

# The Jigsaws of Your Life

## Jigsaw 1: Making a formulation

A **formulation** is a joint effort between you (the client) and your psychologist / psychotherapist / counsellor / therapist in an attempt: to summarise your present difficulties; to explain why these 'things' may be happening to you; and to try to make some sort of sense of them. This 'process' – usually happens over several sessions – and may include looking at past difficulties, and even early experiences if these are in some way relevant to the present situation.

A 'formulation' also needs to acknowledge your strengths and resources, as well as any problems or mistakes. It helps you and the (psychological) therapist work out a representation of your Self, and thus what might need to be done in order for you to feel better and for you to be able to overcome your present difficulties. There is substantial evidence that developing this kind of 'account' or formulation of your problems and your resources can be helpful.

A formulation is not a 'diagnosis', though it can be used alongside a diagnosis (given by a medical doctor), but sometimes it is better used instead of any diagnosis. It is a more personal and detailed overview of you and your situation.

## The formulation process

Working on a formulation, or the process of building a formulation, is a bit like two people working together to complete a jigsaw. The pieces of the 'jigsaw' are pieces of information, such as:

- How you feel at the moment – there may be different 'colours' of feeling?
- What's going on in your life right now? What are the main 'pieces'?
- When did these difficulties, or your distress, start – you were not always like this?
- What are the key (formative) experiences and relationships in your life?
- How have these have affected you – for better and for worse – at different times?
- What do these experiences and what do these relationships mean to you now?
- How have all these come together to make this 'picture' of your life as it is now?

The formulation process can begin during an initial 'assessment' appointment. How long it takes to complete the formulation process, or long this 'jigsaw' takes depends on how complex the 'picture' is – it may not be started and finished in just one session – and on how much time and effort you want to spend on it. However, there are usually enough 'pieces' that can be put together in a first session to give an idea of what the picture might start to look like. What helps the 'therapist' to do this is their knowledge and experience of psychological theory and practice. However, this needs to be combined with your knowledge about your own life and experiences, in order to develop a shared understanding – a 'formulation' – and thus hopefully an agreed way forward.

## An example

Ms A. described to the therapist how she was feeling low and weepy and was arguing more with her partner. The therapist asked Ms A. about her life just now, and about some aspects of her past, and also about her views of herself. Together, they worked out that some of these problems seemed to have started a few weeks after Ms A.'s new boss had started work. This new boss had been very critical of Ms A., whereas her previous boss had thought very highly of her.

It also transpired that Ms A.'s mother had been ill for long periods during Ms A.'s childhood, and – at these times – she was cared for by her grandmother, who was very strict and could be quite critical of her. This, and the fact she had been bullied at school, had left Ms A. feeling that – basically – she was "never good enough". Her new boss's behaviour had re-awakened these feelings. Based on psychological knowledge and experience, the therapist spoke about how and why Ms A. could have been strongly affected by these experiences. He/she also noted Ms A.'s strengths: that she had 'survived'; that she could do good work; that she was in a loving relationship (despite the recent arguments), etc.

Ms A. and her therapist then agreed upon a 'formulation' of how and why she was feeling as she was, and they were also able to identify some things that might be likely to be helpful to her: (a) like speaking to her new boss (or even his line manager), or a union rep, or someone in HR, or other co-workers that felt the same way; learning how to become more self-assertive; (b) being able to

appreciate herself more and realise how hard she was trying and how 'acceptable' she had felt; and/or (c) regarding the way that her partner (and others who knew her properly) felt towards her as being as important, or more important, than how her new boss (who didn't know her) felt towards her; etc.

### **A formulation is not fixed**

If this sort of therapeutic work might seem right for you, the formulation – the building of a jigsaw – provides a good starting point with which to address some of your difficulties – and a good reference point to come back to later. It is a bit like a snapshot taken at one point in time. You and the therapist can return to the original formulation and review it again later: you may have become more aware of certain aspects and you may now see things a bit differently. This means that the formulation can be updated to respond to any new information, or to changing circumstances. In this way a formulation is never really static or fixed (like a jigsaw), even though the events of the past cannot be changed – it will keep evolving throughout your work with the therapist and as you find out more about yourself.

Drawing up a formulation has to be a joint 'process', and you and the therapist will do your best to ensure that it makes sense to you and is practical. It is not a 'diagnosis' or a 'label'. It is important that you can tell the therapist if there is anything in the formulation that doesn't seem accurate – or doesn't 'fit' properly. The more that you are able to contribute to the formulation, the better and more useful it will be. Only you can judge whether it fits properly, because you are the expert on your life and you were the one who experiences your situation. Sometimes, just having a formulation can be all the help you need. This is because understanding your difficulties is necessary, and this understanding can then help you to change how you can deal with them: "Oh, so that's how things are! I can see it now!"

