing seeks to install living-from-love

flourishing requires mutuality and co-responsibility

flourishing is about direction, vocation and calling

more

See also ▼

A flourishing mindset is less concerned with reaching life targets and more concerned, for example, with the quality of the life in this moment we are in together. Above all a flourishing mindset is pre-occupied with finding our unique direction in life, what others might think of as 'vocation', or 'calling'. Put another way it is living with the grain, the zizz of life, of seeking out and honouring what wants to emerge into life. A flourishing mindset will also have a political dimension

Mindcare: good practice

Good practice comes in a wide range of varieties. There are lots of different styles of psychotherapy and counselling, probably many hundreds. Some involve physical contact, many don't. Some are primarily verbal, other styles favour imagination and psycho-drama. These variations are often more a matter of starting points than of fundamental differences.

It is good to remember that while life experiences are widely divergent, in many respects our bodyminds are strikingly similar. Because of this, therapies or counselling that are effective in helping us, for example, to deal with grief and anger, or fear, seem likely to share many common elements.

[more](#)

Pointers to good practice

Your practitioner has good rapport, by which I mean s/he has good attention, listens well, responds warmly and with feeling, where appropriate.

Your practitioner acknowledges/values a variety of ways of working with clients. S/he presents from time to time an array of models, maps, schemes, or other nourishment for the work you do together.

Your practitioner is careful to distinguish between propositions, suggestions, advice, recommendations, and their opinions, whether personal or as a practitioner.

Your practitioner holds a balance between psychological, political, and structural origins of the issues you bring to the sessions.

Your practitioner is actively engaged in helping you take charge of your work in, and between, the sessions (essential for primal and other deep/advanced levels of work).

Your practitioner holds that healing and change come less from the therapist than from you as a client; and more than either from the rapport between the two.

Your practitioner will be open to objections from you and will be able to admit to any mistakes they happen to make.

Your practitioner is scrupulous about the confidentiality of what goes on between you. This confidentiality extends to any supervisor with whom s/he discusses your concerns. (Perhaps the only exception would be a situation where your practitioner believes that a third party may be in danger).

Your practitioner negotiates clear agreements about:

How much you have to pay.

How long the sessions are.

Arrangements about cancellations.

Whether and when you can phone up.

How many sessions you may need.

Arrangements around holiday.

[more](#)

Mindcare: bad or inadequate practice

A practitioner who creates recurring entanglements between you around agreements/disagreements, session etiquette, arrangements/bookings/payment etc. which then have to be unravelled in the sessions.

A practitioner who is rigid about cancellations, postponements, or changes to session times regardless of whether there is adequate notice of the alteration.

A practitioner who doesn't openly and directly negotiate changes in the contract between you, including implicit contracts based on custom and practice. Especially if this involves physical contact.

A practitioner who constantly talks in medically related language, i.e. about mental illness, treatment, sickness, pathology, cure, normality.

A practitioner who offers no suggestions of causes and origins, or maps of the territory you are exploring.

A practitioner who psychologizes everything, including the relationship between you and him/her, particularly when you express dissatisfaction with lack of progress or development, or change.

A practitioner who politicizes everything, so that all your difficulties are ascribed to capitalism, 'men', 'women', 'the state' etc.

A practitioner who too often pours out the riches of their knowledge and skill, so that you feel swamped.

A practitioner who rarely or never discloses anything about themselves.

A practitioner who constantly directs all your work toward catharsis and who is unwilling to help you with planning, or problem-solving etc.

A practitioner who seems unwilling, or unable, to handle your deepest/strongest emotions.

A practitioner who seems unwilling, or unable, to openly discuss/deal with sexuality.

A practitioner who seems to lack a spiritual and/or political perspective.

A practitioner who seems unable to demonstrate the qualities that s/he recommends or admires.

[more](#)

JUNIOR DOCTOR'S FIRST DAY AS A PSYCHIATRIST.
 "Psychiatry. Six diagnoses. Twenty drugs. It's fine." He smiles, perfectly, with perfect teeth. "There are no psychiatric emergencies. Take your time, find your feet, ask for help, just be nice, smile a lot, don't run over time. Just do what you do. All psychiatrists are weirdos anyway."

