

# Metaphors in pain medicine

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# Disclosures:

- ▶ Clinical Lead - UHL Clinical Fellowship Programme - from May 2024 till now.
- ▶ Lead for Clinical Governance, UHL Pain Service - 2017 till now.
- ▶ Past Council Member, British Pain Society, 2009-14.
- ▶ Past Honorary Chief Editor, *Pain News*, 2011-14.
- ▶ Past Council Member, Welsh Pain Society.
- ▶ Founder Editor of POEN, eNewsletter, WPS.
- ▶ Committee Member, Research Ethics Committee, 2009-12.
- ▶ Member, Science and Research Committee, BPS.
- ▶ Written textbooks, chapters and Pain Course Manuals.
- ▶ Author of first international textbook on Long COVID Syndrome.



# Metaphors

► Chronic pain is like.....



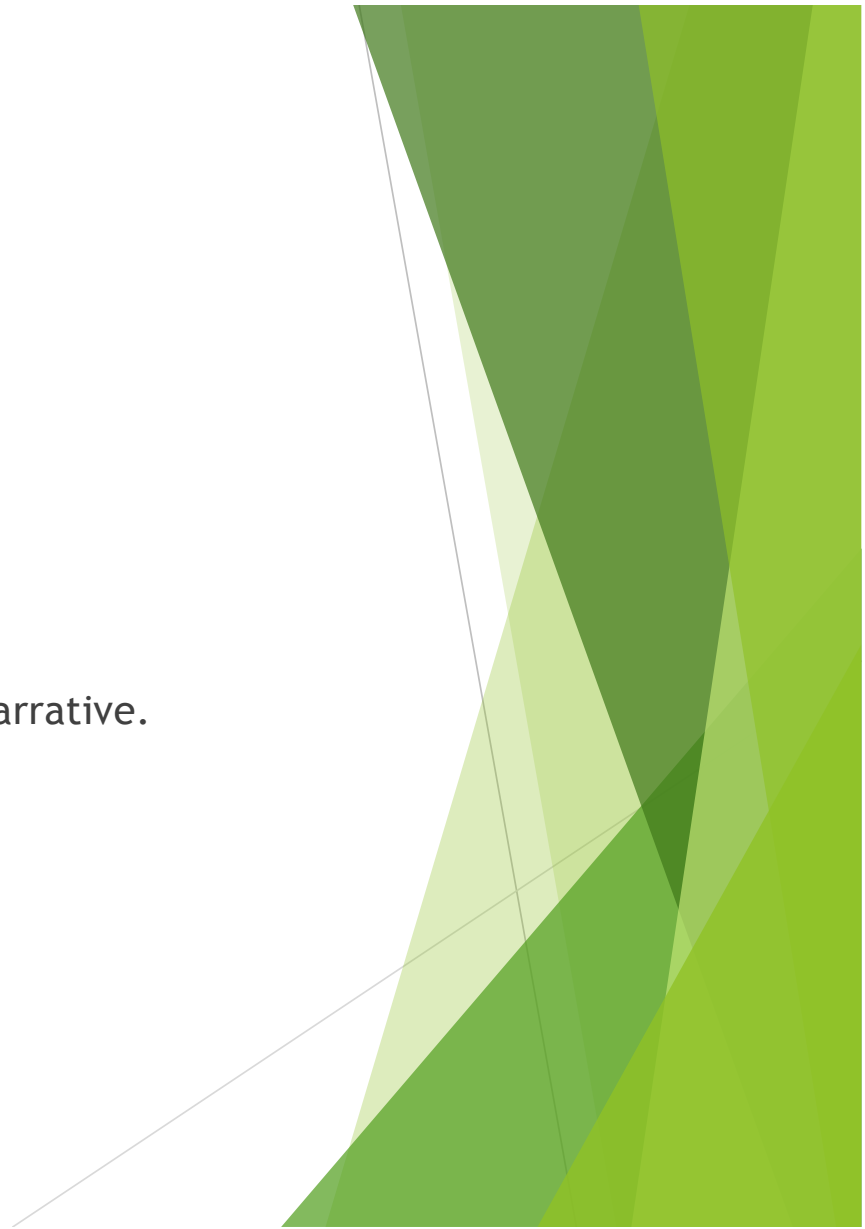
# Definition of Metaphor:

*metaphora - Greek (to transfer)*

- ▶ a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.
- ▶ a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else.
- ▶ an expression, often found in literature that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics.

