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Holding onto fragments: reflections on using mind maps in therapy

karen partridge and marie

encounters with mind maps

Karen: I discovered mind maps in the late 1980s when Sharon Pettle came to talk to us about using them to record sessions during my systemic training at the KCC Foundation. Sharon's fresh and lively approach and her array of coloured pens stuck in my mind. Mind maps fitted for me with the creative and divergent way that I like to think. Tony Buzan (1993) developed the use of mind maps as a way to cut through the linear, left brain dominance of our narrative forms, harnessing right brain activity and the use of images and colours to create maps for thinking. I had recently been reintroduced to mind maps as a way to help my young daughter manage difficulties in sequencing as a result of dyslexia.

Marie first came across Tony Buzan's ideas in an article in the Observer (1985) about dream imagery. Some years later she picked up a book on memory, where Buzan suggested creating a picture and a sequence to aid recall and was amazed that she was able to use it with 100% recall. She was taken with these ideas but didn't put them together with mind maps until our therapy. When we started working together we happened to both watch a TV programme about genius in children where Buzan used mind maps to work with a number of children whose performance improved dramatically over the course of a year. We were both excited by the programme and I bought the book, *Children and Mind Maps* (Buzan, 2003), which I lent to Marie. Marie described herself as 'smitten by the book, I tried it out and it really astonished me'.

Marie and I worked together in therapy over two years ago, meeting every fortnight until recently. I felt a strong connection with Marie as an artist and a thinker and also as a mother of a daughter a few years younger than my own. At the start of our sessions I found it hard to keep up with Marie, whose mind shifted so fast and the idea of using mind maps in our sessions to map where we were going and where we had been, seemed to make sense to us both.

how we used mind maps in therapy

I would start the session with a question like, 'What do you think is important to tell me about today?' drawing an oval containing our names on a flip chart with the date. I would try to map our conversation as offshoots of the centre, using different colours for different themes working in a clockwise direction. I would ask clarifying questions such as, 'What theme do you think this idea fits with, or do you think that this is a new theme?' and exploratory questions such as, 'I'm wondering if you think that is an aspect of an artistic temperament?' My aim was to take an appreciative stance and to draw out abilities and qualities, 'thickening up' stories of connection (White, 1992). On the whole I drew and asked questions although occasionally Marie would grab a pen and add her own connections.

Figure 1 illustrates one of our sessions using a Mind Map. The session started with Marie talking about the church and how important it felt to be connected to something outside, especially for her daughter's sake. The map works in a

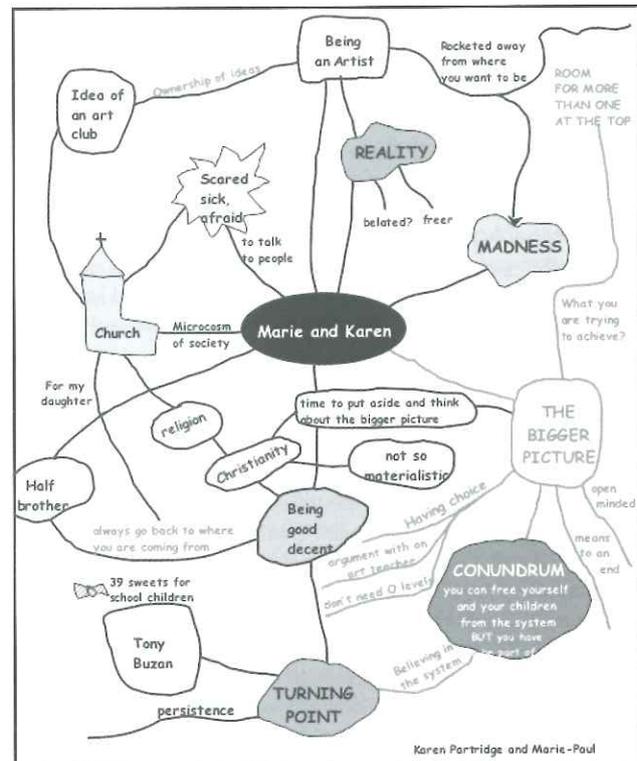


Figure 1. A Mind Map of a Therapy Session.

