

Healing illusions

The use of 'magic tricks' to help children
make sense of trauma

Mark Allenby¹

Abstract: This article focuses on the creative use of a magic trick to help children make sense of the effects of traumatic life events and the process of recovery.

Keywords: trauma; traumatic life events; psycho-education; magic; illusion; recovery

1. Senior Lecturer in Social Work

Address for correspondence: University of Northampton, Park Campus,
Boughton Green Road, Northampton. NN2 7AL.
mark.allenby@northampton.ac.uk

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Introduction

This article explores the use of an illusion to help children and young people make sense of traumatic events. It is based on the writer's experience of using an illusion, a 'magic trick', within his work in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). The article briefly outlines a narrative understanding of trauma. It then give a description of a specific illusion that the writer has found acts as a metaphor which helps children make sense of the experience of psychological trauma and the recovery process. The article finishes by exploring a few caveats about this particular approach and point to a few ways in which the effectiveness of the technique may be enhanced or diminished.

In a medical setting the word trauma is used to refer to a physical injury, stemming as it does from the Greek word for 'wound'. In this article the word trauma is used in its more common sense of 'a deeply distressing or disturbing event' (NODE, 1998). Within a CAMHS setting this definition is too general to be useful. As a result the preferred term will be a 'traumatic life event' and is defined as an event that created strong feelings of fear and which leads to persistent emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes which are adversely affecting a child's personal or social well-being.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl observed that despair is suffering without meaning (Frankl, 1959). In many ways this definition serves as a useful start point for understanding trauma. When people are able to make sense of experiences, no matter how painful or distressing, then they are unlikely to suffer despair. When those experiences are perceived to be without meaning, and especially when they are experiences that fall outside an individual's view of themselves and the world, this is likely to be experienced as a trauma (Kacandes, 2012). From a narrative perspective something will be experienced as a trauma when it is not able to be integrated into the existing narrative of the person's life. If a child has grown up in a home where there is discord between the parents that is open and acknowledged then a parental separation, even if upsetting, is not experienced as traumatic, as the narrative of 'my parents don't like each other' is not violated by this event. However if a child believes that their parents love each other and are fully committed to each other finds their parents separating then this is much more likely to be experienced as a trauma.

Children face many challenging events in life: abuse, accidents, illnesses, bereavements, being the victim of crime, family breakdown, bullying and so on (Carr, 2006). As Carr(2006) notes, the severity of the trauma caused by

these events will be multi-factorial, depending on: the predisposing factors, such as attachment history, genetic vulnerability, previous traumas; the precipitating factors, such as the specific nature of the traumatic event; and maintaining and the protective factors such as the reactions of significant others and the effectiveness of their support networks. Many of these factors are ultimately unchangeable or beyond the child's control, however the extent to which the child is able to create a coherent narrative that includes the traumatic life events, a life-story, will be key in determining the speed and effectiveness of the child's recovery from those events.

Children who have experienced traumatic life events may be referred to support services for a number of different reasons. Most of these will related to one or more of the three classic trauma reactions: arousal, the on-going triggering of the fight-or-flight response long after the traumatic event; re-enactment, including flash-backs and the obsessive replaying of the events of the trauma; and dissociation and avoidance, the loss of feelings, a sense of deadness and foreshortening of the future that robs life of its sense of purpose (Bentovim, 2009). Kacandes (2012) notes that while these symptoms have many causes, including biological changes in the brain, they all have a relationship to the disruption in the child's narrative. Trauma is in a very literal sense meaningless. It is not senseless in that the senses work overtime, but the brain is not able to make any sense of what the senses perceive, even to the point of being unable to differentiate what is being perceived in the 'here-and-now' and what is being recalled from the 'there-and-then' of the traumatic event.

This theoretical understanding of why certain life events lead to trauma is important, perhaps even vital, for workers who are working with children who have experienced trauma. The difficulty comes when attempting to translate this knowledge into practice when working with a child who has experienced traumatic life events; in trying to find ways to bring meaning to the meaningless, and sense to the senseless that is overloading a traumatised child's senses and thoughts.

When working with traumatised children I was careful to make it clear to each child that their reactions were a 'natural' reaction to an abnormal event. I avoided calling them 'normal' as I knew that no traumatised child thinks that what they are going through is 'normal'. However when I first worked at CAMHS I struggled to find a way to explain in child-friendly way what is meant by trauma; I struggled too to help children find meaning within the thoughts, feelings and reactions that are so common in people who have been traumatised.

However I eventually found a creative and effective way to do this through the art of illusion, or what is often called ‘magic’, although I am cautious of that word as it can scare some people and mislead others. There is no ‘magic’ to making sense of traumatic life events, only the innate human capacity to bring meaning to even the most challenging life event. What follows is a description of one technique to explain to a child or young person what is meant by trauma. The mechanics of the trick can be found in most beginners’ guides to magic trick, such as Mark Wilson’s *Cyclopedia of Magic*. (Wilson, 1996) It requires minimal manual dexterity and any child who has the ability to write their name or tie their shoe-laces will have the physical skill level to perform this trick. The focus will be on the aspects of the trick that are relevant to supporting a child in understanding trauma.

