



# The Rainbow Map

**Andrew Thomas** introduces a tool he has developed to help clients manage emotional conflict

**T**his article offers a brief overview of why I developed a therapeutic tool called the Rainbow Map and the theoretical foundations on which it is based, with two composite examples of how it has been integrated into practice - one for couple work, the other with an individual client.

I work as a couple and family therapist for Relate and have integrated evolving versions of the Rainbow Map into my psychodynamic and systemically based practice there since 2015.

The catalyst for change in my practice came in 2014, through a two-day workshop on transforming shame and self-loathing led by US trauma psychotherapist Janina Fisher, which included elements on trauma and sensorimotor therapy. I wondered how many of my couple-counselling clients were experiencing trauma-like effects, even if there was no presence of domestic violence.

The theoretical roots of the Rainbow Map are in many influences, but most notably Bowlby's attachment theory, Beck's model of CBT, and the work of Ogden,<sup>1,2</sup> Porges<sup>3</sup> and van der Kolk.<sup>4</sup> Ogden's commentary<sup>1</sup> on Siegal's 'window of tolerance'<sup>5</sup> also fed the Map's development and is part of the therapeutic terrain I believe it connects with. She wrote: 'Whereas safety is essential for clients to begin therapy, therapists also have a responsibility to help clients expand their capacities by challenging their regulatory abilities in the face of strong emotion or autonomic dysregulation.'

By integrating elements of sensorimotor therapy into my work with couples reporting moderate to intense levels of conflict and/or conflict avoidance, I became increasingly aware of the physical affects some were experiencing. I found myself using the words 'trigger' and 'triggering', because they

were frequently being used by clients. The light-bulb moment came in 2015, when I noticed that the first physical sensation that clients became aware of in the initial stages of a conflict cycle appeared to offer them a reliable and therapeutically useful early sign that their behaviours were increasingly being dominated by their survival orientated reactive brain/body system. Clients with whom I have used the Rainbow Map refer to this sign as their trigger flag.

I have, over the past three years, introduced the Rainbow Map to 10 other therapists, on an individual basis. In January 2019, I led a one-day Rainbow Map CPD at Relate's Eastleigh office, which was attended by 12 experienced couple, adult and young person therapists, two of whom were already using the Rainbow Map in their work. Participants' styles of practice included EMDR, emotion-focused therapy, person-centred, psychodynamic and systemic therapies.

All 12 CPD participants provided anonymised feedback at the end of the day. Their average response to the question 'How useful has the day been?' was 9.0 out of 10, with a lowest score of 8.0. The average response to the question 'How useful has the day been compared with other CPD you have attended?' was 8.8 out of 10, with a lowest score of 7.0.

Following the workshop, I started a more structured and ongoing piece of grounded theory research<sup>6</sup> on the integration of the Rainbow Map into practice, which I plan to publish in 2020, as the categories firm up and become saturated. The research question is: 'What do clients experience, from the therapist's perspective, when the Rainbow Map is integrated into practice?'

I email participating therapists every four months, asking for their reflections. The BACP research department has been very helpful in ensuring this project complies with ethical guidelines. Currently, this ongoing research and experience since 2015 indicates that the Rainbow Map's contribution to client experiences of therapy include:

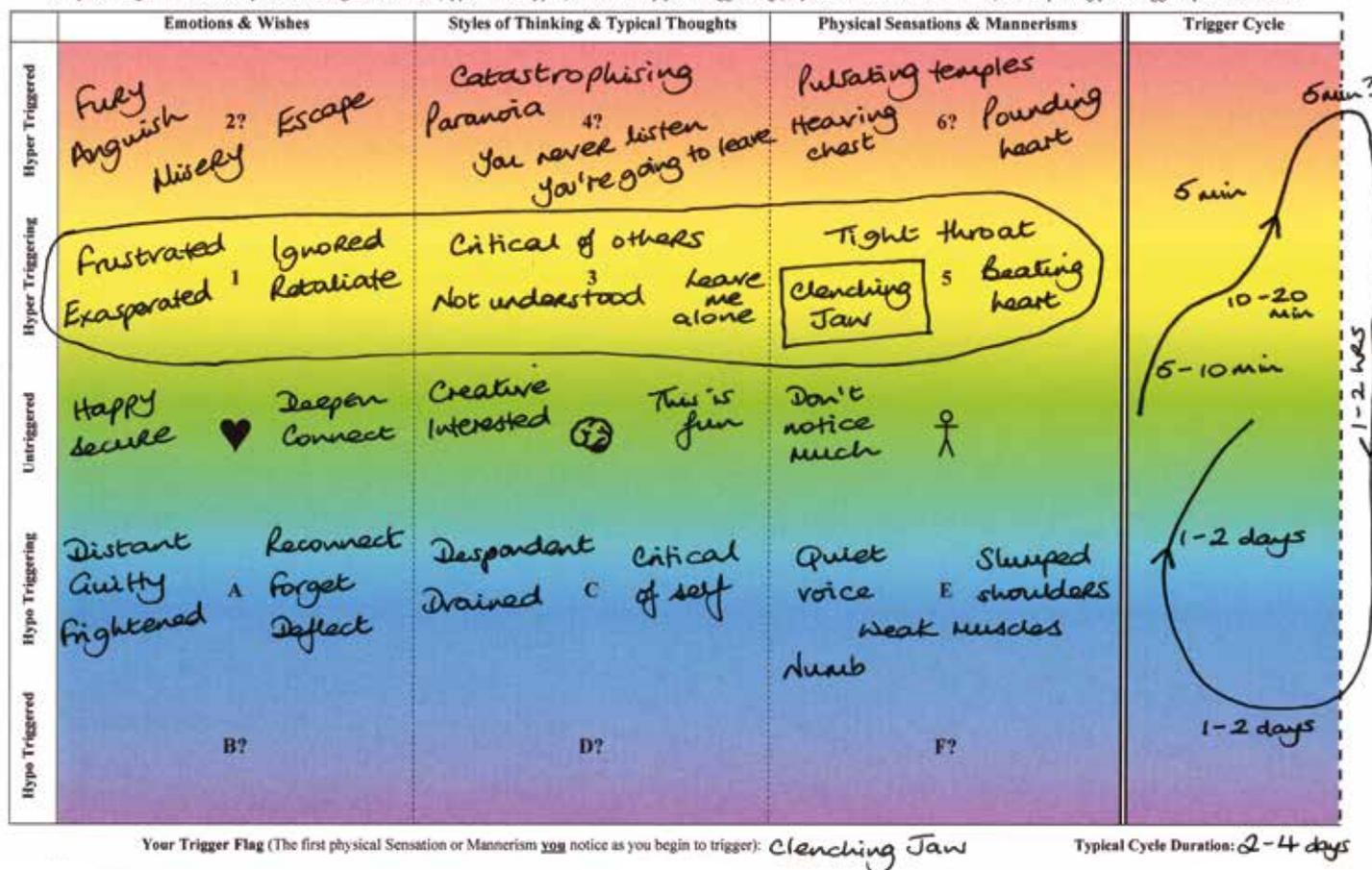
- (for couples and individuals) reinforcing self-confidence and expertise in building psychological self-awareness and resilience;
- (for couples) noticing the systemic nature of their relationship through their conscious first-hand experience of changes in their own reflective mind and reactive brain/body system in the lead up to, during and after conflict; and
- (for couples) creating openings for forgiveness of self and the other through an awareness of the automatic nature of their behaviours when they experience conflict.

There follow two examples of how I have used the Rainbow Map in therapy, which I hope will explain by illustration how it can assist the work.