clockwise direction from the illustration of the church, every new idea being connected to the central oval. So reading the map like a clock shows the progression of the session. Ideas that connect back to previous themes are drawn as branches. The main themes of the session are the coloured shapes. So at the start of the session we talked about being involved in the church and an idea Marie had of setting up an art club for the children but feeling very scared about talking to new people. This led to bigger dilemmas such as reality and madness, including Marie's identity as an artist and the sense of getting rocketed away into madness. This conversation resulted in the new and important idea of the 'Bigger Picture,' an alternative story (White, 1992), about what Marie wants to achieve. This linked to ideas about choice and free will, and we identified a rebellious streak, which had led to an argument about qualifications with an art teacher. We were able to name a conundrum: the wish for freedom, but the need to be part of the system. This led to an important turning point where Marie talked about her persistence. She talked of being inspired by seeing Tony Buzan talk as part of a maths trip with the school (where sweets were given out for the children), and the way in which this had inspired her to go on with her creative ideas.

One of the pleasures in our work together has been sharing books and ideas, sometimes about the use of mind maps, sometimes not. We have used mind maps in our sessions and Marie has applied them to a wide variety of creative developments including ideas for relaxation, an idea for fund

raising at school, 'Mums on the Run' (see leaflet on page 24), a mind map for her daughter, ideas for a maths project, a music CD, the church fete, etc.

reflections

When Marie and I started working together, one of the things that Marie wanted to achieve was to understand her experience of psychosis and to address social anxiety. I thought that a reflection on our work together and in particular on the way that we had used mind maps in therapy might be relevant to this issue of Context, so I invited Marie to join me in putting these thoughts together. What follows is a selection of questions and answers and the odd reflection put together by post when our work ended and Marie achieved a long-held ambition to move out of London.

Marie: 'When I first met you I don't think I knew that we were going to be meeting twice a month to do therapy. I had a lot of worries about our daughter's future with us as parents. I thought my husband and I were coping fairly well with the domestic and practical sides of her needs but felt I couldn't stand back and see if she was really safe with us emotionally in the long term. Would our problems be passed on to her in ways I couldn't see? Part of me didn't want to have therapy because it meant meeting someone you don't know and not knowing if that person or therapy can really help. I didn't want to talk about the past, relive memories and get bogged down in personal history.'

If I remember rightly, I brought you a map of my family tree at our second or third meeting, the intention being to speed up the explanations of who was who. I also showed you photographs of my family and friends, for me that feels like communicating a better impression of people I know than just a list of names of people you've never met. Perhaps you felt that those initial meetings went better when I talked through visual aids.

When you started to use the flip chart I first thought I was helping you to understand or keep clear in your mind where I was coming from but I found them very helpful for focusing and I liked the fun of building the maps, the different coloured lines and when it felt necessary, flipping back the paper to a previous map. Changing gear from past to current seemed a much more productive way to get through what felt like a labyrinth of thoughts and ideas. I found working with the maps, creative, progressive and liberating, at times very thought provoking and exciting. It wasn't just the contents of the maps, I liked the physicality of making new lines turning the paper, leaving aside a constellation of thoughts and facts and when it seemed helpful, returning to previous pages and recognising routes of thought. I think the maps and our shared input-output created an unthreatening and helpful process.'

Karen: 'When you first came to see me one of the things that you talked about was wanting to understand why it was that you had some psychotic experiences when you were a student. This isn't something that we have really talked much about, what do you think about this now?'

M: 'I remember you saying how vividly I described the psychotic episodes I had as a student, the details of conversations and events that had led to my breaking down. Describing what had happened twenty years before we met was like watching a film in my head, broken up by a slide show of outside issues that had mattered. I had relived that first breakdown in my head many many times, trying to understand what had gone wrong. For the following three years everything seemed to revolve around the three or four weeks when my life went completely haywire.'

