

# Drawing on Synchronicity as a Heuristic in the Therapy Setting

*A potential Positive Psychology intervention*

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**For further information, case studies and exercises, see**

Mackey, C., *Synchronicity: Empower your life with the gift of coincidence*,  
Watkins, London (in press). Due for release in Sept 2015.

Have you ever been astonished by a striking coincidence? Indeed, so awestruck that you can't help wondering whether there's some kind of hidden order or organizing force in the universe?

## Objectives

This poster aims to illustrate how to help therapy clients draw on the experience of synchronicity, or meaningful coincidence, as a potentially powerful strategy to enhance their sense of engagement, purpose and meaning.

It primarily draws on case studies to show the potential relevance and positive impact of acknowledging synchronicity in therapy. Doing so can creatively expand the breadth and increase the depth of therapy interventions relevant to a positive psychology framework.

### Relevance of Synchronicity to Positive Psychology

Carl Jung first defined synchronicity in the 1920's as the 'simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events'.

Appreciating synchronistic experience is a potentially powerful positive heuristic for promoting wellbeing, **consistent with a PERMA model** (enhancing positive affect, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement).

- **Synchronicity is commonly accompanied by positive affect**, including a sense of awe and wonder.
- Many people experience more frequent or fortuitous synchronistic experiences as an indication that they are acting in ways consistent with their life purpose or destiny. Such affirmation and experience of providence **can powerfully promote an individual's engagement with life roles and associated achievement.**
- **Acknowledging synchronicity can enhance the therapy relationship and supports achievement of therapeutic goals.**
- By definition, **synchronicity enhances a sense of subjective meaning**, often in a profound manner.

Synchronicity has a mysterious, or numinous, quality. It is one of the more commonly reported forms of paranormal, or 'psi', phenomena. Its rare acknowledgment in current mainstream psychology, including positive psychology, likely results from it defying rational explanation. However, its transpersonal quality undoubtedly contributes to its positive subjective impact and power to effect change. Many influential transpersonal theorists, including William James and Abraham Maslow, have highlighted the importance of transpersonal experience in achieving more advanced or enlightened levels of personality development.

Contrary to popular belief, the notion of synchronicity is not inconsistent with a scientific mindset. Indeed, Carl Jung developed his ideas on synchronicity in part through discussions with Albert Einstein. He wrote about synchronicity only after Wolfgang Pauli, another father of quantum mechanics, convinced him to do so. Synchronicity has some features in common with the physical phenomenon of entanglement, whereby physical particles at vast distances from each other have been found to interact instantaneously. Synchronicity, like entanglement, transcends usual notions of space and time. For example, a person may have the repeated synchronistic experience of going to phone someone, when that particular person phones them at exactly the same time. If physical matter can be instantaneously connected at a distance, then why not people's consciousness, potentially even transcending physical death?

This presentation describes two case examples to illustrate how active consideration of a client's synchronistic experiences can provide a powerful positive heuristic in the therapy setting to promote wellbeing. In each case, the client described an epiphany associated with synchronistic experience, the subjective meaning and positive impact from which was enhanced by acknowledgment by and discussion with the therapist.

## Case Study 1: Suicidality and methamphetamine abuse

- 'Eric' presented in his early 30's with depression in the context of alcohol dependence from adolescent years and a severe methamphetamine addiction.
- He was seen for 15 months of cognitive-behavioural therapy before attending an overseas residential drug rehabilitation program for approximately six months. Following that program he has remained abstinent from all drugs and alcohol for over a year, during which he has attended monthly individual therapy. During that time he has married, fathered a child and returned to full-time work.
- It was only after he learnt that his therapist was writing a book on synchronicity that he described a telling turning point in his recovery.

