Chapter 4.4: Compassionate Transformation in Action, Part 2 – Chairwork [Chapter head]

When getting started with chairwork, it is important to acknowledge that chairwork in psychotherapy, like action methods, has a long and rich history, which stems from Jacob Moreno's development of psychodrama, followed by Fritz Perls, who developed Gestalt Therapy, and more recently, Dr Tobyn Bell, who has adapted chairwork specifically for compassion-focused therapy. This chapter will explore the practical considerations and of course the stories of chairwork in groups.

'The folding chairs of doom!' [A-head]

So-named playfully by many group members over the years… It is important that the chairs that we use for chairwork are different from the usual therapy chairs and that we can move them easily and pack them away at the end of a piece of work. In the UK, a set of Argos' finest folding chairs have become part of the group room furniture, leaning in the corner of the room, waiting to be called on. On the days where we have agreed to use them, I will pull them out of the corner to the side. As the group enter the room, there have often been calls of 'Oh no… the chairs of doom are out' to the members coming behind. Despite some of the understandable trepidation which accompanies this work, it is generally welcomed and understood to be a key part of CFTG.

In this chapter, we will explore some of the infinite uses of chairs in the exploratory therapeutic groupwork, drawing on ideas from psychodrama and Gestalt Therapy. This is not meant to be exhaustive, and within the confines of this text, I have chosen a few of my favourites to explore in detail.

In essence, chairwork supports the process of differentiation, creating an emotional distance between parts of the self and illuminating relationships with others. Chairwork supports the work of transformation, changing meaning and stuck association with aspects of the self and others. Finally, you guessed it, chairwork can support the process of integration of the multiple selves with the Compassionate Self in charge. Chairs are also used as props to support working with the multiplicity of self, turning back to unspoken conversations and to further develop compassionate capacity. Chairwork, as with all work in action, has the opportunity to give group members agency over their memories and enables them to be in charge of how long they stay with the experience before moving. Tobyn Bell's research identified how the therapist seeing the person's inner world could generate shame, but the group process can be used to work this through. As Gillian Rathbone's work reminds us, the group can be 'an arena for the resolution of shame'.[1]

[1] Rathbone, G. (2012). The Analytic Group as an Arena for the Resolution of Shame. *Group Analysis, 45*(2), 139-153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316411436142

People in training have often expressed concern for those who are observing from the 'audience' and how they cope with seemingly all the attention being on them. In over 15 years of this work, I can recall one incident where a group member left the room while someone was engaged in chairwork. They were clear that they could not tolerate the intensity of the work or the focus on another member of the group. This was sadly a catalyst for them leaving the programme. But for the majority of group members, the experience of bearing witness to and often being an active part of someone's work is a deeply moving experience:

> *'The impact on other people in the room, it changed things for them it wasn't just the person at the front in the chairs, it was everybody.'*

I have repeated this quote as a reminder of the group's experience of observing.

'Things come up which I wasn't expecting, it wasn't like I could think about it cognitively … like I am gonna talk about this when I am sitting there… It's just things really emotional came from a different part of me… Quite challenging and important as well.'

This highlights how chairwork and work in action generally enables group members to bypass cognitive defences and work at a deep emotional level. Group members have also often reported that, in chairwork, other people 'speak your truth', and that this can be helpful to experience from the observer's stance in the audience. This has certainly been a catalyst for group members deciding to engage in chairwork after witnessing it. This supports the incredible work of Dr Tobyn Bell who has been practising, researching and writing about the benefits of CFT chairwork for well over a decade.

Meeting angry, sad and frightened [A-head]

Many will be familiar with the traditional ideas of CFT chairwork to explore the multiple aspects of self (angry, sad and frightened). The chairs are placed by the group member to denote the relationship between the different parts of the self. When working with multiple selves, I will invite the person to sit in the chair and allow that part to come to front. I have found that inviting your group member to role-take each part of self can be overwhelming and it then becomes difficult to separate and take up another chair. This links to the idea that the immersion for some, at times, can become too overwhelming. The distinction is subtle, but rather than inviting the person to *be* the part, I invited them to allow this part to come to the front. In dialogue, I am asking 'so how would it be if *this part* of you ran the show?', whereas in role-taking I am asking, 'so, angry self, how would it be if *you* ran the show?' If I am using the role-taking technique, I would take more time de-roling between parts of the self and may also work with fewer parts in one session.