The condition under which I'd be allowed to return to college was that I first submitted two completed theses. It

felt as though everything I tried to write would be scrutinised and found wanting by a panel of tutors who were angry with me and really did not understand what a breakdown was. As one of my college friends said, 'we all thought you were faking it' (the breakdown). When enough people are angry with you, even if you understand why they see things differently, not being able to put it right again feels like failure. That first breakdown still marks the end of who I once was in a strange way. That one brief sequence of events changed so many things, but more than anything I think it changed my ability to cope; when you're too serious and afraid, so is the life you make. I half expect to make mistakes because I'm not the person I'm supposed to be. I don't know if you know the line from George Michael's song 'Guilty feet don't walk in rhythm', but I think fearful feet look much the same.

I still get so excited when things start to work out; a really powerful sign to me that things are going well is the response from other people, especially normal relaxed and positive responses. When that happens it's as though too many lights go on at once in my head and within hours I can feel burnt out. If that sequence repeats several times I lose track of sleep and food and things get stressful, complicated and scary. There have been so many other things going on this last year that I don't recall thinking so much about the breakdowns, though I can still picture many things instantly that are as clear as a film that I could have watched last night or last week, and I still get flashbacks.'

K: 'I'm trying to remember how we first started talking about mind maps and using them in our sessions, do you remember?'

M: 'I drew you a sketch of my family tree and then we talked about my family and if I'm not mistaken you tried to clarify who was who and where and when. I said that I found your diagrams really helpful in locking down key points and data. I think you used different colour felts and symbols to group data and we began a sort of dialogue via the charts and it helped me to explain things better when we could both refer to the chart and I lost my threads of thought less, and I watched things building and making sense.'

K: 'I remember thinking that mind maps might be useful as a way to map all the expanding trains of thought in the early sessions but at some point you started to use them and bought in some books about them. How do you think we influenced each other in this?'

M: 'After a couple of sessions we used the flip charts more intensely. I know this really grounded many of my unconnected thoughts. Sometimes I feel I have too much to communicate/process and not enough time to explain. Anxieties, loss of clarity or confused thoughts add to a sense of the futility of lengthy explanations.'

A big part in my therapy with you is orientation in relation to where I am and where convention lies or the stability to mix and evolve and enjoy being with people without constantly fretting that I'm somehow out of whack or on another plane(t). Sometimes I have to deal with fears of being non-includable and I'm over-sensitive to any sign from other people that I come across as strange in a way that shows negatively in people's responses to me.

A previous therapist said I seemed to be in a state of chaos and I thought this over and over again trying to focus and refocus, and in my mind I realised what I had been doing before that conversation and many times after was genuinely bewildering, to myself especially. I seemed to be in and out of rational and connectable behaviours. I seemed to be the only person who witnessed how many states of mind I really went through in hours or days calm, panicky, up, down, serious, carefree and reacting in ways I couldn't understand to anything or anyone. A piece of paper on the floor; the colour of a pair

