



# How to Use Big Empathy Drawings in Therapeutic Conversations

Presenter: Dr Margot Sunderland



JUST ME W  
GONE AWAY MO

## Adverse Childhood Experiences study: scored in terms of the number of the following experiences

### Personal

- Emotional abuse (humiliated/sworn at/put down/insulted)
- Emotional neglect (feeling unspecial/not important/not loved/not supported)
- Physical abuse (push, grab, slap, throw things at you)
- Physical neglect (not enough to eat/dirty clothes)
- Sexual abuse
- Being bullied
- Multiple moves

### Family members and home environment and neighbourhood

- A family member depressed/mental illness
- Loss of a parent or parent separation/divorce
- A family member being addicted to drugs or alcohol
- Witnessing domestic violence
- A family member in jail
- Poverty
- Violent neighbourhood
- Racial trauma/any discrimination





# Adverse Childhood Experiences study

As the number of ACEs increases so does the risk of physical illness



- Heart attacks/Strokes
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Chronic lung disease
- Autoimmune disease
- Sleep disturbances
- Eating disorders
- Headaches
- Obesity
- Asthma
- Irritable Bowel syndrome
- Early death

*So ACEs are implicated in the 10 leading causes of death in the western world (Burt, 2001)*

As the number of ACEs increases so does the risk of mental illness and attachment issues



- Poor educational attainment
- Learning difficulties
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Conduct disorders
- Addictions to drugs/alcohol/smoking
- ADHD diagnosis
- Violent behaviour
- Domestic violence
- Unemployment
- Teenage pregnancy
- Troubled relationships
- Attempted suicide



**Supporters of the psychiatric diagnosis approach are quick to say, 'But we don't have any valid alternatives'. This is simply not true.**

**The alternative is to hear people's stories.**

Lucy Johnstone (2014)  
*A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis*



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## Big Empathy Drawing

- Include the presenting behaviour/problem/defence and the key underlying emotional themes/core feelings in the drawing.
- It's about overarching emotional themes in the child's life (not factual details about their life) e.g. a feeling of overwhelming chaos, a sense of betrayal, a terrible aloneness, mistrust, betrayal, feeling of being un-helped when someone could have helped.
- It can include words or phrases like graffiti.
- It's great to offer your own associations (they will either help or not) 'I have an image of' or 'When you were talking I was reminded of the film/fairy story xxx'.
- It might also convey some psycho-education. e.g. 'it was not your fault'.
- After you have drawn and then offered and explained your drawing, give the pen to the child/teenager to change the picture in any way they want. Then empathise with the changes they have made.
- Make it clear to the child/teenager that it is 'their drawing now' so they can do what they like to it and take it away.

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# Having a rich language for feelings and mental states



Language for the pain of loss

Language for missing and yearning

Language for alone/loneliness

Language for feeling rejected/abandoned

Language for emotionally numb

Language for knowing a harsh world at home

Language for knowing a bleak world at home

Language for feeling desperate

Language for catastrophic disappointment

Language for hurt

Language for regret

Language for shock

Language for feeling trapped

Language for fear/anxiety/terror

Language for anger/rage

Language for jealousy

Language for feeling raw/exposed/vulnerable

Language for feeling broken

Language for shame

Language for feeling used/abused

Language for wanting to keep people out

Language for unsafe/safe

Language for mistrust /trust

Language for alienation

Language for guilt/regret

Language for hopeless/defeated/despair

Language for overwhelmed/exhausted

Language for feeling powerless

Language for feeling your worthless/scum

Language for not belonging

Language for bottling up feelings

Language for cutting off from feelings

Language for betrayed/injustice

Language for meaninglessness

Language for wanting to protect someone/  
not able to do so

Language for empty/depleted/nothing more to  
give

Language for self-hate

Language for my life's got all smashed up





- Morelli SA, Torre JB, Eisenberger NI. The neural bases of feeling understood and not understood. *Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci*. 2014;9(12)
- Reis HT, Patrick BC. Attachment and intimacy: component processes. In: Higgins ET, Kruglanski AW, editors. *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 1996. pp. 523–63.