This work has multiple elements and phases which could take place over several sessions. This work leads on well from the work in Chapter 4.2 using pen and paper exercises to map out the multiples. The starting point is the multiples and perhaps something of the message from each part or what the part would wish for: 'if nothing stood in your way, what would you do? What would you wish for?' Accessing the motivation which sits within the part of the self is a helpful starting point to begin to bring compassion to all the parts.

The next step may be to invite the conversation with the parts of the self: 'What does angry self think of sad self?' Maybe invite your group member to use the chairs to represent the

relationships, to turn towards or away from one chair or another, or even place one chair behind the other. The symbolic movement of the chairs can help the group member to connect with how this experience of their multiple selves looks and feels.

When engaging in chairwork, it is helpful to have in mind the potential for 'leakage' between different parts of the self. As it is for us all, there will be certain overdeveloped and therefore more comfortable parts of the self. These parts will be more accessible and at times more difficult to move away from.

> *'They called it chairwork. You sit in all different chairs and it was different parts of you – one could be your anger another could be your, erm, sadness, and when you sat in that chair you kind of experienced it. Kate would ask questions … while you are in that chair and you respond from that position… That was really powerful and helped me to see myself more clearly.'*

Case study: Louie and the leaky parts! [B-head]

Louie had agreed to do some chairwork as he had become increasingly aware of how much his threat system had become overrun with anger over the years, which left no room for sadness or fear to be tolerated. He had begun to make some tentative connections with the instrumental violence within his family and in particular his father's tendency to react to any suggestion of vulnerability with immediate brutality. He shared with the group a memory of returning from school bruised and bloodied having been jumped by boys in an alley near his home. His father's response was to beat Louie, demanding that he went back and found them and 'finished the fight'.

At this point, he was not ready to return to this memory (later in the programme, he returned to it and compassionately transformed the ending with help from his auxiliaries and his Compassionate Other, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer', who brought strength wisdom and some 'kick ass' to the situation). But he volunteered to use the chairs to lay out the multiple aspects of his threat survival system. We set out the room in the usual way, creating the horseshoe with the chairs and marking out the space for the 'stage'. Louie first set out the chair for his angry self, and smiling, he sat straight down in the chair and remarked that it felt comfortable. We explored a little of the angry self's motivation and wishes. 'Being in charge always!' was the essence of this dialogue. I asked him to stand and take a step from the angry chair to see what else showed up in his threat system. He spoke in quiet voice of feeling something that might be a bit like fear. I invited him to take a chair to represent this part, but he flatly refused to sit in the chair, which we understood. Instead, he stood holding the back of the chair and, with some gentle questions, began to make some tentative connection with how young this part of him was. Things quickly shifted and his voice became louder and more aggressive, much more like the anger part. Unbeknownst to me, and underneath Louie's awareness, he had hooked his leg around the 'angry chair' and had connected back with this part of himself. My co-facilitator who was sat in the audience noticed this and pointed it out, treading carefully to avoid embarrassing Louie. He had also been unaware and this was the catalyst for a helpful and fruitful discussion about leaky parts, which others could also engage with. This case example demonstrates in a visual way how challenging the process of differentiation can be. The use of chairs enables group members to make the separation of the parts of the self-concrete and visible. The group can also be invited to hold the place of the different parts of the self, thus enabling the person to see and hear the dialogue before bringing the perspective of the Compassionate Self or Other, as described above.

The empty chair: Anyone you want to talk to? [A-head]

This aspect of chairwork, which is a mainstay of Gestalt Therapy, might be the most familiar to people, with the idea that we can put anyone in the chair and say all the things that it was not possible to name previously. This can also be used to work with the transference material once it has been identified, and the feelings can then be directed through the empty chair, usually to the adult who hurt them.