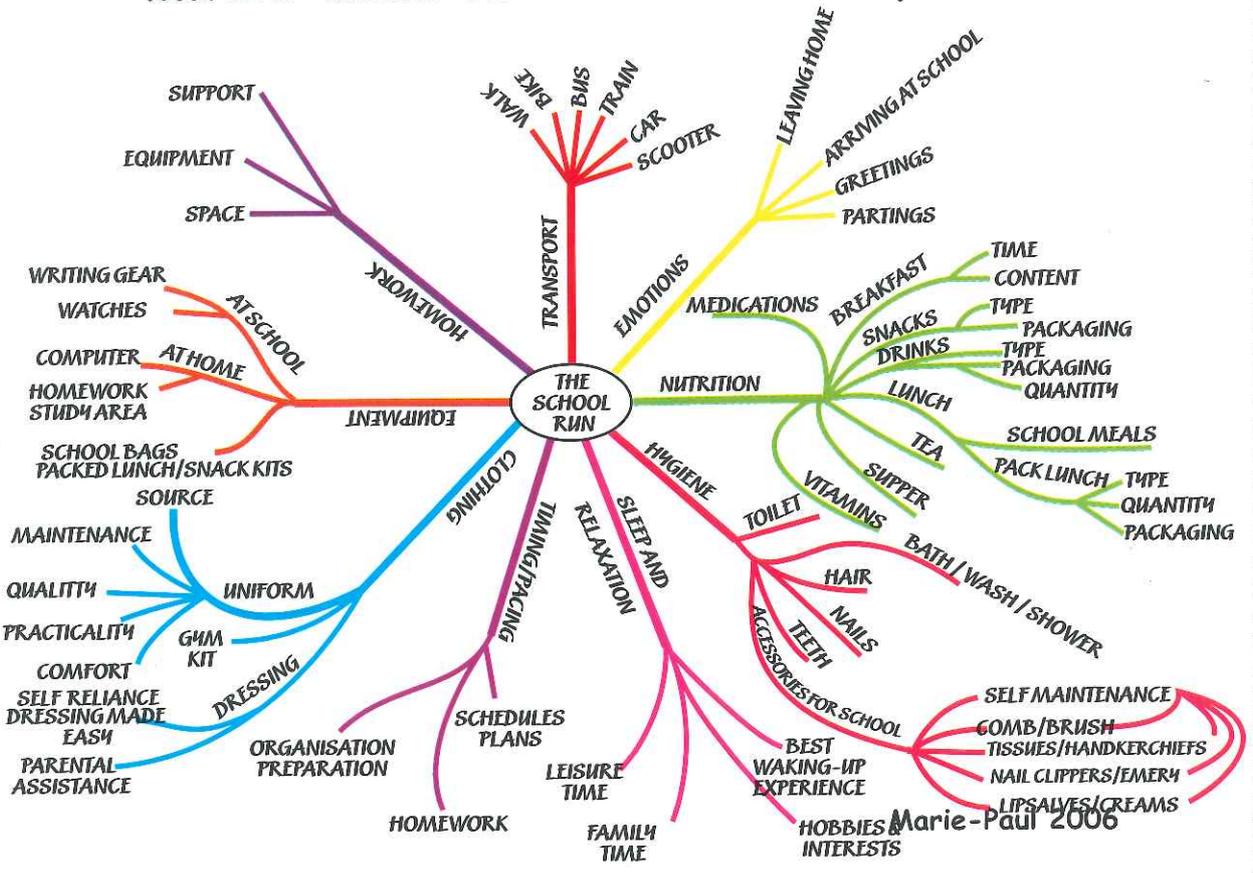
Karen Partridge and Marie.