Having set the scene the article will now describe the details of how a magic trick can be used as a metaphor for explaining traumatic life events.

Creating an alliance

Building rapport with the child establishes an environment of safety. This can be done in a variety of ways, for example by talking about their interests and strengths. It is also important at this point to explain the limits of confidentiality and give a broad overview of your role and the goals for the work. Once there is a working alliance move on to the explanation.

The set up

The worker begins by asking the child whether or not they knew that they had a life-story. The worker then explains that this story helps us make sense of our lives, and that this story is made up of many strands; strands to do with family and friends; strands to do with school and hobbies; strands to do with where we live and how we spend our time; and explains that these strands are woven together like the strands in a rope. At this point the worker shows the child a length of ordinary rope and how the strands that make up the rope and asks them to hold the rope and pull it to check that the rope was strong, perhaps making the point that they could feel safe that this rope would not break.

The Illusion

The worker then takes a pair of scissors from a pocket, bag or briefcase and says that sometimes in life things happen that can cut the rope, giving a list such events: illnesses, being bullied, a bereavement, having the house broken into, a fire, an accident and so on, with one of these events being either the same or similar to the one that has happened to the child.

Whilst doing this the worker takes the scissors and cuts the rope apparently into two equal halves, before holding the rope so the child can see the ends of each strand. The worker then says that this is what adults mean when they talk about a 'trauma': an event that cuts our life-story in two, with one strand being before the trauma, what life was like then, and the other strand being after the trauma, and what life is like now.

The worker puts the scissors down and knots the ends of the rope together before holding the rope up with the knot in the middle. They ask the child what they can see when they look at the rope. The children will usually say 'the knot'. The worker explains that the knot is like the thoughts and feelings that people get when they have been through a trauma, it is there in the middle of their life story, and it is the first thing they notice when they look at their life story. The worker talks about how the rope no longer feels as strong as it did before it had been cut; how we do not feel as safe with the knot in the middle in case it comes undone.

Winding the rope around their hand the worker explains how people often let their feelings get wound up and hide them like the knot in the palm of their hand. Things now feel hidden, and secret, but the knot has not gone away, no matter how hard we try to hide it.

The worker carefully explains to the child that although these things have happened, they are in the past, provided the worker knows this is the case, and talks about how things have moved on, the illness has been treated; the person who abused them is not in their life any more, or whatever else fits the situation. To illustrate this the worker puts the scissors away in the pocket, bag or brief case.

Next they explain that the way we are able to overcome trauma is to find ways to take that knot, the thing that has happened and the feelings and reactions that come from that, and put them back into the whole of the story of our lives. The worker continues by saying that when people are able to talk about what has happened and make sense of it, then it is possible to do just that, to have a whole story without a big gap or knot in the middle, and that can be helped by working together to overcome the

thoughts and feelings that have been upsetting them.

At this point the worker gets the child to hold one end of the rope, and then slowly unravel the rope from around their fist, until both the worker and the child are looking at a complete, unbroken, strong rope, with no knot. This is likely to get a range of different responses, from intrigued puzzlement to delighted surprise, and nearly always a request to examine the rope. The worker finishes by allowing the child to examine the rope and see for themselves that the rope is whole and unbroken.

The explanation and follow-up

In the explanation the worker repeats the key points that traumatic reactions are completely natural, affecting fire-fighters and soldiers as much as anyone else, and so it does not mean that there is anything wrong with the child, only that they have been through a really difficult event, and one that, up to that point, they had not been able to make sense of. The worker talks about how, once we can make sense of events, they become part of our life-story and no longer cause the same problems as they did when they stood out like the knot in the rope. They explain the fact that the things that had happened would still be there, a part of the story of their life, but it would be just one part of the rope and no longer stand out as it did before. The worker is clear that nothing will take away what has happened, but by making some sense of it all, we could limit the effects it is having on their life and help them get on with their life in a way that suited them better.

Having done this the worker teaches the child the mechanics of the trick and has them practice the trick until they can perform it smoothly and confidently. The worker ends by explaining that what had seemed amazing was really quite simple, but that they still needed to practice it before they could do it well.

Commentary

Over a period of nine years working in CAMHS I used this procedure many times and it never failed to build a collaborative relationship and to provide some comfort for the children affected by traumatic life events. At a most basic level it provides two powerful metaphors. Firstly, the trick itself provides a metaphor to understand what initially is experienced as a chaotic and distressing reaction to the traumatic event. Secondly the learning of the trick stands as a metaphor for the process of recovery: a simple trick once you knew the secret; but a trick that takes time, patience and practice to become really effective.