Neuroscience research shows that feeling understood results in increased activity in brain regions associated with reward, positive affect states, social connection and mentalising. ( Morelli et al 2014)

Psychological research shows that feeling understood results in people feel valued, respected and validated ( Reis et al 1996)

**Research shows that when you listen empathically to a child or young person over time, it results in good vagal tone (activation of the vagus nerve).**

**GOOD VAGAL TONE brings about:**

- States of calm, social connection, pro-social behaviour, emotion regulation.
- Increased performance on cognitive tasks, attention, working memory, inhibitory control.
- Better physical health.
- Reduced inflammation, reduced risk for heart attack and all-cause mortality.
- Smaller negativity bias (the tendency to see things negatively instead of positively).
- Stronger explorative urge.

*Mather & Thayer, 2018; Hansen, Johnsen, & Thayer, 2003, 2009; Ottaviani et al., 2018; Saus et al., 2006; Hillebrand et al., 2013; Rothberg, Lees, Clifton-Bligh, & Lal, 2016; Thayer & Fischer, 2009; Thayer, Yamamoto, & Brosschot, 2010. Shook, Fazio, & Vasey, 2007.*





More on  
use of big  
empathy  
drawings  
in Margot's  
book

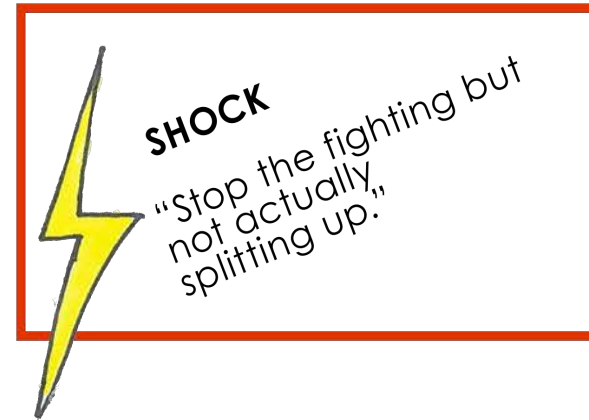
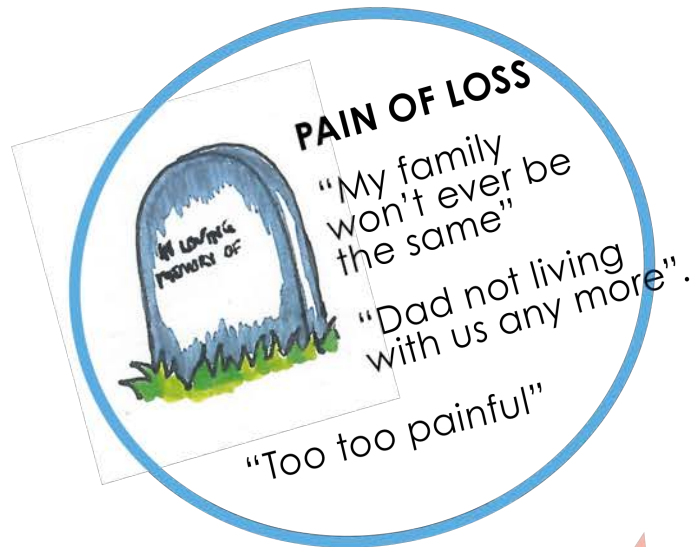
## **Conversations that Matter**

Talking with children and teenagers  
in ways that help

Margot Sunderland



## CONVERSATION THAT MATTERS ON NEWS OF PARENTS SPLITTING UP



### FEAR/WORRY

"What will happen to me now?"