MICHAEL FOXTON
 THE GUARDIAN G2, 14.0.2002

Abusive practice

A practitioner who seems to rely a lot on authority in a way that frequently invites you to defer to their expertise.

A practitioner who seeks any kind of contact outside of the meetings—more specifically—one who offers or accepts sexual contact.

A practitioner who often seeks to tell you what to do outside the meetings through advice, recommendations, or judgements.

A practitioner who asks curiosity questions, such as ‘How can I invest in the company you were talking about?’, or seeks favours, i.e. ‘Will you use your influence to get me an appointment with Mr X.’

[more](#)

[See also ▼](#)

If you feel mistreated

If you can, raise your concern right away.

Even if your concern is unclear, or has been growing gradually over a period, don't let this stop you from raising it.

Consider leaving the relationship and finding another practitioner. If you can, say why you are leaving.

Keep in mind that an actual present-time grievance may also carry a emotional overlay from some similar episode from your past.

If raising your grievance isn't given a hearing, or there isn't enough of a recognition of your concern from the practitioner, ask to make contact with their supervisor, or practitioner support group, or the organization through which they are accredited/accountable.

In the UK, POPAN is a voluntary organization that offers support and advocacy to people who consider that they have suffered abuse from psychopractitioners.

[more](#)

Mindcare: psychopolitics notes

Many practitioners in what I think of as the ‘caring-for-the-human-condition trades’ see a clear trend in this work that is unhelpful to service users.

What was a fluid, open, highly creative and often anarchically chaotic field of creative development, is becoming closed, academic, and fear-driven due to moves toward statutory regulation. These regulatory initiatives make spurious, untested claims that they will ‘protect clients’ from abusive practitioners, and look set to undermine one of the mostly profoundly valuable and important developments of the second half of the 20th century.

The Emperor’s New Clothes

The claims of ‘client protection’ insulate the moves toward licensure, registration, centralized standards, measurable outcomes and legalistic complaints procedures from discussion of their harmful effects. The notion of ‘client protection’ also serves to hide the commercial agendas of training organizations, drug manufacturers and insurance companies that stand to benefit from the professionalization of psychotherapy and counselling.

The need for client protection from aberrant or abusive psychotherapists is nowhere near large enough to justify the scale of bureaucratic consolidation that is planned. As I write, mid 2003, the significant levels of abuse of clients in the UK in recent years have occurred not in psychotherapy or counselling but inside the highly regulated medical profession. Yet it is the institutional arrangements of medicine that are being lined up for use as the template for state regulation of psychopractice.

I am strongly in favour of practitioners being held in an accountability process. It needs to be one that features an ongoing feedback loop with other practitioners who know each other’s work well enough to be in a position to affirm, or deny their fitness to practice, their competence for the clients they seek to work with, and their ethical commitment, plus of course adequate supervision.

Current and proposed plans for licensure will enable practitioners to avoid the key element of this, the ongoing exposure to feedback from people who know them well as persons. They are unlikely to be even marginally more effective in eliminating client abuse than the regulatory procedures of medicine have been in surfacing medical malpractice.

How does this affect you as a client?

If you choose a registered, or licensed practitioner, the cost of the unnecessarily lengthy and expensive training, and the registration procedures that are being put in place, will be passed on to you. You will be paying for your own protection whether or not you feel you need it.

As the balance of power in the training institutions shifts toward high-status academic attainment, this is tending already to exclude the many people whose capacity for rapport and empathic divination exceeds their capacity and inclination for theory-driven compliance.

Lastly, the economic imperative to stay licensed as a psychotherapist tends to lead to a safe, sanitized style of practice that denies the intrinsic riskiness of the open-ended exploration that effective psychotherapy is likely to entail.