# Analogy vs metaphor

- ▶ Analogy: Pain is like an alarm.
- ▶ Metaphor: Narrative that moves towards an outcome.
- ▶ One step further, similar items substituted and placed in a narrative.

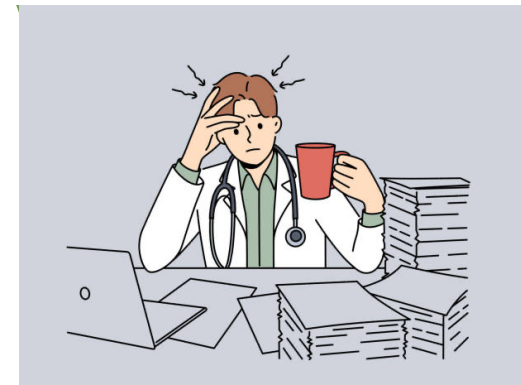


# Current practice

- ▶ Challenging consultations
- ▶ Patient confusion, distrust, poor adherence to management
- ▶ Revolving door phenomenon
- ▶ ‘Lost in translation’ challenge between clinician’s findings and a patient’s lived experience; frustration to both.



# Metaphors - myths



- ▶ Is it new way of telling that it is all in the head? - **No.**
- ▶ Real biological phenomenon, but we can influence through psychological and behavioural strategies.
- ▶ We don't have time in our clinics - **that is the reason to use metaphors, as avoids resistance and revisits. Investment for long term efficacy.**



# Patient descriptions

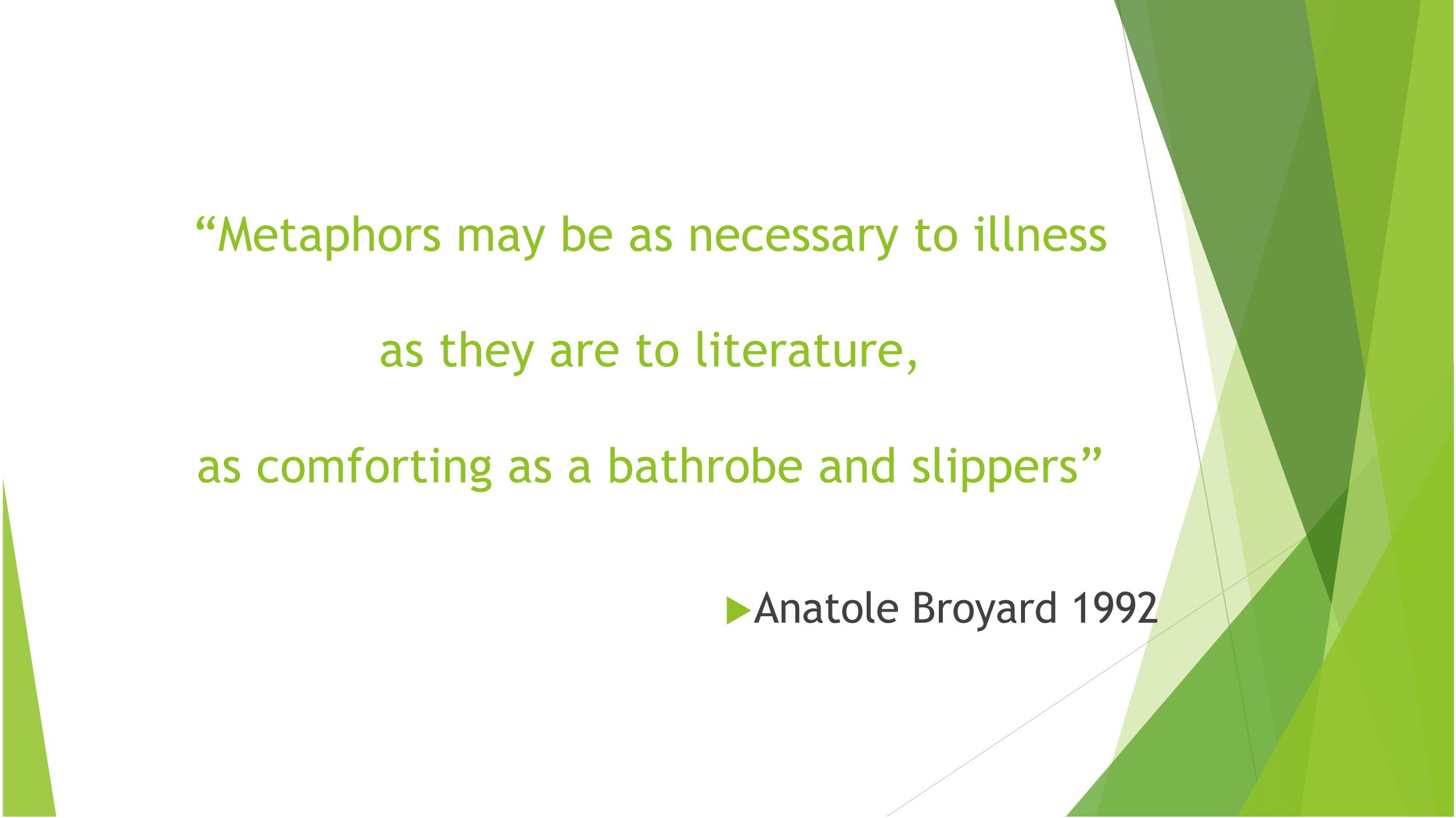
- ▶ Pain like 'knife stabbing into my leg'.
- ▶ Like 'toothache but all over the body'.
- ▶ 'thousands of pins piercing the body'.
- ▶ 'my back feels bruised'
- ▶ 'like hot oil poured on the leg'.
- ▶ 'barbed wire pulling inside the tummy'.



