

## The ‘senses’ know best

Exploring the role of Life Code Matrix™ in accessing individual strengths and improving personal relationships

Kathryn Owler and Cilla Sturt

### Abstract

Life Code Matrix™ (LCM) is a strengths-based practice presently used by some counsellors in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. It is unique in its intentional use of the *senses* to identify strengths. This paper investigates the role of LCM in accessing individual strengths and improving personal relationships. It presents the results of research undertaken using a narrative approach that was designed to provide an independent evaluation of the use of LCM in practice. Fifteen adults were interviewed before and after completing the LCM process. Results indicate that most participants were easily able to identify strengths, which led to improved personal relationships. A striking finding was that many participants experienced a sense of ease in relationships that had formerly been problematic. The authors discuss these promising findings, highlighting the implications of both LCM and other contemporary sensory approaches for future counselling practice.

**Keywords:** body work, self-esteem, senses, relationship counselling, strengths-based practice

Strengths-based approaches are well recognised in a range of counselling- and guidance-related professions (Jones-Smith, 2016; Saleebey, 2013). A variety of methods exist (Davidson, 2014)<sup>1</sup> that emphasise working with a person’s strengths rather than deficits (Macaskill & Denovan, 2014; Sharry, Darmody, & Madden, 2002). Identifying personal strengths is viewed as central to facilitating and maintaining a positive self-concept as well as managing challenges and significant life transitions (Jones-Smith, 2016). Awareness of one’s strengths is also recognised as useful for a client in helping to sustain and improve personal relationships (Allison et al., 2003; Anuradha, 2004;

Barwick, 2004; Bernard, 2013; DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Jones-Smith, 2016; Kalil, 2003; Ng, Parikh, & Guo, 2012; Selekman, 2010; Sharry, 2004; Wong, 2006).

Life Code Matrix™ (LCM) is a strengths-based approach that is distinctive in its use of the *senses* (in combination with body work) to help clients recognise their strengths. In contrast, most strengths-based approaches focus on assisting clients to improve their emotional state by *cognitively* identifying strengths (Davidson, 2014). LCM was developed in 2004 by Aotearoa New Zealand counsellor and life-coach Cilla Sturt. It might be best described as a facilitated self-development practice aimed at increasing a client's capability and wellbeing in key areas of life, including important personal relationships. It is a method currently used by some counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

Sturt is something of a pioneer in her purposeful use of the senses in strength-based practice. General sensory approaches are currently being utilised by some professionals working with sectors of the population such as children with special needs and adults in psychiatric settings (Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui, 2011). They have also been used to some extent in addiction recovery (Carnes, 2013). However, deliberate utilisation of the senses to identify strengths is still not readily embraced by the mainstream health, wellbeing, and counselling professions. This article aims to stimulate discussion among counsellors regarding the use of sensory work to enhance human strengths and identity.

The article begins by outlining the LCM process, to give the reader a broad, general understanding. It then goes on to discuss original narrative research conducted by Kathryn Oowler, which was designed to provide an independent evaluation of LCM. The research examines the role of LCM in accessing individual strengths and improving personal relationships. Fifteen working-age adults were interviewed before and after completing LCM. Research findings were encouraging. The majority of participants were easily able to identify strengths and describe improved personal relationships. The article concludes with a discussion of the potential of LCM and other current sensory practices for informing future counselling and wellbeing practice.

### **What is Life Code Matrix™?**

#### *Background and context*

LCM aims to help people recognise their unique identity using sensory processes and imaginative body work. It was developed by Sturt, who has spent her career (over 30 years) specialising in personal and team development. Sturt's background is somewhat

unusual. She was born in Aotearoa New Zealand, but grew up in Papua New Guinea. Following Pollock and Van Reken's (2009) analysis, she describes herself as a "third culture kid" that is, "a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture" (p. 13). Sturt later returned to Aotearoa New Zealand with her parents, thereby only fully experiencing her first culture as a young adult; consequently, she confronted a number of identity issues. Her third-culture experience was the genesis of her interest in resolving problems with identity and provided a creative impulse for the development of LCM (Sturt, 2007, 2014). Sturt first developed and trialled the LCM model in 2004 when working in Australia as a counsellor and life-coach. In 2005 she returned to Aotearoa New Zealand, where she continued to improve the model and train facilitators, including counsellors, in the approach.