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Caption

CO-COUNSELLING

[more](#)

Of the hundreds of service-marked and trademarked styles of counselling and psychotherapy that are available, the only method of personal development that I have decided to present in any detail in *The Mind Gymnasium* is co-counselling. In co-counselling, following a short basic-training course of a minimum of 40 hours, individuals are equipped to engage in their own 'change of mind'. For me, co-counselling is one of the most striking innovations in personal development work. In the depth of inquiry it makes possible, in the directness of its methods, in the way it contradicts authoritarian structures of learning, and the means it provides of developing emotional competence rapidly, it represents a microcosm of the best of the personal development traditions.

[more](#)

Basic principles

Co-counselling is based on the view that people are fundamentally intelligent, responsible, able to co-operate, and to find a balance between their own and other's interests. It maintains that our capacity to be intelligent is compromised by the hurts and lacks we suffered as a child, but that as adults we can reconnect to these early experiences, re-evaluate the solution that we adopted then, and choose to behave differently.

Re-connection is not an intellectual task but involves emotionally and physically re-experiencing the early event in which a pattern of distress was laid down. At the point of re-connection there is both a physical transformation and a rush of insight into what needs to be done and how to do it, as the blocked intelligence is restored. Other fundamental ideas are that, to be valid, learning about ourselves has to be based on personal experience, that our learning has to be self-directed, and also that only we can come to know ourselves—no-one can do the work for us. Co-counselling is available internationally (see [Resources](#)).

Self-direction

The essence of co-counselling is that the client is always in charge. The training teaches participants to be self-directing and their counselling skills are founded on their experience as clients. The 'counsellor' learns to make no judgements or interpretations, and to abstain from giving advice and from sharing personal experiences. Above all, there is absolute confidentiality between both people involved about what is revealed during the session.

Co-counselling aims at dismantling patterns of distressed behaviour. This involves contradicting those patterns to enable blocked memories of past distress to come through. Sometimes this can mean first celebrating and reinforcing personal strengths for a considerable period before the client is ready to look at the patterns of distress. Since the client is always fully in charge, she or he can choose how far and how fast to proceed.



Training

Co-counselling training follows the workshop format and it takes a minimum of 40 hours to achieve competence in the basic skills. It is not recommended for anyone who is distressed to the point of being unable to listen to other people. During the training, each person learns to use a collection of

powerful, practical techniques, including role play, celebration, free attention, contradiction, repetition and intensification. In later co-counselling sessions, the client can then apply them to any current concerns.

All these techniques, with the exception of the listening skills, are intended for use only with other co-counsellors, not in daily life. During the training, the participants learn how to make a co-counselling session into a formal ritual and so create a situation in which they can both deal with patterns of distress. This may involve, for example, identifying past or present oppression, or working through the early origins of a stubborn psychosomatic ailment.

The client and the counsellor

The co-counselling client's working methods include celebrating her or his strengths, contradicting weaknesses and the shoulds and oughts of past obligations, and exploring distress patterns arising from present oppression, or early formative experiences. She or he aims to re-live these experiences directly, to re-connect with the distress emotions that remain attached to the bodymind memories and afterwards, to re-evaluate and replace the early survival decision with one more appropriate for adult life.

The counsellor's principal strategy is lovingly to interrupt the client's distress patterns, by reminding her or him of the repertoire of working methods they have both learned. Throughout the session, the counsellor's main role is to give high-quality attention to whatever the client is doing, without advising, interpreting, judging, or discussing what is happening.

A typical session

Two people who have satisfactorily completed the formal co-counselling training meet at one of their homes or, perhaps, at work. They decide how much time they have, and divide it equally between them. One person elects to work first as 'client', with the other person as 'counsellor', and the roles are reversed for the second half of the session. The client takes a little time to scan their mind for some current personal issue. Then, using the working techniques learned in the training course, and with the support of the counsellor, she or he plunges in and explores it.