### **Working with a therapist**

Finding a solution to life's problems may take some time. It may be hard for you to look at some of your early life experiences and it is also hard to make sufficient changes to achieve your long-term goals. It can often be – and may need to be – a step-by-step process, over time. In the short term, you may not see the point of all this 'stuff'. The therapy or counselling can sometimes be quite upsetting and it can also be quite emotionally challenging. Therapists are trained to recognise this and to support you through these initial stages. Working with a therapist is all about building up a relationship, based on mutual trust. It is not a 'quick fix' (there's no such thing) – and if it were to be, then it would probably not last long.

A therapeutic process requires a degree of openness from you, and also for you to be prepared to take part in the developing process – a process (hopefully) of change and empowerment. This also means taking a few risks – like being open and honest, trusting another person's viewpoint, being prepared to change. You will also need to feel able to tell the therapist if you disagree with anything that he or she says, or feel that something needs to change about the style or pace of your work together.

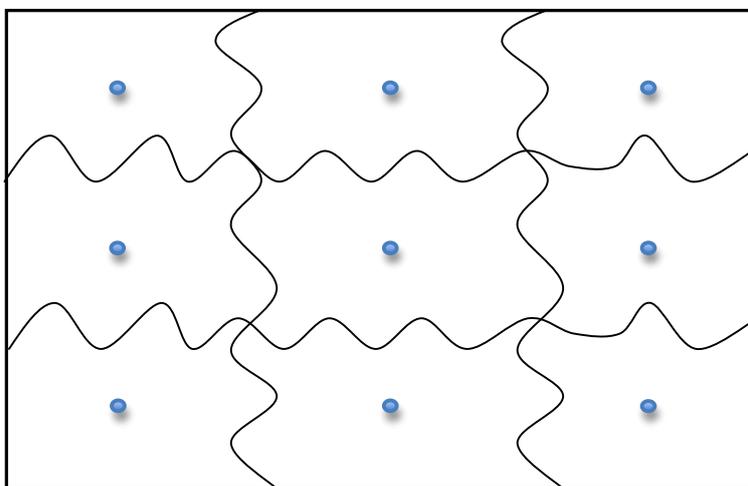
### **The formulation is not a solution**

Once the formulation has been completed, the real work can start. It's not like finishing a jigsaw and then getting on with the rest of your life. It is more like using the formulation to review your life, and then progress – hopefully differently – with the rest of your life. It is process that starts a process. Once you and the therapist have created a formulation that seems to make sense, you should be able to notice how this formulation changes your view of yourself. This enables you to make changes. At this point in time, the role of the therapist changes. Instead of 'leading' the process – as might have happened initially (when you were 'stuck'), you are now continuing with your process, by yourself, and maybe only using the therapist as feedback, and for some fine tuning of your process. You are back in the driving seat – so to speak – you are leading (living) your life!

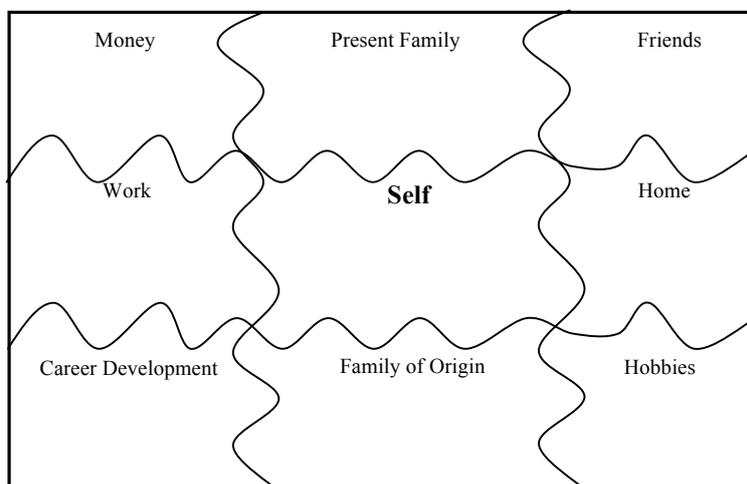
## Jigsaw 2: The Jigsaw of Your Life

Finding out what might have happened, and how it might have affected you in the past, is just one of the 'tasks' in therapy. We have seen how this sort of formulation can 'start' a process. However, doing something – or helping yourself to do something – to sort things out that are present in your present life is another 'task'. And a "jigsaw" can play a significant part here as well – but somewhat differently.