Eric had been feeling suicidal earlier in our contact. At one point he was kneeling before a window, crying, with the barrel of a 9mm pistol in his mouth. He slightly chipped a tooth on the barrel. He was about to pull the trigger. He suddenly noticed a black bird, like a raven, looking towards him from about 20 metres away. It suddenly took flight directly at him at full speed. It smashed into the window pane immediately in front of him and fell down dead, 'like a kamikaze pilot'. Eric put down the pistol. He had a 'brief moment of clarity', believing that the black bird had sacrificed itself for him. The uncanny nature and timing of this event led him to feel he was meant to live. He soon booked himself into the rehabilitation program. He felt that the black bird incident had strengthened his motivation to the point where he was only one of two people he knew of from the rehabilitation facility who had left and remained alcohol and drug free for more than a year.

Eric explained that he hadn't mentioned the black bird incident to me because it might have seemed like 'borderline psychotic behaviour'. He now highlights the importance to him of meaningful coincidences. He told me, 'I've been getting these messages all my life. When I'm in touch with me and my inner feelings, I'm aware of good things happening around me ... that's my higher power. That's synchronicity.' He continues to believe that this synchronistic experience saved his life and helped his excellent recovery. Directly acknowledging his transpersonal experience in the therapy setting has seemingly assisted his engagement with therapy goals, his life meaning and achievement in resisting any relapse.

"I've been getting these messages all my life. When I'm in touch with me and my inner feelings, I'm aware of (strongly coincidental) good things happening around me ... that's my higher power. That's synchronicity."

*Eric, client who overcame methamphetamine addiction*

### Journalling Synchronicity

Synchronicity relates to our personal, inner life and experience as much as to any objective, outer experience. It is defined in terms of uncanny and meaningful coincidence – this means things that seem like a coincidence to *you*, seem uncanny to *you* and seem meaningful to *you*.

To further appreciate synchronistic experience, it can help to record it in a journal. As with recording dreams, recording synchronistic experiences can help to increase their frequency and intensity. Note whether you have experienced the synchronicity as mild, moderate or strong. You can also record your associations, or any symbolic meaning you attach to the experience.

Notice what you notice. File it away. Sometimes the meaning and relevance of a synchronistic experience emerges later.

## Case Study 2: PTSD and encounter with a 'spirit'

- 'Gary' presented in his 50's after 8 years of psychiatric and 6 years of psychological treatment for 'severe clinical depression', which was not greatly improving.
- He was found to be suffering from a previously undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder in relation to the loss of his infant daughter 20 years earlier.

Gary was plagued by guilt from allowing undignified funeral arrangements for his daughter, including a seemingly unnecessary and macabre viewing of her corpse. He frequently admonished himself for not better attending to the upkeep of her gravesite, but feared that if he did so, he might give into fantasies of taking his life at the gravesite.

We initially used Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) from the fourth session to help alleviate his distress from painful memories. At the end of that session, Gary became my first client ever to directly ask me, 'Do you believe in synchronicity?' after which I responded that I was writing a book about it. We both laughed, considering that in itself to be synchronistic.

Gary later confided that on the night after the first EMDR session he had felt very distressed, worrying about whether his daughter was 'OK'. Lying in his bed he had the vivid but incomprehensible experience of feeling a pat on his head. After the following session he'd again gone to bed, worrying whether his daughter was OK. He awoke at 3am to notice his bedside clock flashing as though the household power had failed. He got up to check, after which the flashing incomprehensibly stopped. He then described the profound experience of 'putting two and two together', recognizing that the pat he'd unmistakably felt the week before was his infant daughter 'saying everything is all right'. He believed that the flashing clock, occurring at precisely the time he tended to wake up at night, along with the pat on the head the week before, was his daughter sending a sign that 'seemed too coincidental'. He concluded, 'she knows I care about her, she knows that I know she's OK.'

That night, after his fifth session, he had an even more vivid spiritualistic encounter. He described distinctly seeing his daughter's face above his bed around 3am, after having had a chat with her before he went to sleep. Gary described feeling so much lighter in spirits after these experiences. He emphasized that he felt absolved of guilt, stating that if his deceased daughter had felt any grievance against him, then she wouldn't have so reassuringly appeared.