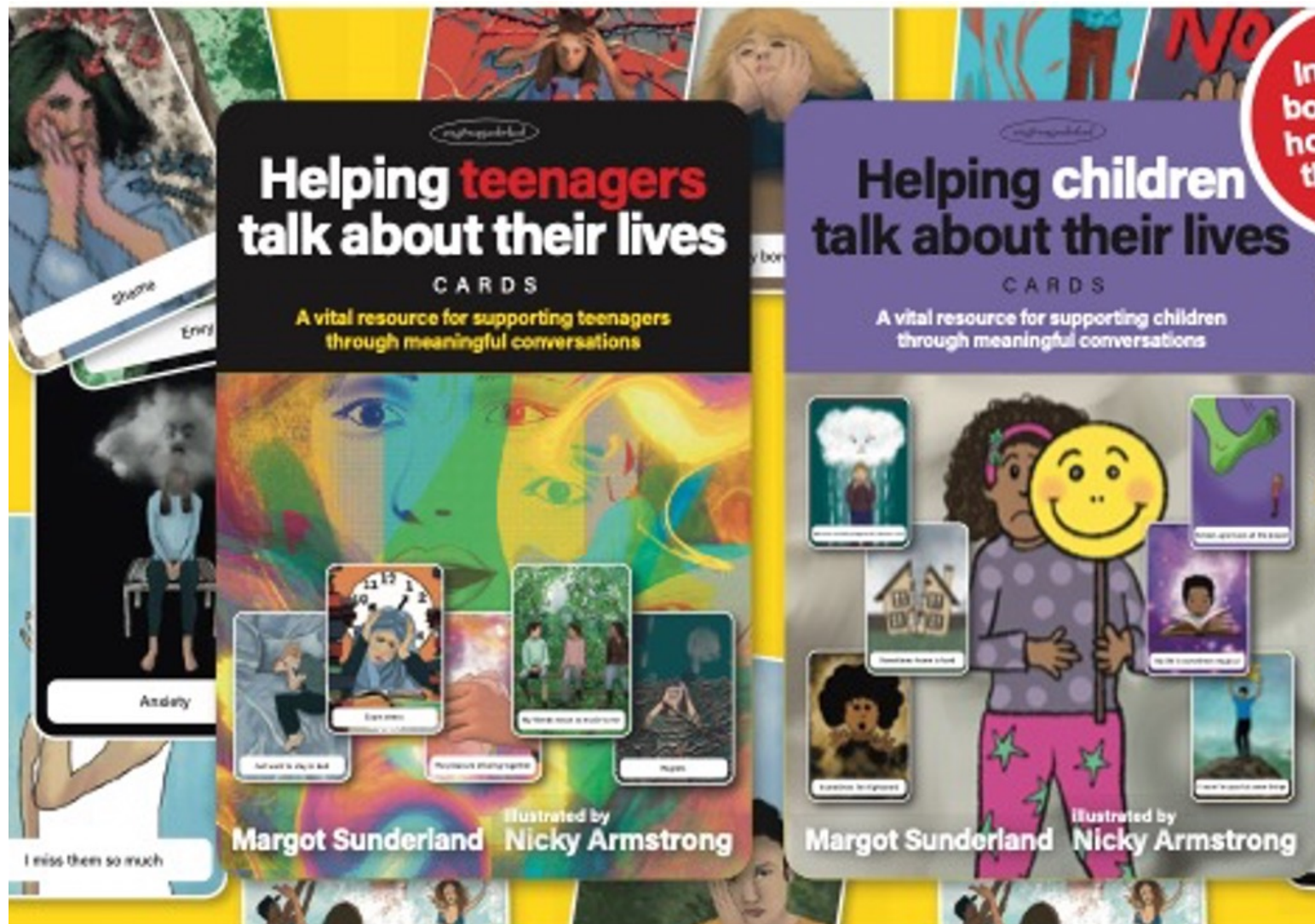
"What else is going to crash land?"

"Feels like its all falling apart."





Resources by Margot as additional ways of helping children, teenagers and adults tell their story and process what has happened to them.







What else is going to crash into my life



Living among the broken people



**Includes booklet on how to use the cards and help people recover from trauma**

Fear of going m...

Raw, vul.

Lost hopes

Worthless



Desperate to protect them, but unable to do so



*strong & underland*

# Helping People Talk about Trauma

CARDS

**A vital resource for adults and teenagers  
who want to heal**

**Margot Sunderland** illustrated by **Nicky Armstrong**

Shame

A comic book illustration of a man with a red bandana and a red X over his face, with a speech bubble saying "didn't". The man has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. The background is a solid color.

have helped but they didn't

An illustration of a person with dark hair and a distressed expression, holding their hands to their face. Above them are speech bubbles containing the words "You", "Loser", and "Pathetic". To the right, a box contains the text "Self-hate". At the bottom, a large white banner reads "Condemned by my inner critic".

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