The previous section on forgiveness illustrated the importance of allowing and facilitating appropriate anger towards those who failed to care and protect, which can be part of naming the hurt. This is unlikely to be easily accessible for many group members who have internalised anger to avoid punishment from powerful others. In such situations, there may a need from

some compassionate coaching, ideally from the group who can be recruited to provide support and ideas. I recall many occasions on which group members got stuck and an auxiliary would be invited to offer some suggestions or take over and double for the group member, often stepping up on the stage and sitting beside or placing a reassuring arm on the group member's shoulder to accompany an alternative, assertive and boundaried response. Many group members have stepped up with perhaps an overdeveloped angry part to share some of their rage with someone who struggles. This can have benefits for all, diluting anger for some and activating it for others.

Jane had been working with the shame that she had carried for her entire life, which had led to her avoiding any intimate relationships or even friendships. She was beginning to connect her aversion to closeness with her father's contempt, which coloured all memories of him and in particular his reaction to her overdose. She described that he had found her and dragged her into a cold shower and the next day arranged for her admission to a local psychiatric unit where she remained for four years. She had internalised the shame and feeling of being unacceptable. The group suggested that she give it back to him, as it didn't belong to her. She found a dark-coloured stone to pour the shame into, pulled out the empty chair and leaned over to give the stone back to her father.

Just as she leaned forward, she paused, looked back at the group with some sadness, and said that she didn't want him to have the shame either. Although he had hurt her deeply, she knew that he was also hurt and wounded by his relationship with his mother who had been abusive and cold. So she took the stone and buried it in the garden, symbolising her wish for no one to have this shame, especially not her. There was a shift in Jane after this session, there a little less prickle in her way of being in the group, warmer and less critical. I think she started a process that enabled her to turn back to other relationships and let go of more painful material. This is also a powerful example of the healing power of forgiveness.

Many empty chairs [A-head]

Working with abusive, absent and critical attachment figures can become particularly tricky and stuck when there is a continuing relationship with the attachment figure, often a parent. I have worked with many people over the years who have spoken of feeling anger towards the attachment figure who mistreated them in early life, but who were unable to reconcile this with the empathy they felt towards the frail and elderly person in their adult life. So many of our traumatised patients have been unable to extricate themselves from the coercive relationships with their attachment figures, perhaps still waiting and yearning for the love to be offered. This was most definitely the case for Dal, and as their mother's carer, they spoke of often feeling conflicted about the rage which seemingly had nowhere to be directed to, and which, of course, then got transferred onto others.

It is possible in such situations to have multiple empty chairs representing the different aspects of an attachment figure or other. Dal put out a chair for the sick and vulnerable part of their mother, as well as one for the cruel and hurtful part. The ensuring dialogue was different for each part and enabled Dal to reconcile the conflict. Dal was working with the idea that they could be both angry with and empathic towards their mother who had failed to care and protect.

The empty chair and the chair behind [B-head]

When working with difficult or stuck relationships where there is a motivation to resolve, understand or repair, we can use an adaptation of the Gestalt empty chair technique to support

a mentalising compassionate dialogue. As much as possible, be clear at the beginning with the group member about what they are hoping for, as this will help guide the work in action. We will want to be clear about the nature of the relationship to the person. If the relationship is or has been abusive towards your group member, then I would not use this technique, as role-taking an abuser can be extremely re-traumatising and generally is not helpful.

The group member is invited to set out two chairs in whatever way feels right for them; often they are placed facing each other. First, the member is invited to sit in their chair and say what they would like to say to the other. The invitation is then to switch into the other chair, as they sit taking the role of the other person and hear the message, taking time in this process to allow the person to settle into the role. I will often offer some initial questions to support this process; again, we are orientating Jane into the role of her of sister, before moving to the next stage.

Here's a script of Jane's conversation with her sister:

Therapist: *'So, welcome, Joanne. Jane has invited you here as she has some things she really needs you to hear, is this OK?'*

Jane (as Joanne): *'Yes, that is OK.'*

Therapist: *'So Joanne, I just wanted to check with you that you heard what Jane (your sister) has asked you? Or do you need a reminder?'*

If the message has become lost, you can invite, with Jane's permission, an auxiliary to come and repeat the message with help from the group, bearing in mind the advice from the previous section. Once the message has been received, a response is invited from the member, in role as the other. Sometimes this brings new material and insights, but equally it can give rise to a familiar and often stuck dialogue. In such circumstances, it can be helpful to invite the member in role as the other to put a chair behind (back-to-back) and take the role of the part that does not show up. This is invariably the voice of the unconscious.