"It all happens for a reason. It's put me in a fantastic mindset. Not so many things worry me any more ... I have a lot of living ahead of me."

*Gary, client who overcame PTSD*

By the sixth session, Gary's post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms had reduced to a minimal level. He became more motivated and efficient at work, his energy levels lifted, and his family relationships improved. 'I probably would have written it off as stupid 10 years ago,' he said. 'Now it's all happening for a reason ... The timing is perfect ... Coming to see you ... That night it happens ... It all happens for a reason. It's put me in a fantastic mindset.' He added, 'Not so many things worry me any more ... I have a lot of living ahead of me.'

Gary then described having more frequent and intense synchronistic experiences that 'happen too often to dismiss', including going to phone someone who happened to ring him at that precise time. He attributed this to having a 'clearer mind' and being 'more open to stuff like this'. His increased synchronistic experiences led him to feel that 'I'm on the right track ... Things are definitely pointing in the right direction.' He remained relatively symptom-free at early follow-up sessions.

We'd probably never have had such intriguing conversations without a fortunate happenstance. Gary later explained that his question as to whether I believed in synchronicity was initially prompted by my requesting him to change our next appointment to a particular day when I don't normally see clients. Unbeknownst to me, just beforehand he'd asked our reception staff for the exact same change in date, but had been denied as they didn't know that I planned to request this exceptional change myself. We both saw this as synchronistic.

## How to draw on synchronicity in the therapy setting

**The key is for the therapist to actively give permission to the client to acknowledge their paranormal or transpersonal experience, such as synchronicity, in the context of whatever other therapy interventions are being offered for the client's presenting issues and therapy goals.**

As illustrated by these case studies, prompting, allowing, or encouraging such discussion, provided that it is consistent with the client's interests and therapy goals, can be an adjunctive aspect of therapy. It may serve as a positive heuristic to potentially enhance the client's sense of engagement, meaning, purpose and achievement of therapy and overarching life goals.

The subject of synchronicity can be raised in an implicit or informal way, or in a more explicit and structured manner.

In my own practice, I have typically prompted or indirectly encouraged such acknowledgment of transpersonal experience by making reference to writing a book about synchronicity. This in itself has been a sufficient invitation for numerous clients to volunteer subjectively profound experiences such as those described here. Apart from synchronistic experiences that have shaped their life direction, they include other examples of paranormal phenomena such as perceived encounters with ghosts. Typically people highlight two things: firstly, the subjectively meaningful impact of the synchronistic experience on their life, and secondly, that they have kept such experience to themselves lest they be judged mad.

Therapists could also encourage such discussion of transpersonal or spiritual experience by directly asking the client during the assessment phase of therapy whether they would like to discuss their beliefs in relation to spiritual or transpersonal experience, explaining that such discussion is welcome if they wish, but nor is there a need to do so if that is not of particular relevance to them. The therapist can also be attuned to any other hints or suggestions from the client that spiritual or transpersonal experience is relevant to them, perhaps then relating an anecdote that reflects a therapist's acceptance of transpersonal phenomena. Some self-disclosure may be appropriate.

More structured ways of exploring synchronicity, including journaling and enhancing intuitive and symbolic interpretation of synchronistic experience, are detailed in the book, *Synchronicity: Empower your life with the gift of coincidence* (in press). This book also describes numerous other therapy case studies. It details a transpersonal therapy model as well as scientific findings relevant to synchronicity. Neuroscience research indicates that fascinating, numinous and subjectively meaningful experience, defining features of synchronicity, promote neurogenesis and dopamine release, biological outcomes that can demonstrably enhance wellbeing.

### Conclusion

As these case studies show, actively acknowledging the client's synchronistic experiences in a therapy setting can enhance the client's perceived meaning and relationships (including the therapist-client relationship), facilitate engagement with life roles, and promote achievement of general life and therapy goals. Doing so is therefore an adjunctive heuristic device for applying the PERMA model in therapy, consistent with a positive psychology approach.

### For further information, case studies and exercises, see

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