# Metaphors as a bridge

- ▶ Powerful cognitive tools.
- ▶ Translate abstract scientific concepts into shared meaning for patients.
- ▶ Relational Frame Theory (RFT).
- ▶ Human brain creates complex relations between concepts, like pain=danger.
- ▶ Metaphors aim to change verbal relations, not the pain itself.
- ▶ Psychological flexibility.



The slide features abstract green geometric shapes. On the left, a small green triangle points upwards. On the right, a large, complex shape composed of several overlapping triangles in various shades of green (from light lime to dark forest green) extends from the top to the bottom. A thin, light gray line runs diagonally across the lower right portion of the slide, passing through the green shapes.

“Metaphors may be as necessary to illness  
as they are to literature,  
as comforting as a bathrobe and slippers”

► Anatole Broyard 1992

# Double blind RCT trial

- ▶ Metaphor Vs General education.
  - ▶ Increases knowledge of pain biology.
  - ▶ Decreases catastrophic thought processes.
- 
- ▶ Gallagher et al 2013
  - ▶ Clin J Pain 2013 Jan; 29(1) 20-25

# Clear evidence that knowledge of biology of pain is associated with:

- ▶ Increased pain thresholds.
- ▶ Reduced pain frequency.
- ▶ Improved functioning.
- ▶ Reduced catastrophising.

- ▶ Moseley 2002
- ▶ Moseley et al 2004



# Metaphors

- ▶ Helps understand the complexity of chronic pain.
- ▶ Foster clarity and transfers meaning effectively.
- ▶ Reduces resistance to treatment options.
- ▶ Helps the patients to rethink preconceived notions about pain.
- ▶ Clarifies when patients assume that we don't believe their pain.
- ▶ Helps prove why movement is important.