This is an exercise that many people say they have found useful and enjoyed. Imagine a child's first jigsaw: often with only about 9 pieces; often made of wood; often with a picture of a farmyard scene, or Thomas the Tank Engine (or something similar); and often with little buttons in the middle of the pieces to help the toddler pick up the pieces in the wooden frame: so, it might look something like this:



Reproduce this sort of diagram on a large piece of paper (but you don't have to draw the buttons in): an A1-size sheet from a flipchart is ideal. Then, when it is finished, you can put it up on a wall with some Blue-tack so that you can see it properly. At the top of each one of these 'jigsaw pieces', you should now write a 'heading' or 'label' for that particular piece: the top-centre piece might be labelled "**Present Family**" (partner, kids, etc); the bottom-centre piece might be a label for your "**Family of Origin**"; the left-middle 'piece' might be labelled "**Work**"; the right-middle might be labelled "**Home**"; the top-left section might be (something like) "**Money**"; the top-right piece might be (something like) "**Friends**"; and the bottom-left section might be labelled "**Career Development**" or "**College**" or "**Re-training**" (or something to improve future prospects); and the bottom-right might be "**Hobbies**" or "**Interests**".



Thus, these areas are identified as the main or most significant areas of your life into which you direct – and/or which require – quite a lot of your time, energy and attention. If any one of these labels doesn't fit into **your** life, then change it to something that does. You would then get a diagram looking something like the above.

What often happens (or goes wrong) is that we put so much energy into making sure that all the external 'pieces' of our life are doing OK, that we can all too easily deplete the central piece – the **Self**. This ... is ... just ... not ... sustainable, and it can often be a significant part of the 'problem' as it has been going on for a long time. You probably need to look after yourself better: your **Self**!

So, the main point of the exercise is that the middle-centre piece – your **Self** – has often been neglected: this piece should be labelled as the "**Self**" (or "**Me**") and it is – actually – the most important piece in your life. So, what are the bullet-points that will represent some of the changes that you are going to make in your life? What are you going to put in here? "\*\*\*\* Stop smoking"; "\*\*\*\* Go to the gym and have a couple of sessions with a personal trainer"; or more generally "\*\*\*\* Look after myself more"? You can prioritise these bullet points with one (\*), two (\*\*), or three stars (\*\*\*) – but the bullet points in the centre piece should really all have three stars (\*\*\*).

Now, for each of the other pieces, please start to write in a few "bullet-points" in these pieces: so, for example - the "**Family of Origin**" piece might have (for example) 3 bullet-points, each with a different number of stars: e.g. "\*\*\* Parents' Wedding Anniversary"; "\* Cousin Jess' marriage"; and "\*\*\*\* Auntie Morag" (because she's just had a heart-attack and needs some extra care and you are her closest relative); and the "**Home**" piece might have (for example) another three bullet points: e.g. "\*\*\*\* Re-painting hallway" (because that's relatively easy); "\* Clean out pond" (lower priority: as you want to wait until the weather's warmer); and "\*\*\*\* Re-mortgage the house" (as you need to pay off a few credit cards and interest rates have just changed). This last bullet point might then connect to one of the bullet-points in the "**Money**" section, labelled "\*\* Financial Adviser", and so it could be in the same colour – and so on.

These bullet-points should be worked out on the basis of being all the things that you would like to do – or are realistically able to do – within (say) the next 3 months. You need to identify what these are: you – not your therapist – not your partner; – and they are also all things that you would like to see completed: there are no real 'shoulds' or 'oughts': this isn't a 'Community Service Order' because you have done something wrong: it is how to get things right. Be as specific and as realistic and as practical as you can about these "Action Points": it is fairly pointless putting "\*\*\*\*Win the Lottery" into the "**Money**" section; or "\*\*\*\* Get a Ph.D." in the "**Career Development**" section; or "\*\* Build a conservatory" in the "**Home**" section. Keep it all simple, precise and achievable.

Hopefully, after a while, you can sit back and look at what you have put into this jigsaw-type diagram – this 'work of art' – and see whether it feels "good enough". You may want to 'tweak' some of the action points, or \* priorities, or the colour-coding, or something. You may want to sit back, have a cup of tea, and look at it. Is the balance right? Can you really do all this within the next 3 months? How might you feel if you just managed to complete half of it? It has to work for you!

At this point, it is also very important to put a memo in your diary to do the whole thing again in 3 months time. This means it won't just be a one-off: it becomes an important 'life tool'. Anything not completed can easily be carried over – that's not a problem: you haven't failed: you just haven't done that one thing yet! Or you now realise that 'that' Action Point was a bit ambitious, however you have – at least – made a start.

This sort of "process exercise" – writing the Jigsaw of Your Life – and then living it – can be started with your therapist; but then it really needs to become your business (or your homework) – you may need to (or want to) fill in some of these bullet-points in this centre piece for yourself at home, or in discussion with your partner: you may need to take a week-end to do this exercise; or even a week! Please remember: the most important piece is the central piece: You are at the Centre of Your Life!

I hope that this exercise will be of some help to you: instead of you helping others all the time, now is the time to start to help yourself – so that your life now starts to work for you: that way you won't get depleted; that way you can start to restore some of your energy; that way you can become in charge of your life again; that way you can get things 'back on track'; and that way you can start to enjoy life a little more – and thus make it also more enjoyable for others around you. This way you get to complete the Jigsaw of your Life!