Therapist: '*Thank you, Joanne, for responding to Jane. I wonder if I could invite you to move to chair behind yours and speak from the part of you that Jane does not see or hear?'*

Jane (as Joanne): '*OK.'*

Therapist*: 'Welcome. You are the part of Joanne that Jane does not ever hear from. I wonder if you can respond to Jane's question from this place?'*

Jane (as Joanne's unconscious): *'I just can't give her what she needs… It is not that I don't want to or I don't care… I can't be the sister she needs me to be… I love her, but I can't care for her… I just don't know how to…'*

Jane was the invited to de-role her sister Joanne and move back to her chair to hear the message. She was asked if she wanted to hear the message again through an auxiliary, but Jane opted not to. She spoke of feeling that, when she sat in the chair behind, she felt completely connected with Joanne's sadness about what she cannot do, and the anger that she felt in the front chair was absent. This powerful experience for Jane was a precursor to making an important decision to stop angrily 'pursuing' her sister for not being available to her.

Jane's response to this work was a spontaneous bringing of compassion to the situation and an understanding which guided her decision. Therefore, the evocation of the Compassionate Self or Other as a response to the work was not needed. But in such situations, I would notice that

the Compassionate Self is already present, to reinforce and validate the group member's progress. There will, however, be occasions when this needs to be made more explicit, and we will return to this in more detail in the next chapter.

Talking with the critic [A-head]

Many group members over the years have questioned why we would want to open up a dialogue with the inner critic. In Phase Three, we support the work of differentiating and creating emotional distance from the inner critic. Some would say that dialoguing or talking to the critic might contradict this. This, of course, makes good sense against a backdrop of understandable avoidance, denial and attempts to disown the critic as a means of survival. When introducing the idea of a conversation with the critic, we start with an exploration – usually in the formulation stage – about how their current strategies are working out. The language of unintended consequences is useful here. Most will be able to acknowledge that the current strategy has little utility and has been unsuccessful in silencing the voice of the critic. We can also invite the group to consider what happens when they attempt to 'fight' with the inner critic. This often leads to an honest realisation that the critic generally feels more powerful than the Compassionate Self or Other. We can then remind our group member that the critic has the 'advantage' of coming from our overdeveloped threat protection system and stimulated by the natural bias that it is 'better to be safe than sorry'. This reminds me of the Native American parable of the two wolves that are fighting inside us, one good, one bad, and the idea that the wolf who will win is the one that we feed. Often our Compassionate Self has only been fed and developed more recently, so may not be as developed.

These kinds of group-based discussions introduce the idea of dialogues with the inner critic. We can build on the work in Phase Three with image making around the critic and exploration of where the critic came from, usually vulnerability in early life.

I will often use role-taking as a precursor to chairwork in group. We can spontaneously invite our group members to take on the role of the inner critic as part of the preparation for chairwork and compassionate transformation. I think of these exercises as a 'fact finding mission', to understand more about the roles and functions. One of the many great possibilities with role-taking is that it can be used as a functional analysis of a part the self, which bypasses cognitive processes. This process can also help to establish whether the critic is a protective survival strategy or an internalised abuser, as referred to later in this chapter.

We follow the same protocol for this exercise as we do for role-taking for the kitbag, but the difference is in the steer of the interview questions:

Facilitator: *'So, you have been with Dal for nearly all their life. Actually, you cannot remember not being in their life. I wonder when you think you are needed most?'*

Dal, in role as critic: '*They always need me because people always want something from them and they are not strong enough to say no. I help them see how bad people are and how weak they are for not saying no.'*

Facilitator: 'What is your wish for, Dal?'

Dal, in role as critic: *'They need to listen to me more – I know what's best. I am always having to shout. They try and ignore me, but it is not going to work.'*

Facilitator: *'I wonder how it is being here to today and being heard by us all here?'*

Critic: *'Actually, I feel a bit better getting to have my say.'*

Facilitator: *'I see… So when you get an opportunity to speak, what then? Is there room to have a conversation?'*

Critic: *'Maybe I won't have to shout so loud.'*

Facilitator: 'That is really interesting and helpful to know. So a conversation might help everyone? I was wondering if I could ask another question. I am curious about what you fear most? I know nothing really scares you, but maybe what worries you most?'