## **Emma and Michael**

Emma and Michael are both in their mid 40s. They have two teenage children, one of whom was experiencing anxiety issues that started when the family relocated to a new area two years previously. They had moved so that the couple could spend less time commuting to their increasingly demanding jobs, but the time saved was instead being spent working longer hours at their respective offices. Michael's mother had died after a short illness around the time of the move, which Emma said he was reticent to talk about with her.

Complete the green band before you work through other bands (hyper and/or hypo?). Then identify your Trigger Flag (Physical Sensation or Mannerism) before plotting your Trigger Cycle and duration.



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They both described their once-intimate relationship as becoming distant and bitter. Whenever they tried to talk about what was happening, the conversation turned quickly into an argument, and then Michael would walk away. This made Emma even angrier. She would follow him, shouting and demanding answers to her questions. Emma had recently discovered messages on Michael's phone between him and an old friend in which he had been sharing his worries and feelings about their child, his mother's death and the problems in their relationship. Emma felt betrayed and exposed. She had given Michael an ultimatum that, unless they attended couple therapy, their relationship was over.

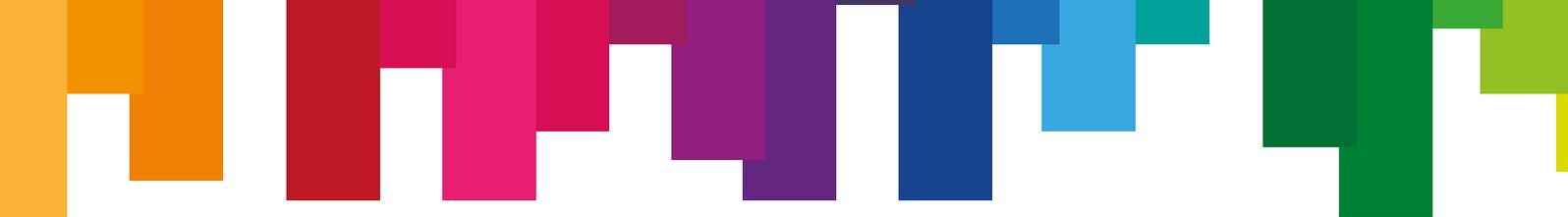
For brevity and because this is only a short introduction to the Rainbow Map and associated concepts, I am going to leave out the host of considerations and thoughts that would precede and accompany its use with clients. These include how and

when to introduce it; whether the couple or the therapist should choose which of them experiences it first; how much does dominance and fear play a role in that choice; and whether to use the Rainbow Map at all. Such issues explain why I have, to date, only trained experienced therapists. I have created the Rainbow Map website ([www.rainbowmap.org](http://www.rainbowmap.org)) to provide more information to those interested in the approach and to support practitioners who have been trained to use it and have access to the therapists' area, which holds resources such as the Rainbow Map Aide Memoire.

The Rainbow Map Aide Memoire is a one-page document that is laid out in the same column format as the Rainbow Map (see next page). It provides examples of emotions, wishes, types of thinking, typical thoughts, sensations and mannerisms for each level of triggering. It can be used as a prompt to help clients either get started and/or refine their responses. It can also be used to test for the degree of triggering a client might experience in a typical conflict cycle.

I gave Emma and Michael a blank copy of the Rainbow Map on a clipboard and described the main areas to them. I asked which of them ▶

'The Rainbow Map's contribution to client experiences of therapy include... creating openings for forgiveness of self and the other'



would like to try it first. Emma suggested Michael and he agreed. The illustration on the preceding page shows his completed Rainbow Map at the end of the session.

First, I invited him to reflect on what he might be doing when he was typically most relaxed. He said he was most at ease when he was working in their garden at the weekends. I had the Rainbow Map Aide-Memoire and another blank copy of the Rainbow Map in front of me, and together we traversed, left to right, the green untriggered band. Initially Michael found it difficult to describe his emotions when he was feeling relaxed. I shared a few examples from the Aide-Memoire, two of which Michael felt resonated with him, and he then mentioned two others. He found it easier to describe his styles of thinking and typical thoughts when he was untriggered but drew a blank when trying to think of any sensations or mannerisms.