More generally I believe that the use of illusions/magic tricks, provides workers with a powerful tool to engage with children. It is extremely difficult for adults to enter the world of a child. One of the key reasons for this is that adults forget what they have learned, and therefore assume that this knowledge is natural. This was demonstrated in an episode of the comedy 'Father Ted' where Father Ted holds up a small plastic cow and says 'Small', then points out the window presumably at cows in a field and says, 'Far away.' This strikes the audience as funny as we cannot imagine not being able to tell the difference between a 'small' object near and a large object 'far away.' But this ability is not innate; children have to learn not to believe their eyes in order to make sense of what they see. This means that below a certain age children live in a magical world; a world so far removed from the adult world that most adults rarely, if ever enter this world. When a child watches a plane taking off at the airport they quite reasonably assume that the plane physically shrinks as it gets further away. For an adult, a shrinking plane would break the laws of physics, and so be classed as magic. But young people have this tendency to believe their eyes as they have not yet learned how easily eyes and ears are deceived by reality. Many of Piaget's experiments show how easy this is. If an adult takes three cookies, gives one to the child and keeps two for themselves, the child will readily see this as unfair. If the adult resolves this problem by taking the child's cookie and breaking it in half, a child below a certain age will now see this as fair; they have two and the adult has two. To adults this seems so false that we are amazed children will fall for this, but this is because adults experience the world so differently from children. Illusions can play into this 'liminal space' (Cousin, 2006) where both adult and child enter a world where the normal rules do not apply.

The game of 'magic tricks' is one where rules and roles of everyday are

subverted; the impossible becomes possible. In the first part of the process described the worker plays the role of the magician, the one who holds the knowledge of how to change reality. But by teaching the child how the trick works, the worker and the child become 'insiders' in the game. Now they share knowledge that sets them apart. If this is done with sufficient sense of fun and deep respect for the child, then it builds the relationship and that in itself has a powerful therapeutic effect.

A second way in which adults fail to recognise how different their world is from that of the child comes through considering the nature of secrets. Most social workers have come to be suspicious of 'secrets', for very understandable reasons. For most social workers the 'secrets' they confront regularly are those of abuse, where the secret traps the child into a sense of powerlessness. However the child's world is surrounded by secrets. So much of what happens to them, so much of what they experience, happens 'over their heads'. Adults use a coded language that hints at shades of meanings, but creates more confusion than clarity for the child. This is not simply the sick strategy of abusive parents, but the behaviour of most parents in deciding what to share and what not to share with their children. Again, illusions provide a gateway into that secret world; one where the social worker and child can share a secret together in an empowering way; the child can learn to know things other adults do not, and not be harmed by this experience.

For these reasons, amongst others, the teaching and learning of a 'trick' can help the social worker and the child to meet and share an experience. This helps build the relationship between them. This also explains why I only use tricks that I am willing and able to teach the child. Although at the start the worker is the one with the expert knowledge, by the end this knowledge is shared. This is important for maintaining a partnership; one where the knowledge and power is shared as equally as possible.

Despite these differences between the world of the child and the world of the adult, magic tricks provide a powerful bridge between the two, and that is through the medium of story. The power of narrative is widely recognised in working with trauma (Crawford, 2010). Pratchett et. al. (2003) have humorously, albeit with a passionately argued case, suggested that the species name for humans, *Homo sapiens* - thinking human - could be replaced by a more accurate one, *Pan Narrans* – the story-telling chimpanzee. For psycho-education to work with traumatic life events, or indeed in any situation, there needs to be a bridge between what the person knows and understands now, and what they need to know and

understand in order to make sense of the experience they are dealing with. The cut-and-restore rope trick provides one such bridge. This combination of 'simple ideas' and 'repeated practice' is an essential part of overcoming most 'people problems' (Thompson, 2009). Although it is important to note that simple is not the same as easy.

During my time at CAMHS I used this trick with children as young as seven years old and with teenagers. I often found it helpful to use the trick with parents present as the metaphor can then be shared between child and parent. Although a young children, a teenager and an adult are at different developmental stages, the importance of a 'coherent narrative' (Dobson, 2010, p190) remains unchanged, as does the power of the relationship between the worker and the person they are working with (Hubble et. al., 2002).

One of the main dangers in the use of magic tricks is the need to be culturally sensitive to the use of the word 'magic'. For most people in a secular, Western context magic is synonymous with 'illusion', and is seen to be a form of entertainment or performance. It carries no greater significance than the fact that rapidly flickering still images in the cinema create the impression of movement. But for people coming from cultural backgrounds where life is experienced as profoundly spiritual, the term magic may carry other meanings, many of them very negative. I have had experience of people questioning whether magic is linked to the occult, to demons and the Devil. This can generally be avoided by using words such as 'illusion' or 'trick' rather than 'magic'.

Although I have found this technique useful in helping children come to terms with traumatic events, it is important to finish with a word of caution. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a serious disorder with many long-term effects (Seligman, 2007). Making sense of the events, arriving at some sensible way to find meaning in the experience is only one small part of the road to recovery; and recovery is very different from 'cure' (Cook, 2000). In many ways this offering of a technique cannot, by itself, hope to change the life of a traumatised child. But when done with a deep respect for the individual and a belief in their power to recover; when practiced with warmth, humour and compassion; when used as part of a supportive, nurturing relationship; and when done with a sound understanding of the principles and theories that underpin the technique, this can be a powerful part of the overall process of helping children overcome the traumas too many of them face in life.

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