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**“More beneficial than ‘standard’ advice in  
reconceptualising pain and  
reducing catastrophising”**

- Gallagher L, McAuley J, Moseley GL
- *Clin Jn Pain 2013;29:20-25*

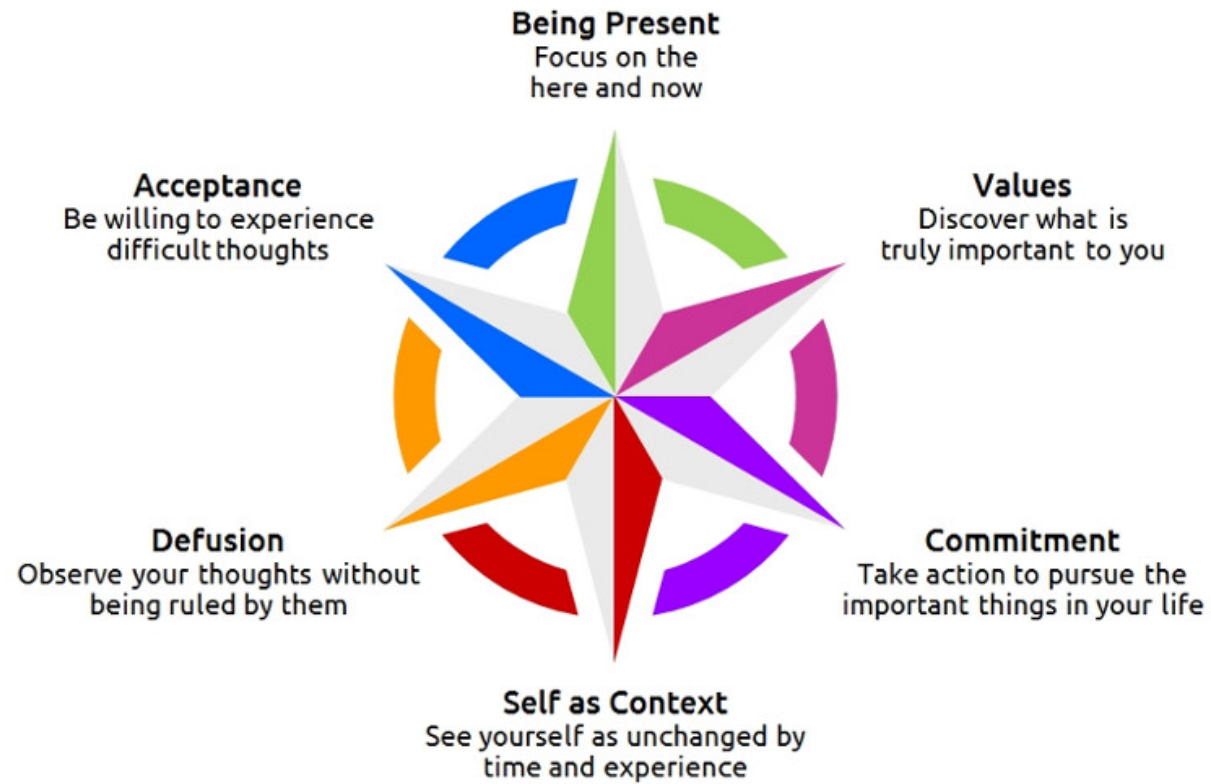




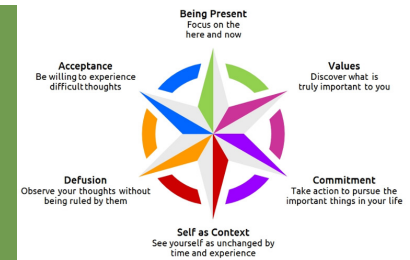
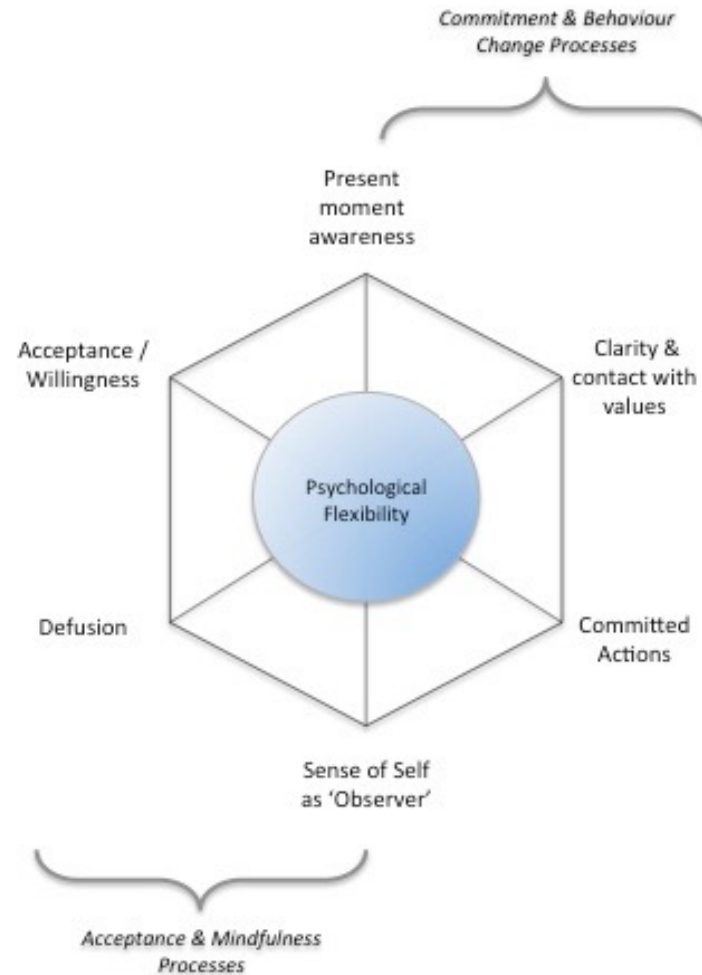
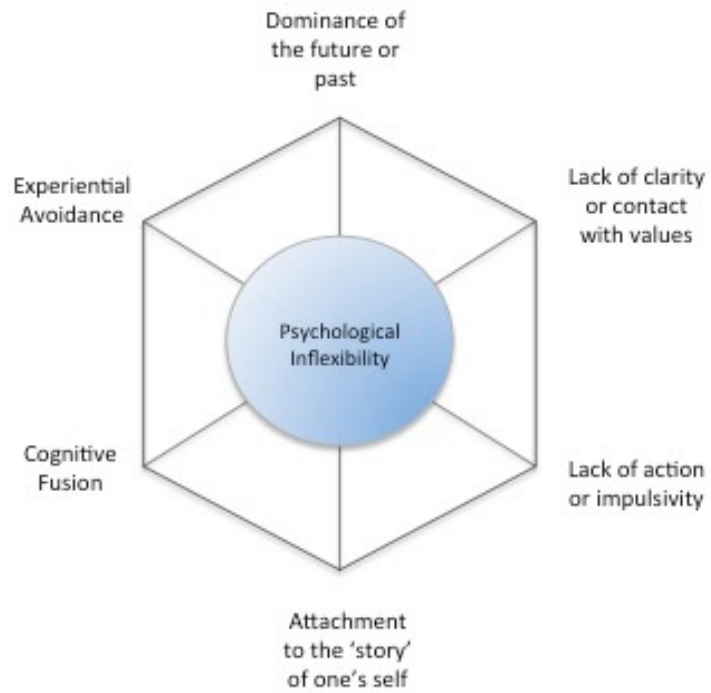
# Evidences

- ▶ Physicians using metaphors are better communicators (Cassarett D et al 2010).
- ▶ Can explain difficult things to patients (Pinheiro AP et al 2017).
- ▶ Critical in reasoning process in mental illness (Elvevag B et al 2011).
- ▶ Education needed for difficult patients (Woodgate RL et al 2017).
- ▶ Helps in the emergence of new epistemic objects and scientific discovery (Koch U 2015).

# ACT



## The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Model



## ACT and metaphors



# ACT and metaphors

- ▶ **The Bus Driver:** You, the individual, are the driver steering your own life.
- ▶ **The Bus:** Your life and your overall direction.
- ▶ **The Passengers:** Your various internal experiences—thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, and physical sensations.
- ▶ **The Destination:** Your personal values and what is most important to you.



Metaphor	Explanation of metaphor	Message to convey	Limitations
Doorbell going haywire	Usually a doorbell is used to inform someone is at the door. If it continuously rings, it affects us and serves no purpose.	Acute pain is warning us of a problem; doorbell gone haywire; similarly, the nervous system is causing continuous pain with no purpose.	Needs a level of understanding to pitch this metaphor. Need time to explore this metaphor.
Faulty alarm clock	An alarm clock is to wake us up. If it continuously alarms, it will affect our sleep and serve no purpose.	Acute pain vs. chronic pain can be explained.	Time to explain and correlate the metaphor.