Critic: *'I have to shout loud so that they don't forget me or get rid of me.'*

Facilitator: *'That makes so much sense, but what if there is no plan to get rid of you? I don't think anyone wants to get rid of you, and I don't think we could! But maybe there might be an opportunity to work a little more together?'*

Critic: '*Maybe…'*

Facilitator: *'So one last thing – I wonder if you have a sense of what you need?'*

Critic: *'Well, a bit of help might be good. I'm here on my own doing all the work. Keeping an eye out for all the dangers. To be honest, it is pretty exhausting.'*

Facilitator: *'Well, I definitely think that we can help with that. It has been so good to hear from you and I hope to chat with you again soon.'*

Once we have differentiated the critic from other parts of the self and understood the function or strategy that this part serves, we are ready to begin to develop a new compassionate relationship with the critic. This often comes from the last question from the segment above, asking what the critic needs. My experience is that the response can sometimes relate to being heard: 'I have something to say and she/he doesn't listen, so I have to shout louder and remind them more forcefully about what happened in the past.'

This scripted piece paves the way for more dialogues with the critic and the introduction of the Compassionate Self or Other, moving into transforming meaning and creating a new relationship with the critic.

Climbing, like working with the critic, is not a battle [A-head]

We live in a world where the language of conflict is all around us. We are 'battling cancer', 'waging war on crime', 'beating mental ill health', and then driving our points home with bullet points in PowerPoint presentations. It all starts to feel exhaustingly adversarial. We can get caught in the same trap with our group members working with the inner critic. It can be tempting to wage war on the inner critic, but remember that the critic is a part of the self and so needs to be treated with the same compassion as the other parts.

Working with the inner critic, like climbing, is not a battle to be fought and won, it is a conversation to be engaged in. You can bring the words of compassion but the work is in your mind. The cultivation of a compassionate mind is key here, to know the words and the compassionate intention that sits behind them.

It is the same with climbing. I have thrown myself at many cliffs in my time, full of anger, frustration and a need to 'nail it'. Every time, mother nature has unceremoniously spat me out. We can have all the strength and technique, but it is the intention to be with rather than to conquer which will allow us to make slow and steady progress up the mountain. The moments I cherish are those when I stop to take in the view, allow myself to be present with my threat system and meet my critic who tells me I shouldn't try this, then calmly do it anyway.

As I write this, I am full of moments when my group members have slowed down and pulled up a chair with the motivation to understand rather than conquer. It is these conditions which allow change to occur.

Case study: Adam meets Skull [B-head]

For many months, Adam had alluded to a part of himself that had done really bad things and that he could not hope to ever overcome or make amends for. We had never seen this part of Adam in the group as he was often withdrawn and quiet. Adam called this part of himself Skull, and it connected him with the times when his food restriction had reached a dangerous and risky point.

Adam was reluctant to bring this part of himself to the session as he was fearful that the group would see him differently and judge him as harshly as he judged himself. But, just as he had worked to take off his gloves and hat and even to take a pebble, with encouragement, he agreed to put Skull in the chair.

He set out two chairs, one for himself and one for Skull. He first sat in the chair and tried to speak to Skull, which quickly got stuck and became quite fearful and withdrawn. With some support he managed to say that felt that Skull was unhelpful to his life. He then switched to the Skull chair and immediately his whole demeanour shifted – he sat upright, shoulders back, staring straight ahead. His voice was louder, demanding, insistent. He told Adam that he could not manage without him, that he was weak, but that it was OK because he (Skull) was strong. Skull went on to launch a tirade of verbal abuse towards Adam and that he was weak and pathetic for coming to therapy. Adam shifted back to his original chair at hearing this and quickly slumped down appearing small and quite young. I stopped the exercise and asked Adam what he noticed. He spoke of a part of Skull reminding him of the teacher at school who had told him he deserved the bruises inflicted on him by his mother.

