

The therapeutic use of a cartoon as a way to gain influence over a problem

Peter Ord & Emma

Peter Ord works as a clinical psychologist in a community mental health team in Eastern England, UK. He can be contacted via email: peter.ord@smhp.nhs.uk

This paper describes how Emma used a cartoon in therapy to gain a perspective and influence over a problem in her life. It has been written in collaboration with Emma, with additional first-hand accounts by her and others. The purpose of submitting the cartoon for publication is to provide a testimony to the value Emma placed on comedy. An example of this was how Emma imagined a cartoon could portray a problem and the process of gaining influence over it, and this paper focuses on a cartoon we developed as a consequence of such a perspective. The paper begins with the background and context in which the cartoon was created and then describes the effects for all concerned.

Keywords: cartoon, comical approach, therapy

EMMA'S BACKGROUND

Emma called the problem she came to tackle in therapy the 'What Ifs'. Emma was thirty-four years old at this time and had received about ten years of support from mental health services to deal with the 'What Ifs' and their consequences prior to her therapy. In Emma's case notes, several psychiatric diagnoses

had been used to describe her experiences and difficulties. Emma was also currently receiving psychiatric drugs on a regular basis, and regular support from a Community Psychiatric Nurse and Psychiatrist. She lived with her partner and dog in a large market town in England.

THE THERAPEUTIC CONTEXT OF THE CARTOON

Factors making the cartoon possible included the use of a narrative approach, the value Emma placed on humour, and my own (PO) longstanding interest in using humour in therapeutic contexts. I thought that a narrative approach, and externalising conversations in particular, could provide Emma with an opportunity to gain a perspective and perhaps an influence over her problems. Another reason for taking a narrative approach was due to the fact that several other therapists had worked with Emma to little or no effect, but a narrative approach had not been used to date. From her records, there was no indication of what was important to her, and what she valued.¹ On this basis, even if the longstanding influence of the 'What Ifs' could not be thwarted, I thought it could be worth providing an opportunity for Emma to give voice to aspects of life that were precious to her, and which the 'What Ifs' may have overshadowed. After discussing the options with Emma, she opted to give narrative therapy a try.

Externalising conversations

Externalising conversations support people to see the problem as the problem, to place it within a social and cultural context, and to be less defined and determined by the problem (White, 2007). We engaged in externalising conversations to understand the social and historical context to the 'What Ifs'. It turned out that they were predated by another problem which was named in therapy as 'secrecy'. Externalising conversations revealed the extent to which Emma's life had been affected by secrecy, including:

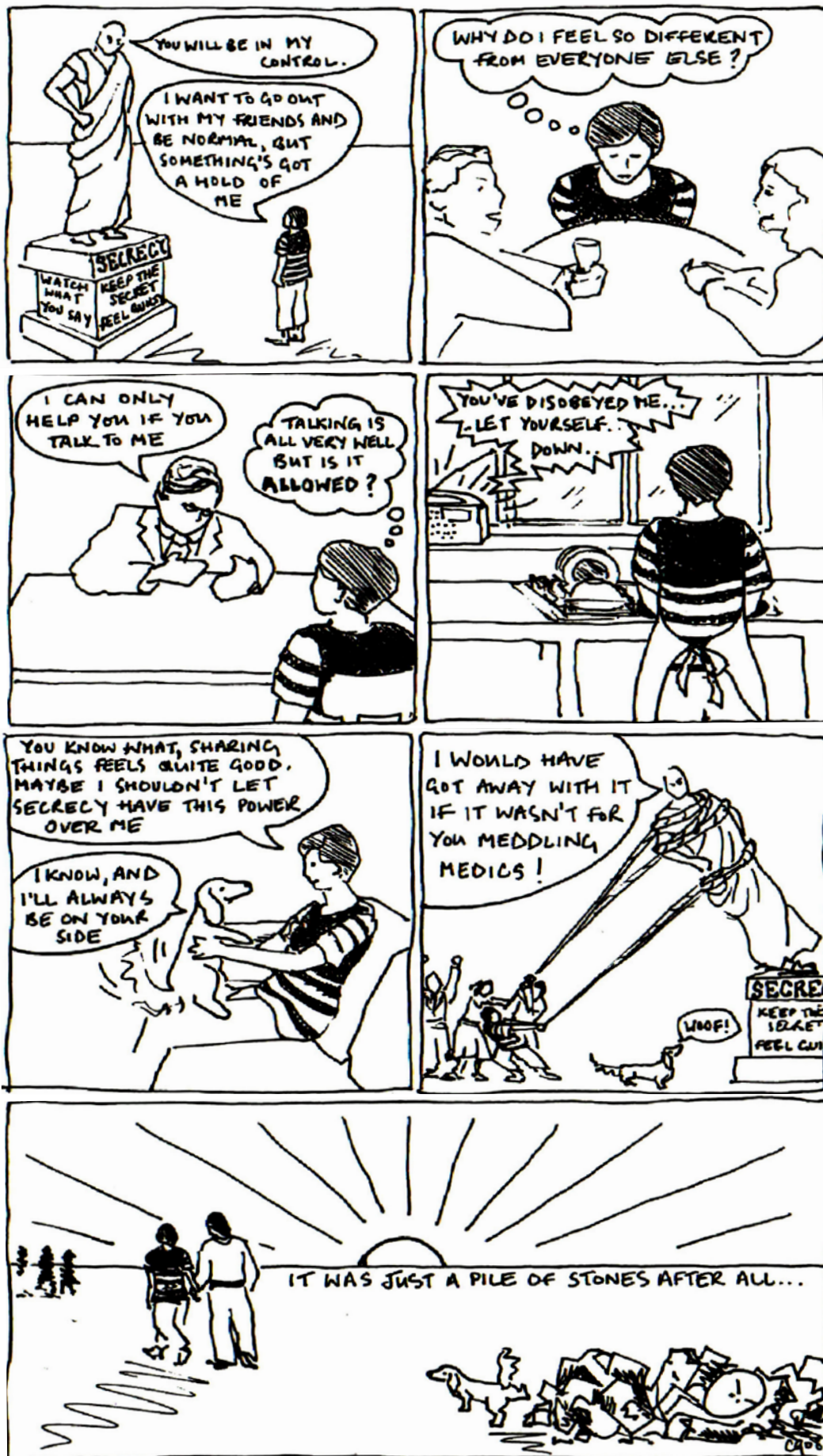
- having to watch what she said to people
- feeling different from other people and other families
- being careful about what she thought
- becoming very isolated from her friends
- becoming very tired
- being angry about not having a 'normal' life
- suffering a lot of anxiety
- restricting what she ate as a punishment for transgressing secrecy's rules
- having thoughts that harm may come to members of her family should she not comply with secrecy's rules ('What If' thoughts)