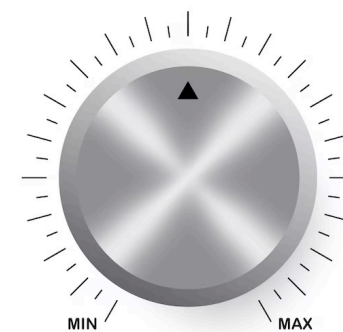


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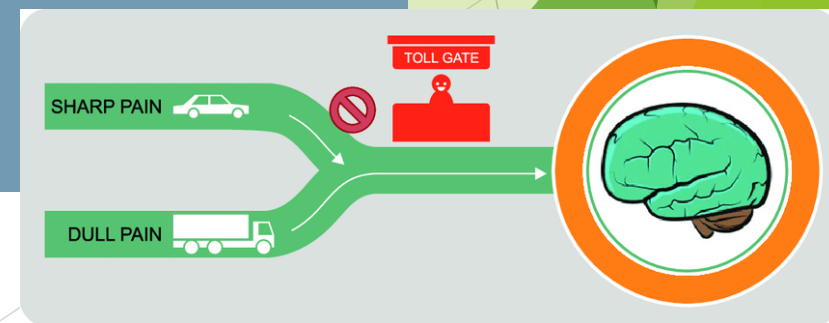
Metaphor	Explanation of metaphor	Message to convey	Limitations
Hardware vs. software in a computer	Hardware defects are easy to visualise. Software defects are not seen but will affect the function.	Nervous system dysfunction causing pain can be explained as a software problem; helps to gain the rapport of patients and help them understand the pathogenesis of neuropathic pain.	The patient needs to have an understanding of hardware vs. software. It can lead to further catastrophisation if the patient gets fixed that there is a problem in the system, rather than looking at keeping active.
Dimmer switch for light or volume control of in-ear headphones	Amplification leads to more volume in these devices.	Nervous system signals are amplified in chronic pain. This helps to explain the pathology that cannot be demonstrated by common tests.	The patient needs a clear explanation and should be ready to accept pacing and coping strategies.



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Metaphor	Explanation of metaphor	Message to convey	Limitations
Car alarm going off suddenly	Sometimes car alarms can be activated by slight touch or pressure that was not intended to do so.	Sometimes, even minor injury can activate the nervous system and amplify signals. This helps to explain the diagnosis of chronic pain, detailing that there is no harm.	The patient should be in the right frame of mind to understand and time should be given to assimilate the information in the metaphor and correlate appropriately.
Gate control theory	One gate closes and another one opens.	To explain how chronic pain can be managed by massage or desensitisation strategies. This can be used to explain the mechanism of transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) machines, acupuncture, etc.	Pictorial representation might help the patient to understand better.