At this point, it became clear that part of Skull was an internalised abuser, and we needed to work differently with this. As I have mentioned, it is very important to make a distinction between the protective inner critic who has emerged often as part of surviving a hostile early rearing environment, and the internalised abuser. The internalised abuser can be difficult to spot, but as we discussed previously, will often emerge when we explore intention. The internalised abuser invariably does not wish the person to thrive or even stay safe, and usually it will give instructions or reminders to cause harm, and offer no advice or guidance.

We stopped the exercise and brought Adam out of chair, and invited him to observe the two chairs, Adam and Skull. Adam, now with some distance, began to see the connections between part of Skull and the many people who had abused and hurt him in his childhood. It seemed that Skull held not only the narrative of these experiences but also the clear message from his abusers that he was to blame. So we put another chair in for the internalised abuser, or 'abuse echo' as the group often name it, and agreed that we would work differently with this part. Tobyn Bell's research can support a greater understanding of the distinctions to be made between self-hatred, which sits alongside contempt, and self-criticism, which has a protective albeit harsh tone.

The ensuing dialogue was with the part of Skull who wished to protect him from those who had hurt him, and invited the idea that Skull could do with some support i.e. a Compassionate Other. I often find in this work that the greatest fear of the inner critic is that they will be killed off. We can give some resolute reassurance that death to the critic is not the plan, but perhaps turning the volume down is an acceptable goal. Skull, in this sense, had a protective and corrective function, and as such could be supported to be calmed and, over time integrated, into the self.

Working with internalised abusers [A-head]

Once identified, we will need to work with the internalised abuser with greater caution and a different approach than we do with a protective critical part. The instinct might be to put the echo in the chair and invite a tirade, but I would avoid this – as we said before, this is a part of the self. To do so generally increases the strength of the part you are fighting with.

We need to work around the edges to cultivate and develop the Compassionate Self to turn back with wisdom, courage and strength to distinguish between what belongs to the group member and what doesn't. This quote illustrates the understanding that this group member developed about his internalised abuser, which came through the group process:

> *'For me, having spent so much time beating myself up and then understanding that the verbal beating was just echoes of things said by an overly expectant … impatient … father … and that it was a denial of legitimacy your feelings are … wrong or you have no right to feel them … kind of thing and that's … it's a terrible thing to say to a child.'*

This discovery then lays the foundation, with support from the group, to begin to develop a different lens to view the experience. For some, beginning to identify the internalised abuser is the precursor to developing a compassionate response, while for others the compassionate response comes first from the group. The process is repeated and slowly internalised.

Once distinguished, the work of putting down or letting go of what no longer serves or belongs to the member can be helpful. You will recall the work on the four-fold path in the previous chapter. Group members have used scarfs and coats to represent the layers of internalised abusive others and these can be taken off to illustrate the externalising of the abuse echoes. Objects holding the toxic messages have been symbolically buried and letters have been read to the abuser in the chair. Tobyn Bell describes the need to make the memory 'molten' and therefore more fluid and malleable. For some, this will involve accessing the memories which accompany the echo and these can be worked with explicitly using the compassionate transformation work described in the previous chapter.

Bringing compassion [A-head]

The final stage in all work in action, which may not always be in the same session, is the evocation of the Compassionate Self or Other to bring a new perspective to the scene. As with other exercises, I would not bring a chair for compassion because part of the function of the chairs for aspects of the self is that the person can stand up and walk away from them. My hope is for compassion to become embodied and not allocated to a chair. So I will generally invite a standing embodiment and breathing practice to support the group member to 'feel' compassion and where it resides in the body (see Appendix 4.4).

‘Bookending’ the compassion-focused trauma work [A-head]

I am sure it is already clear that this work is painful and a source of considerable terror for most of our group members – whether this is shared or not is another issue! I think we have to assume that there is much work to be undertaken to co-create the necessary safeness. The idea of using the Compassionate Kitbag and the support of the group explicitly in the context of this exploratory work has always been in my mind. But there have been times when it did not seem to be enough to encourage members out of their chairs and onto the stage. An arched brow of scepticism seemed to be the main response to group member’s words of support or encouragement: ‘you are not the one about to throw yourself into this’.