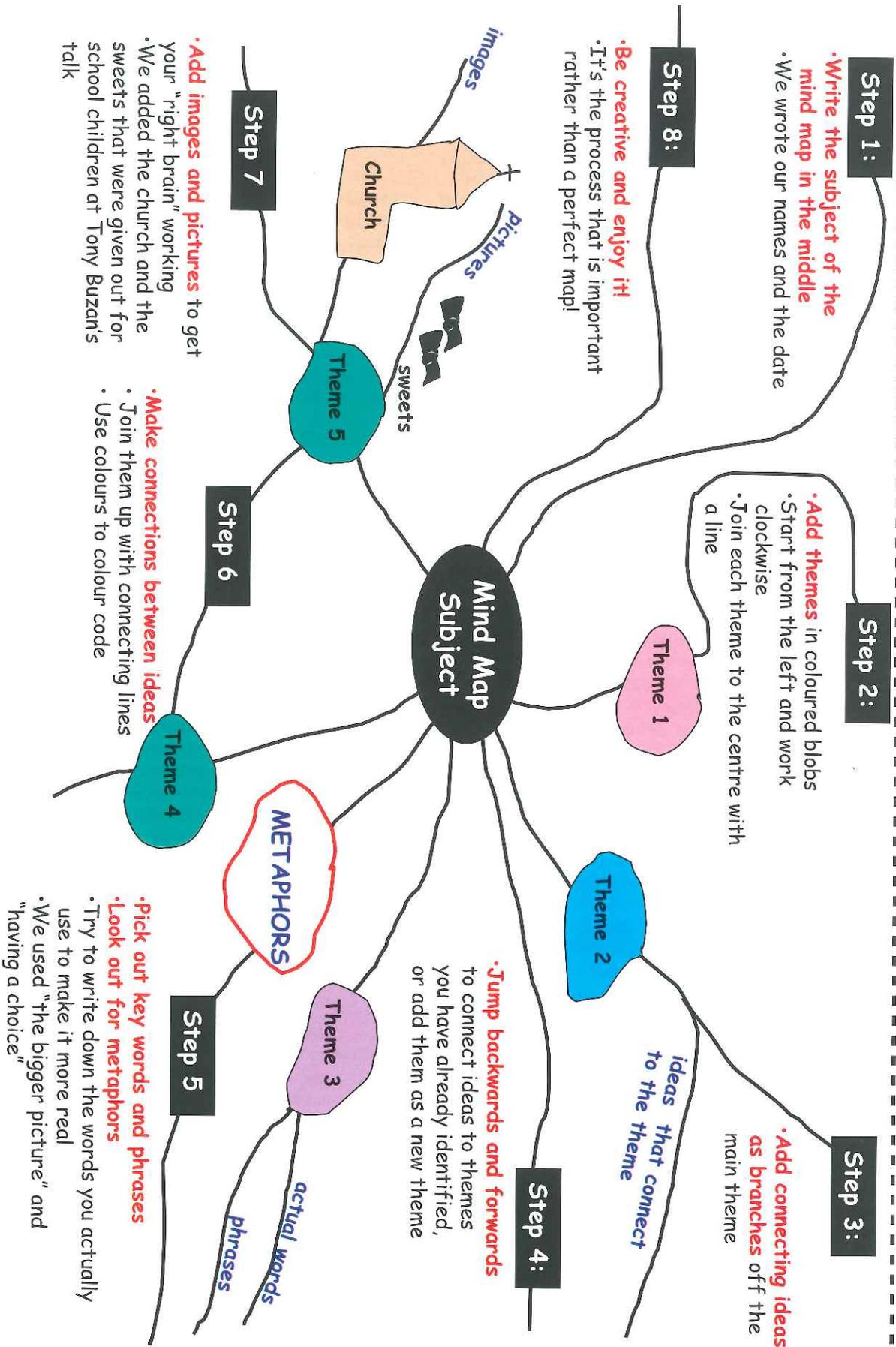


Reference: Buzan, B. The Mind Map Book, BBC Books 1995

fold here

Marie's "Mums on the Run" Mind Map





of shoes and who was wearing them, the actions of an animal even. I didn't realise I was doing this until this was pointed out. I felt I had been way past lost and didn't know it. I don't have a sure-fire way of escaping chaotic feelings but practical progress reassures me a lot. If I pick my daughter up in time, if we've eaten three proper meals, got to bed at a reasonable time, better still, if my head is clear enough to make other things happen, fix things, write things, make things. The maps we made together reassured me I was saying concrete things, thinking and making sense. I could feel progress and hope and I could feel that I was making sense to you. A strong part of therapy for me was finding my bearings again and getting well enough to be a good parent to my daughter. I had and have strong feelings about what a parent should try to do or be and I dreaded her being harmed in any way by my illness.'

K: 'What is it you like about mind maps? How do you think they have been useful for you?'

M: 'I think mind maps of seemingly unconnected thoughts and facts make more sense visually than a list. It feels intuitively more familiar to how I think and I suspect other people think especially when they are in chaos, which I am sure I've recognised in the behaviour of some patients that I have met in hospitals. The flip chart helped me structure memories and data so they could be accessed/evaluated/sorted out/disentangled and not lost.'