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Tug of war with monster

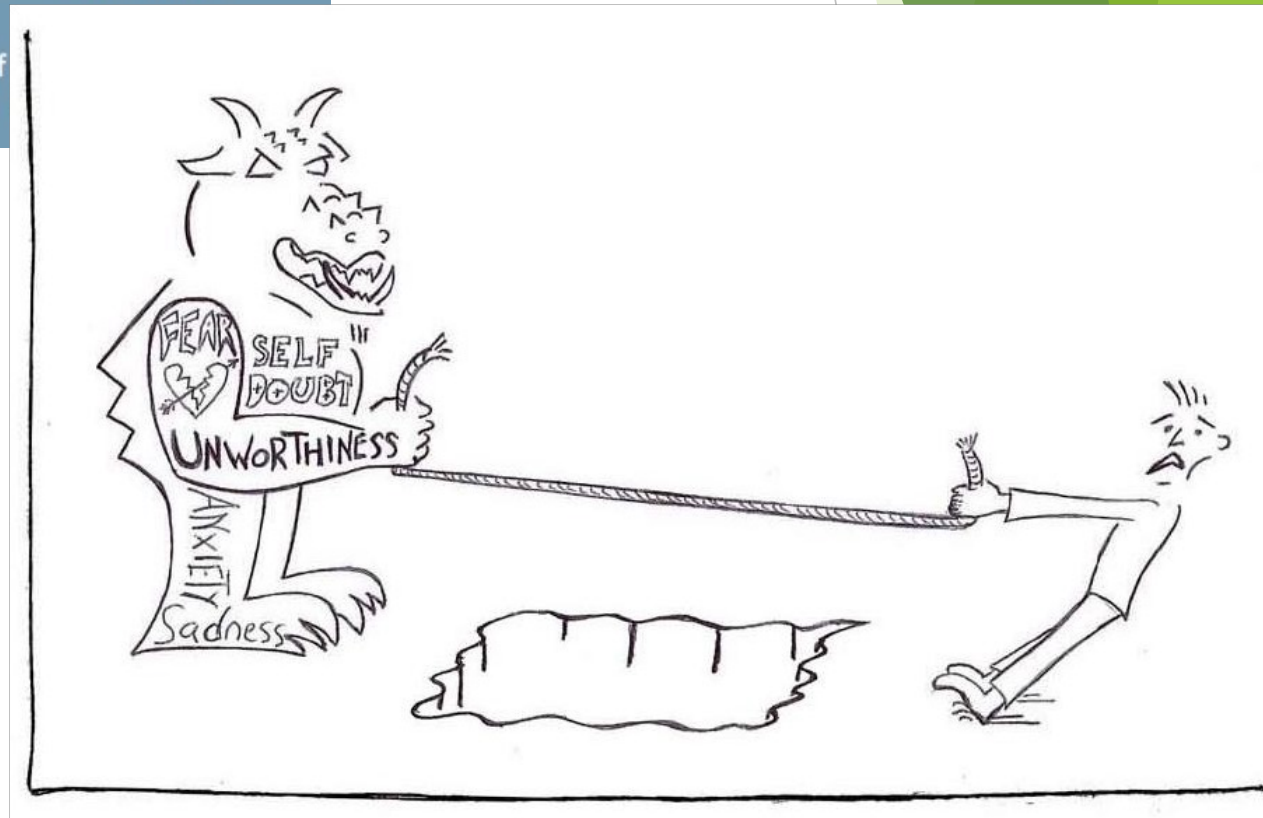
Unless we let go of the rope, we will be continuously fighting with the monster.

Acceptance and commitment are key to recovery. The monster might still be there, but we are not fighting continuously and we might not even notice if we let go of the rope.

The patient can start catastrophising that there is a monster/ problem, unless this metaphor is pitched carefully to them in the right way.

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## Hole in the boat

There is a hole in your boat; whilst you are focusing trying to pour water out of the boat with a pail, the direction of the boat deviates and does not go to the shore.

Whilst trying to fix a problem, your aim to progress is deviated. Look at the whole picture (despite the hole in the boat) and try to accept things and move forward at the same time.

The patient might become fixated on the hole being a bigger problem, and so this requires clear explanation.



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# Quicksand metaphor

- ▶ Instinct is to fight and struggle to get out -> struggle only makes you sink faster and deeper.
- ▶ Alternative is to stop struggling, spread your weight out to float on the surface; less exhaustive and more effective.
- ▶ Accept the discomfort rather than fight against it, allows you to float and focus your energy on what is important for you.



# Rehabilitation

- ▶ Athlete recovering
- ▶ Car with four flat tyres
- ▶ Bonfire with hot coals
- ▶ Mountain climbing zigzag



# Others

- ▶ Creaking noise in old house.
- ▶ Scratch on leg.



# Harms of metaphors

- ▶ Qualitative study of 81 orthopaedic and trauma specialists.
  - ▶ 157 metaphors, categorised into 15 different themes.
  - ▶ 22% had potential to reinforce unhelpful thinking.
- 
- ▶ Fatehi A, Table B, Peck S, et al. Medical metaphors: Increasing clarity but at what cost?
  - ▶ Arch Bone Jt Surg. 2022 Aug;10(8):721-8