I then asked Michael to think of a recent example of conflict with Emma, without talking about it. First, we focused on the Emotions and Wishes column and, using the Aide-Memoire again, I offered some examples of emotions and wishes that a person might experience as they moved into the yellow hyper-triggering band that marks the earliest and perhaps, from a therapeutic perspective, the most useful part of the client's experience of their triggering selves (note, around 10% of clients trigger directly down into the hypo-triggering and hypo-triggered states, particularly those worn down by extended periods of conflict and/or conflict avoidance). In this transitional band, the relative influence of the reflective mind wanes as the reactive and interacting brain and body system increasingly direct what is said and done. I always emphasise that these are examples only, and not suggestions; I find that clients generally then create their own descriptions or refinements. Michael, reflecting on the recent example of conflict with Emma, talked about his sense of frustration and exasperation, and how he felt ignored by her.

Emma was, meantime, making occasional notes on her own Rainbow Map but in the main was focused on Michael and what he was saying.

I used the Aide-Memoire to share examples of emotions from the orange shading to red hyper-triggered band to see if any resonated with Michael. He described his anguish and fury. This degree of opening, albeit tentative, by a person who had otherwise been taciturn is a common outcome of working with the Rainbow Map.

I then shared examples from the blue hypo-triggering and deep-purple hypo-triggered bands, as typically we do not simply calm down back into the green untriggered band after experiencing an episode of conflict with someone who is close to us. Instead, most clients who experience the Rainbow Map report a period of mild to severe down-regulation before they re-experience themselves as untriggered. For some, that state never exists or is very short-lived, as they oscillate between phases of being hyper- and hypo-triggered. Again, Michael was able to identify examples from his own experience.

Once we had completed the Emotions and Wishes column, we moved across the Rainbow Map to the Styles of Thinking and Typical Thoughts column and repeated these processes.

Finally, we worked on the Physical Sensations and Mannerisms column, which draws on specific aspects of polyvagal theory.<sup>3</sup> I find that even clients who report never having previously felt a sense of connection with their body have started to discover it through this experience, typically when one small, perhaps previously ignored sensation is first noticed.

Once he had completed the Physical Sensations and Mannerisms column, I asked Michael if he could identify his trigger flag. He said he thought it was clenching his jaw. We talked about how he could use this as his internal signal that he was starting to trigger when he got into conflict with Emma.

We circled the entries across the yellow hyper-triggering band on our respective copies of the map and I suggested to Michael that, when he noticed his trigger flag, he might also be experiencing most of the entries contained within that loop. This often generates conversation and insights into the automatic nature of the behaviours clients notice in themselves and their partner in connection with their conflict or avoidance of conflict. This in turn offers opportunities for conversations that can include forgiveness of self and the other.

Towards the end of the session, which took around 45 minutes, Michael plotted his

trigger cycle in the right-hand column. This experience helped him track the trajectory and duration of his typical conflict and recovery cycle. In couple work, this reveals the different nature and duration of each partner's trigger cycles and how they may be playing into what can often appear to be intractable cycles of conflict. For example, if one client recovers more quickly than the other and wants to move on or seek resolution, their partner, still recovering and unavailable, may react in a way that can trip them both back into another episode of conflict and/or avoidance. Awareness of the different nature and duration of their cycles typically provides openings for conversations that can generate ways to avoid experiencing being triggered themselves and behaving in ways that cause their partner to trigger. This capacity to notice their own reflective mind and reactive brain/body system typically offers each client an opportunity to catch themselves earlier in a trigger cycle and exert more choice in what they say and do to de-escalate conflict and sustain constructive dialogue.