In response to this, we came up with the idea of ‘bookending’ the work in group with activities to promote safeness and connection. This bookending is designed to stimulate an internal supportive and reassuring response from the group member, because external reassurance is easily dismissed. This can sometimes involve games, but we will explore this in more depth in the next chapter.

So we return to role-taking, discussed in Chapter 3.5. As I have suggested before, the utility of this exercise is endless and it is powerful in its simplicity and accessibility. Suffice to say I am a big fan, and usually, once the initial reticence has been addressed, most group members will feel the same.

Group members are invited to select something from their Compassionate Kitbag and bring this to the session when they are planning to use the group. We can also work more spontaneously as needed and objects from the table can be used to represent the symbol of compassionate identity. The group member is invited to take the role of the object before the work commences, and the questions centre on the work to be undertaken and a perspective and advice is sought from the object that has become the compassionate symbol.

Case study: Sherelle and the Daisy lip balm [B-head]

During the check in, Sherelle brought a situation where she had taken up her authority when confronted with a taxi driver ridiculing her Daisy Duck paraphernalia. Sherelle had worked hard in group to develop her Compassionate Kitbag with many objects connected to Daisy Duck, who had become her Compassionate Other. Sherelle had been able to gather objects around her to build her ego strength and she had used these objects to begin to turn back to the reality of her early trauma. Sherelle connected the altercation with the taxi driver to memories of her father, who would not allow toys or playing. This disclosure signalled a shift for Sherrelle from a defended position in relation to her parents, to beginning to confront the reality of deprivation, intrusion and neglect. She was able to notice how angry she had been about the comments from the taxi driver. We did not explore this in any depth at this time, but it seemed that Sherelle was noticing the transference of unresolved anger towards her father to the taxi driver.

After the check in, with some encouragement from the group, Sherelle shared a specific memory that had emerged when the taxi driver had derided her. She recalled her father putting cockroaches into her bed as a punishment and then being forced to get into the bed. Since then, her bed had never been a place a place of sanctuary and she spoke of wishing to reclaim this space.

She decided to work with this but felt fearful that this would be disrespecting her father's memory and that he would somehow 'know' what she had done. This gave us an indication of the power that Sherelle's father had exerted over her, which made sense given the narrative of omnipotence that Sherelle had shared. There had never before been an opportunity for other minds to inform her thinking. The shock of the other group members about what he had done to Sherelle as a seven-year-old, I believe, was part of what made this work possible. We slowed down this part of the work to ensure there was space for Sherelle to notice and respond to the other group members.

Sherelle was invited to consider how she would like to work with this memory and she opted to put her father in the chair and tell him the impact that this had on her life. I invited her to consider what she might need to do this, she smiled and nodded to her Daisy Duck lip balm that she carried with her. This was a symbol of her Compassionate Other, which she had used to respond with assertiveness and anger during the week, so it had already proved to be helpful. I invited her to take the role of the lip balm and asked her lip balm what thoughts she had about what Sherelle was planning. The lip balm was of course supportive and encouraging, and said that she was proud of Sherelle turning back to this memory.

Sherelle stayed in the circle for this exercise and moved to the stage when she was ready. We set the stage with a chair to represent her father and with her lip balm in her pocket as a concrete representation of her compassionate capacity, she spoke to the empty chair and finished the exercise, turning back to her space in the group. This act symbolised for the first time Sherelle feeling able to take charge of the relationship with her father and turn her back on him and the terror he instilled in her. We also witnessed, over time, a loosening of the idealised place that he occupied in her mind.

Concluding comments [A-head]

Chairwork in the context of CFGP can offer a slightly more structured approach to reworking old attachment relationships, adaptively connecting with the multiplicity of self and ultimately bringing compassionate conversations, but perhaps not all in one session!

I hope this chapter has offered some ideas for chairwork and how this can be offered in the context of safeness in a group. As has been discussed previously, I would not attempt this kind of chair work in a shorter group as we need to be able to take the time to prepare and close the sessions. In shorter programmes, there is great utility in role-taking to work with critical dialogues and develop the Compassionate Self.

The preparatory work is key to maintaining safeness in the room and we need to be able to change track and respond to the needs of the group. This all takes more time in the room and in the programme.

On to compassionate transformation part three, the final more discursive aspect of the exploratory work that I would like to share with you.