Themes of metaphors	Descriptions with negative outcomes
Negative connotations	<p>A calcaneal fracture is like an egg crushed flat.</p> <p>Carpal tunnel syndrome is like a ‘rock crushing a hose’.</p>
Disease modification	Gel injection into knee is like oil change for your car.
Overuse damage	Tendon rupture - like rope rubbing on a rock - the rock eventually wins.
Invoking fear	<p>Abdominal aortic aneurysm is like a ticking time bomb.</p> <p>Just as with a car, motor gets older (heart), and bearings start to grind (arthritis).</p>
Nudging patient towards treatment	A car with 100K miles will make noises, will not start on cold mornings, and you try to tune it up (medications, injections), or trade it for a new one (new joint).
Hurt means harm	If your car was running long like your knee, you take it to service with mechanic.
Battle analogies	Be a fighter and win this battle; use the weapons at your disposal.

Themes of metaphors	Descriptions with negative outcomes	Changing metaphors to improve outcome
Negative connotations	<p>A calcaneal fracture is like an egg crushed flat.</p> <p>Carpal tunnel syndrome is like a ‘rock crushing a hose’.</p>	<p>A calcaneal fracture is like a cracked egg.</p> <p>Carpal tunnel syndrome - like a hose that is under pressure and water flow is less than normal.</p>
Disease modification	Gel injection into knee is like oil change for your car.	Gel injection is like ‘dyeing one’s hair’ - temporary effect.
Overuse damage	Tendon rupture - like rope rubbing on a rock - the rock eventually wins.	Your hair does not thin because of your hat or your pillow; it’s just age and genetics.
Invoking fear	<p>Abdominal aortic aneurysm is like a ticking time bomb.</p> <p>Just as with a car, motor gets older (heart), and bearings start to grind (arthritis).</p>	<p>Like an aging garden hose, can work for sometime, but not forever.</p> <p>Arthritis is like grey hair, everyone eventually gets it.</p>
Nudging patient towards treatment	A car with 100K miles will make noises, will not start on cold mornings, and you try to tune it up (medications, injections), or trade it for a new one (new joint).	An old car can still get you where you want to go.
Hurt means harm	If your car was running long like your knee, you take it to service with mechanic.	Just like when you get your car checked, if there is nothing specific to address, you can keep using it as normal.
Battle analogies	Be a fighter and win this battle; use the weapons at your disposal.	Just like people live with diabetes or heart problems, you can live with cancer.



# Clinical application

- ▶ Listen for cues.
- ▶ What do you mean by...?
- ▶ Co-construction of new metaphors.
- ▶ Working collaboratively with patient, new and more adaptive metaphor.  
(shift from injury to a process of recovery).



**Metaphors have a way of holding the  
most truth in the least space**

- *Orson Scott Card*



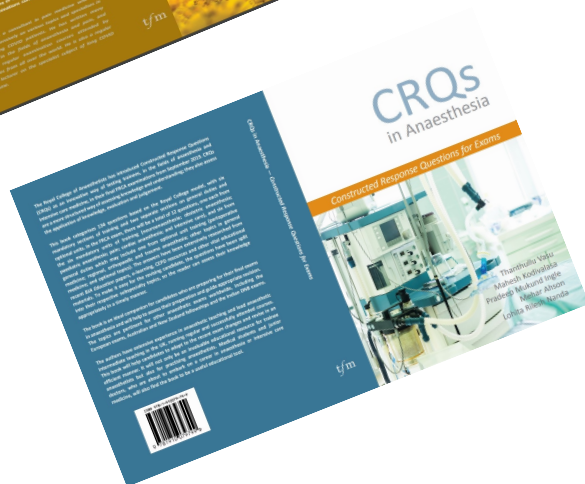
Dos	Don'ts
Use metaphor sparingly, carefully, and respectfully	Mix and match your metaphors
Take metaphor far enough	Take metaphors too far
Think about metaphor's connotations	Mistake metaphors for marketing language
Make metaphors culturally appropriate	Let metaphors stand alone
Prepare, test, and practice metaphors	
Take metaphors in a given context	
Use authentic metaphors	

Adapted from Nguyen & Umemoto (2012, p. 49).

# Metaphors in chronic pain

- ▶ Not just diagnosis and management.
- ▶ We can provide a patient with a new story for their pain.
- ▶ Where they are the driver, not the victim, of their pain journey.





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Thank you very much