Couple therapists reading this example may be concerned about the focus of a session being on one partner. Initially, I also had that concern. My own experience, and that of other therapists using the tool, shows that, for both the active and the listening client, time seems to stop and both become involved. It may be their first experience of noticing and separating out the interactions within and between them, without the need for any awareness or understanding of complex systemic theory. I have also found that some couple therapists decide not to use the Aide-Memoire and simply give each partner a Rainbow Map and a brief explanation of its main parts as a primer for reflection and dialogue about their reflective minds and reactive brain/body systems in connection with their relationship.

#### **Mia**

Mia was a first-year university student who was experiencing cycles of anger and

**'Awareness of the different nature and duration of their cycles typically provides openings for conversations'**



## Summary

I hope these brief examples will whet readers' interest in the Rainbow Map. I believe it offers therapists practising in a wide range of modalities a flexible and relatively straightforward way to integrate aspects of sensorimotor therapy into their work with couples and individual clients. I, and others using the map, find it can stimulate useful reflections, conversations and self-awareness around how clients' reflective minds and reactive brain/body systems interact. From this, it can enable them to identify actions they can take to manage trigger situations better and stay with and resolve situations involving challenging emotional conflict.

You can find out more about the theoretical foundations of the Rainbow Map on the support website at [www.rainbowmap.org](http://www.rainbowmap.org) ■

unhappiness that were becoming longer and more intense. She felt that she was doing the wrong degree and was slipping further behind in her studies. Mia went home to her parents every other weekend and lately had found herself getting into heated arguments with them over seemingly trivial issues, which was unusual. After four sessions, Mia was still struggling to engage with therapy, and her sense of despondency and hopelessness was getting deeper.

Mia reacted with interest when I suggested we use the Rainbow Map to help with her cycling episodes of anger and low mood. I explained it briefly to her and she commented on the coloured bands and what they meant to her. She focused on the trigger cycle column and recognised how quickly she got angry with her parents. She pondered on why that was happening and started to reflect on whether it might be connected to a fear of letting them down. She also thought more about the intensity of her anger and whether it ever got into the red zone. She said the arguments could last for up to an hour and that afterwards she felt totally exhausted - her mood and energy collapsing into the blue to dark purple hypo-triggering band. She said she could remain in those bands for two to three days on her return to university and was unable to do much work, which was what was causing her to fall behind in her studies.

I asked Mia how she recovered out of the blue hypo-triggering band. She wasn't sure but thought that perhaps the first sign that

it was happening was feeling able to open a textbook, and this was easier if she chose one relating to the module she had some interest in. This led to a conversation that generated other ideas about how she could re-engage with her studies.

Our conversation then moved on to whether she noticed any physical signs as she became increasingly angry with her parents. Mia thought that the pitch of her voice went up and her throat felt increasingly tight. I asked her to consider whether her tightening throat sensation could be used as her personal Trigger Flag. This stimulated a discussion about how that could help her realise she was triggering before the conflict became too intense. I asked Mia what she might be able to do to help calm herself if she noticed her trigger flag and she thought that going for a run might distract her, or perhaps massaging her throat to ease it. As the session ended, Mia asked if she could take the Rainbow Map away with her. She wanted to put it on her pinboard in her dorm room to remind her of what we had been talking about.

At the following session Mia reported that, on her last visit to her parents, she had managed to hold her triggering within the yellow zone on her Rainbow Map, as she described it, while having a conversation with them about what was happening at university. She felt as though a weight had started to lift from her shoulders, but that more work would be required if she was to hold on to these gains.



**About the author**  
**Andrew Thomas**  
**MBACP (Accred)**

Andrew is a practising couple and family therapist working for Relate in Hampshire. He gained an MA in Couple and Family Therapy in 2012. [info@rainbowmap.org](mailto:info@rainbowmap.org); [www.rainbowmap.org](http://www.rainbowmap.org)

*To protect client confidentiality, names, ages and some details have been changed, drawing on the many cases in which the Rainbow Map has been used.*

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