The style of the session depends entirely on the needs and inclinations of the client. It may be cognitive—seeking to understand and draw conclusions from earlier sessions or from current experience—or it may involve returning to some distressing episode in the past that continues to cast a shadow over the client's life. At the end of the session, the client will clarify what she or he has learned and perhaps at the prompting of the counsellor, sum it up in a pithy phrase that will make it easy to take out into everyday life. The two people then reverse roles and the process is repeated for the 'counsellor', who now becomes the 'client'.

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THE WORKSHOP

[more](#)

Caption

One of the major innovations of new paradigm mindcare or mindwork, has been the development in the personal development movement and elsewhere of the workshop. A workshop often doesn't distinguish between education or development, counselling or therapy. Typically, in a personal development workshop, people attending are primarily there to learn about themselves, and deep knowledge of yourself necessarily turns out to include deepening knowledge of other people too. The emphasis is on learning from experience—trying something, noticing what happened or what you learned, then moving on to try something new. If any theory is given, it will be to provide a framework or to help you make sense of yourself, or to encourage further exploration.

[more](#)

The circle

A common feature of workshops is that everyone sits in a circle while sharing experiences or discussing the exercises. This builds power-sharing and personal responsibility into the life of the group. At a casual glance, it may be difficult to spot who is acting as the group leader, or 'facilitator'. The circle also allows everyone to see and hear more or less equally, what is being said both verbally and visually through body language.

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Ground rules

In many workshops an early priority is to agree on a set of ground rules for the session, or series of sessions. These may include time-keeping, the limits of permissible behaviour and the fairly universal rule of complete confidentiality. If you can be sure that others will not gossip about what you did or said, then you're more likely to risk digging into the dark corners of your experience. Other essential conditions include speaking only from 'I', from 'my experience', and agreeing that only one person speaks at a time. Once agreed, these rules may be pinned on a wall and anyone can challenge a breach of them.

[more](#)





Working together

Many workshops begin with energizing exercises to liven everyone up and to 'break the ice'. At other times the whole group may work together or divide into small units of three or more, or work in pairs. The group then returns to the circle so that members can share their experiences. Often each person speaks in turn to counteract the competitiveness or submissiveness that people may bring into the group.

[more](#)



Personal responsibility

If some deep material comes to light, someone may elect to explore it further, with the support of the group and the guidance of the 'facilitator'. The essential point is that participants are all in charge of their own personal development. This can be difficult for many people at the beginning, because old paradigm habits of expecting to be told what to do run deep. The role of the 'facilitator' is primarily to ease the exploratory process, although she or he will probably set the objectives of the workshop and devise its format.

[more](#)

The benefits of workshops

Within the general workshop format, a wide range of experiences can be explored, but whatever the specific focus, people usually find the following benefits emerge.

Self-understanding

Exploring aspects of your mind in a workshop usually leads to increased self-awareness. 'How am I doing this?'; 'What is my contribution to this difficulty?'

Autonomy

Being persistently invited to take charge of your own development, to set your own goals, methods and learning programmes, greatly increases your capacity to behave autonomously.

Self-esteem

As you develop your capacity to act and choose without distress-related constraints or compulsiveness, you learn to value your inner strengths and come to be much less at the mercy of your weaknesses.

Creativity

At the beginning, learning to be more personally creative and not to rely on a leader to do it all for you can be a bit of a shock. But as the old constraints are lifted, creativity often becomes a source of great delight.

Spontaneity

Because the workshop is a safe and encouraging environment, it is easier to step through fears of failure and insecurities about personal worth and to say what you want to say. Imperceptibly, inner fears begin to lose their power, and ideas and experiences become more directly connected to—and so more congruent with—what we say and how we behave.

See also ▾

Openness

In a well-run workshop where what you say and do is confidential and where attacks and criticism will be challenged and worked on, you are less likely to feel the need to defend yourself. The workshop setting gives you permission to explore the kinds of feelings and behaviour you usually have to keep quiet.

Risk-taking

The relative safety and the full confidentiality of the workshop create a supportive climate for exploring the limits of our minds and behaviour. It gives you the opportunity to try yourself out and to take risks. And since success and failure mean nothing in the workshop context, you can try out new ways of behaving without feeling threatened or unduly at risk.

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