

## Ten questions and answers about Symbolic Modelling

James Lawley | Published 10 April 2022 | [cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/105/](https://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/105/)

Penny Tompkins and I are supporting 24 Ukrainian psychologists and psychotherapists in their efforts to find ways respond to the current heartbreaking situation in their country – both for their clients and their own well-being. Below are ten questions (and our answers) they raised in preparation for our first workshop.

### 1. What is the scope of Symbolic Modelling? What requests, symptoms, problems does it work best with?

These are outlined in this summary of the method:

Lawley, J. & Tompkins, P. (2011). Symbolic Modelling Emergent Change through Metaphor and Clean Language. In Chapter 4 of L. M. Hall & S. R. Charvet (Eds.), *Innovations in NLP: Innovations for Challenging Times*.

<https://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/346/1/Symbolic-Modelling-Emergent-Change-through-Metaphor-and-Clean-Language/>

### 2. Can the method be used with survivors of sexual violence?

Yes. That is exactly the client base that David Grove worked with when he originally developed Clean Language and working with client-generated metaphor. See:

Grove, D. J (1998) Problem Domains and Non-Traumatic Resolution Through Metaphor Therapy. <https://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/4/1/Problem-Domains-And-Non-Traumatic-Resolution-Through-Metaphor-Therapy/>

### 3. Can the method be combined with protocols from other psychotherapy methods? For example, with CBT, Somatic experiencing, EMDR?

Yes. It can be combined with many methods, since almost all clients use metaphors to describe their internal and complex experiences. See:

**Hyer, Lee & Brandsma, Jeffrey M** (1997). EMDR Minus Eye Movements Equals Good Psychotherapy, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, July, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 515-522

Download: <https://en.art1lib.org/book/1711650/4934bc>

“The sixth psychotherapy principle to apply to EMDR is clean language”  
(p. 519).

**Pole, N. & Cadney, P.** (2016) ‘Very, Very Traumatic’ Working with Trauma with Clean Language and Shiatsu. *Shiatsu Society Journal (UK)*, Winter, Issue 140.

<https://nickpole.com/2019/06/27/very-very-traumatic-working-with-trauma-using-clean-language-and-shiatsu/>

**Schenck, K.** (2013). "So What's a Meta For?" *InterAction - The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations*, Volume 5, Number 2, November 2013, pp. 35-53(19), SFCT.

Download: <https://sfwork.com/resources/interaction/04Schenck.pdf>

“The approach of ‘Clean Language’ has cultivated a whole set of questions that may be helpful to know about, and useful for extending the toolbox of Solution Focus questions.’

**Tompkins, P., Sullivan, W. & Lawley, J.** (2005). Tangled Spaghetti in My Head: Making use of metaphor, *Therapy Today, Journal of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy*, October. [cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/30/](http://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/30/)

**Lawley, J. & Tompkins, P.** (2011). Metaphor, the Body and Health, The CAPA Quarterly, Issue One, February. *Journal of the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Association of NSW.*

Download: [Lawley & Tompkins-2011-Metaphor the Body and Healing.pdf](http://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/30/)

#### **4. What are the limitations and contraindications of the method?**

These are fully discussed in this blog:

Lawley, J. (2011) Contraindications for Symbolic Modelling.

<https://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/blogs/8/Contraindications-for-Symbolic-Modelling.html>

#### **5. Sometimes I do one session with the technique of Epistemological Metaphor, in the next session we discuss the changes that have taken place with the client, in the third session we continue to work with Metaphor. Is this allowed?**

Yes, as long as (a) you are not interpreting their metaphors, and (b) the client is getting value from what you are doing.

#### **6. Sometimes the whole work takes 20-25 minutes, and sometimes 4-5 sessions. Is it correct?**

Yes, and it does very much depend on the client and their situation.

#### **7. What should I do if during the process of forming images the client has very strong negative emotional or body experiences, and cannot continue to work with them?**

Do whatever you normally do to support the client when this happens. Also, see this article for how to work with difficult metaphors:

Lawley, J. & Fail, K. (2013). Macabre Metaphors. *Acuity* Vol. 4.

<https://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/339/1/Macabre-Metaphors/>

## **8. What should I do if more and more different images appear during the formation of metaphors, and this does not bring relief or awareness?**

The number of images is not an important factor. How the client *relates* to the images is what matters. If the client keeps producing new images and that does not appear to help them, you can ask

“Which image are you drawn to, in relation to what you would like to have happen?”

and focus on that image (even if further images arise).

## **9. What do I do if the metaphorical landscape evokes negative emotions and body sensations in the client and does not transform, just “freezes”?**

Work with what is happening in the moment, i.e. the “freezes”. This reaction is very likely representative of how the client responds to traumatic experiences outside of therapy, and so you will be working ‘live’ with the process of “freezing”.

Also, I would be very careful of labelling any emotions or bodily sensations “negative”. All emotions play a role in the psychic economy of the client, they all carry information and provide feedback to the client about their reaction to events. Of course, there may be some feelings the client would like to diminish but that does not make them “negative”, just “unwanted”.

A clean way of working with emotions the *client* finds difficult is to ask:

“And when you have [their name for the emotion/feeling], what would you like to have happen?”

And then to develop their desired outcome for how they would like to respond when they have the feeling. This is part of the PRO (Problem-Remedy-Outcome) model we have developed:

Tompkins, P. & Lawley, J. (2006). Coaching for P.R.O.s., Coach the Coach (Feb.).  
<https://cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/31/1/Coaching-for-PROs/>

## **10. What if the client is prone to dissociation? He can create images and metaphors, but they are “empty”, do not evoke an emotional and bodily response?**

Symbolic Modelling does not aim to “evoke emotional and bodily response”. It aims to work with whatever the client is experiencing (including dissociation) and to facilitate them to make the changes they would like to make.

Often, a lack of “affect” is an indication of a protective process that needs to be honoured and respectfully worked with.

Some people simply have a low-level of affect and that’s okay. They can still make improvements and lead fulfilling lives.

Also, remember, metaphors work at multiple levels simultaneously. Even if the client’s body does not show any obvious responses during the therapy, the metaphor may well have an effect outside of the session.

End.