The influence the maps had on our sessions was initially at least a very helpful means to structure what I felt to be an overwhelming jumble of disorganised thoughts, data and emotions, freeing us up to converse more naturally about real issues, I think we both recognised this, or at least you could see that I found it very helpful.'

K: 'At some point we stopped using them in the sessions, what do you think about this?'

M: 'I really don't know why you stopped the maps. Perhaps though I don't remember exactly at what point we stopped or reduced the use of the flip chart, you could see that it was no longer necessary and had even become an obstacle to free flowing conversation.'

K: 'What were your thoughts about writing about our use of mind maps for Context?'

M: 'Very simply that other patients/therapist could benefit from mind mapping as I know I did.'

K: 'I'm wondering what ideas you have got about mind maps and psychosis?'

M: 'I think it may be an aid to getting out of the labyrinth of insane processes and thoughts.'

K: 'I'm wondering what you thought about me asking you if you would like to contribute to Context?'

M: 'Thrilled that you asked me but scared I might not be able to deliver.'

K: 'We have been working together for a long time, what do you think has been most helpful for you?'

M: 'Just being able to talk in an environment that I trusted and felt safe in. I felt I couldn't trust my own thoughts, what they meant when I conveyed them to you, and whether they were worthwhile disentangling.'

K: 'What has been least helpful?'

M: 'Sometimes the gaps of two weeks or more between sessions and coming to see you with overriding events that distracted from the connecting conversations of sessions.'

K: 'What will you take away with you from those sessions?'

M: 'Some of what we talked about may only come to fruition in the future. I think therapy with you prevented me from at least giving up on being a part of the real world, but I still feel I haven't achieved that. Ideally I feel my daughter would be happier if I were a good role model and more than just a good parent, if I could stabilise enough to be creative

and move beyond being simply her guardian/protector/facilitator.'

I liked how the maps seemed to work but I thought that Tony Buzan's maps were for already organised people who wanted to organise their minds and lives still further e.g. refine their memory skills, restructure their lives to make room for writing a book, taking up singing etc. For me a more basic form of mapping was helpful, at a level of necessity, to orientate, to hold those thoughts.'

karen's reflections

'I love Marie's description of the physicality of the process of creating the mind maps, which I also enjoyed and found very grounding. It reminds me of Wittgenstein's (1996) idea that we were performing meaning together. In the act of committing thoughts to paper we were making meaning-action and action-meaning links. Mind maps could also be thought about as a way of externalising, (White, 1989), creating space to think and explore new meanings. Perhaps we stopped using the maps when we both joined the same grammar, in Wittgenstein's sense.'

reflections on reflections

When Marie and I reflected on what we had written she felt that it was strange to see her thoughts in written form and to see the article working and making sense. She said that she felt it was no longer a part of her, but a part of something broader. She felt very happy with it but felt that her belief in the method went beyond what we had written. She raised two main dilemmas. Firstly she was concerned that other clients looking at the mind map of our session might see it as overwhelming. She wanted to be able to illustrate that the map is built up gradually step-by-step. She described a mind map as 'an invitation to think about fragments and to put them back together in a healthy way.' The second point she made was that she had wanted it to be simple, useful and applicable for clients and therapists. She had the idea of including a leaflet, which people could take away to try out and use mind maps as a way to go forward in their own lives. This idea has led to the inclusion of the leaflet with this article (see page 24) called, 'Have a go at mind maps.' We hope that you will cut it out and have a go!

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Karen Partridge is a consultant clinical psychologist in systemic psychotherapy, Central and North West London Mental Health Trust and tutor at the KCC Foundation. She lives in London with her husband, son and daughter. Marie is an artist and designer. She now lives in the South West with her husband and daughter.

'No wonder your thoughts are feeling so unconnected today. I accidentally picked up the wrong piece of paper and you've been trying to explain things using my London Underground Map for the last half hour.'