- resorting to harming herself to manage her distress
- just existing and not having any hopes for her life.

It was clear Emma preferred to take a predominantly fun and light-hearted approach in therapy sessions and to have a comical attitude to her problems. This was important to Emma as she found that this made her problems seem less scary than they once were. This discovery then opened up the possibility of introducing funny stories and anecdotes into therapeutic conversations. It was one of these anecdotes that provided the foundation for the idea of the cartoon:

The idea of creating the cartoon came about in one of my (Emma) sessions with Peter. We both have come to an understanding that, although therapy needs to be serious at times, it can also have an element of fun. Picturing my worries has made them seem less significant, so the perfect idea was to put these together in a cartoon. It was important to document a few key points in the cartoon – for example, the power the statue of secrecy had over me and, how with hope, it was reduced to a mass of stones.

During an externalising conversation, I (PO) had asked Emma what image came to mind when thinking of secrecy. Emma described an image of a tall stone statue and, when imagining how the story might unfold, Emma said the statue of secrecy could be pulled over in an overthrow of power. This story reminded me of the end of *Scooby Doo*, an American cartoon I had watched as a child. This always featured the villain of the story sitting on the ground being unveiled by one of the Scooby Doo gang, who would stand over him with others from the local community. The villain invariably said something like, 'I would've got away with it if it wasn't for you meddling kids'. We later agreed to try to actually create a cartoon to further develop this comical approach, and draw on this imagery. By having a permanent comical record of the story of how Emma gained an influence over secrecy, we hoped that this influence and any positive effects in Emma's life could be sustained.



The process of creating the cartoon itself involved Emma deciding what each scene should depict, and therefore choosing which were the key points in her life. During these discussions, we recorded the characters and actions involved. Luckily, Emma had a good friend who was a talented artist, who she contacted to ask if she could help translate the ideas for each scene into an actual cartoon. Emma's friend was keen to help and actually took the cartoon away on holiday to finish it off. She made two copies, one black and white, and one in full cartoon-style colour.

THE EFFECTS OF CREATING THE CARTOON

Below are some reflections about how producing the cartoon had influenced the lives of those involved. As well as describing her own reflections, Emma talked to her husband, Andrew, and her artistic friend, Clarissa, to find out what effect the cartoon had for them. She also described what she felt it was like for her dog, Hervey. I (PO) also provide some reflections.

For Emma

Producing the cartoon has been both helpful and fun and has had some promising results. Portraying my fears in a comical form helped me see them for what they are – which is slightly ridiculous. It has taken away the seriousness from them and helped me see them as silly, meaningless thoughts.

For Hervey

Hervey has played an important part in the cartoon. He is loyal to me to the end and has helped with getting me out however I feel. As a result of the cartoon, he is able to feel my new confidence and enjoy our company.

For Andrew

In seeing the cartoon, I was able to get an idea of what Emma had been through. It has been helpful to me and given me an understanding of Emma's past. The result of the cartoon has been positive and has given Emma a new confidence of which I am happy to be a part.

For Clarissa

I enjoyed doing the cartoon, especially as it has helped Emma overcome problems from her past. I thought the cartoon was an original way of portraying Emma's story and I was very glad to be involved.

For Peter

Having the opportunity to join with Emma in taking a comical perspective on her life was a very refreshing experience for me, and one that would not have been possible had Emma not made it clear that she valued such a perspective. Indeed, I can recall the very session when the idea of the cartoon was discussed and leaving the session on such a high! Although I was often pulled back into a serious 'professional' mode in between sessions, and felt slightly guilty for enjoying working with Emma in this way, these reservations were quickly brushed aside when Emma told me how much she benefitted from taking a comical perspective in life.

I was also reminded of my longstanding interest in the use of humour within therapeutic conversations, an interest which I gained a few years earlier while working in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health service. Working with Emma, and witnessing how much she benefitted from a humorous and comical perspective in therapy, has given me a determination to sustain this interest, to make it more present in my work, and to share it with others. On reflection, this has also reinforced to me the importance of being ever-curious about the kind of perspectives that are useful to people, and how these perspectives are not grounded in the knowledges of the professional disciplines but rather are embedded in people's own knowledge about life and their preferred ways of living.

Closing words from Emma

Doing the cartoon was both fun and educational. Not only did it help me visualise with pictures what I once thought to be everyday life, but it also helped me to see that it was a distorted view of what I believed to be normal. I feel very pleased with the results of the cartoon and would recommend it as a successful way of seeing your problems in a totally new light. I now feel I can draw closure on that particular time in my life.

NOTE

1. From a narrative perspective, values are emphasised as foundations for knowledge about life and skills in living (White, 2007).

REFERENCE

- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: W.W. Norton.