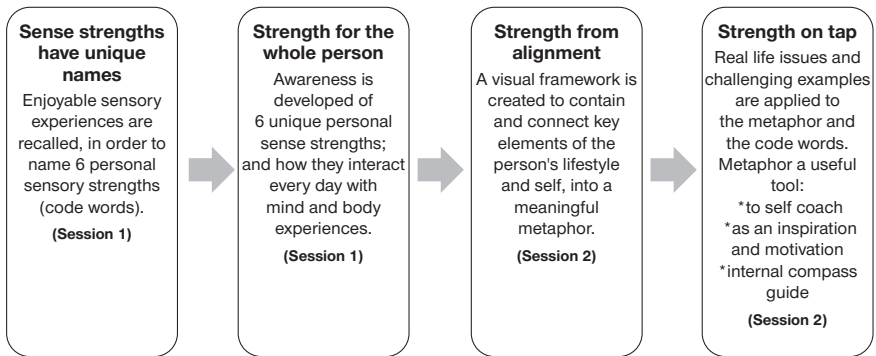
LCM was originally developed to remedy some of the limitations that Sturt had observed professionally with some traditional counselling and life-coaching models. For instance, she observed that traditional therapeutic approaches that focused on problems rather than strengths could be disempowering. Other therapists and researchers have documented similar issues with problem-focused models (e.g., Jones-Smith, 2014; Madsen, 2007; Saleebey, 2013). Moreover, even when therapeutic models did focus on identifying strengths, Sturt noted it could be time-consuming and difficult for clients to locate strengths simply through cognitive effort. As a result, she began to experiment with a more holistic approach that utilised cognitive, emotional, *and* sensory information. The outcome of this experimentation was LCM.

#### *LCM: A two-part process*

The LCM method evolved because of research, creative exploration, and inspiration on Sturt's part. The method was honed through practice and observing whether, first, it assisted clients to easily identify strengths, and second, whether clients could then effectively draw on these strengths to help them reach their goals. LCM aims to deliberately draw a client's attention to sensory intelligence experiences and body awareness. While many of the techniques used in LCM are original, others closely align with the ideas of philosophers, poets, therapists, and body-work practitioners; some of this theoretical alignment is discussed below.

The premise of LCM is that there should be minimal or no "effort" in being ourselves. The objective of LCM is that each client leaves with an effective personal metaphor—made up of their personal strengths—that will provide a healthy sense of self to help them navigate daily challenges and make decisions. This metaphor is not

Figure 1. The LCM process



simply the result of conscious choice by a client. Rather, it is something the person *becomes* conscious of; indeed, it emerges, for many, as a kind of numinous experience. Many clients in Aotearoa New Zealand describe this metaphor as an experience of “coming home” or a discovery of their own “personal mihi.”<sup>2</sup>

LCM is designed as a tool for self-empowerment. The metaphor, made up of personal strengths, becomes an “internal (intrinsic) compass” of self, allowing clients to become their own personal coach. Their newly discovered sense of self provides them with a firm foundation because they can make decisions—large or small—in alignment with it.

LCM has evolved into a two-part process, of two separate three-hour sessions. The first part involves identifying sense strengths, and the second part, body work (see Figure 1). To provide a broad, basic understanding of LCM, the fundamentals of the process and its theoretical alignment are discussed below. However, given the limitations of space (and because LCM is currently a proprietary process), the authors do not attempt a complete and comprehensive discussion of the method.

### *Part One: Identifying sense strengths*

The first part of LCM uses a specifically sensory approach to identify strengths. In preparation for this session, clients are asked to take some time at home to note down what they most love to smell, taste, listen to, touch, and look at. It is also suggested that they discuss these questions with friends and family. This preparation helps to orient clients to LCM, stimulating stories and reflections that might be hard to call to mind without some time for consideration.

The sensory approach utilised in the first session is confirmed to an extent by the work of the renowned philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus (1266–1308), who emphasised the uniqueness of all animate and inanimate objects, and human experience. Scotus specifically identified a connection between identity and sensory data, arguing that:

*what first motivates our intellect, in this life at least, is what can be abstracted from sense images. But it is the accidental features of objects in the real world that impinge upon our senses, and it is these we must use to identify and differentiate individuals.* (Wolter, 1990, pp. 95–96)

Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) expanded on Scotus’s work, as well as developing his own original ideas. Sturt’s development of LCM echoes Hopkins in striving to enable a client to clarify what Hopkins calls one’s “inscape” (Hopkins, as cited in Ruggles, 1947). Ruggles (1947) explained that “the term inscaping (a verb or noun)... [refers to] the individualising pattern or quality of uniqueness in an object” (p. 86). In other words, inscape is the inward distinctive essential quality of a thing or being. Hopkins’ contention was that nothing in nature is repeated; rather, everything has an essential uniqueness, including human identity. He referred to the way individuality is perceived or experienced uniquely, by an object, animal, or person, and used the term “instress” to describe this experience (Ruggles, 1947).

During the LCM process, the facilitator encourages a client to gain clarity about their identity (similar to an “inscape”) by reflecting on their relationship with each of their five external senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight, and their internal sense (commonly referred to as the sixth sense, or intuition). In her practice, Sturt has found that sensory attractions are likely to be more consistent throughout a person’s life than emotional attractions, lasting as they do for longer periods. In the same way that we are attracted to care for babies *with all our five external senses* (Kringelbach, Stark, Alexander, Bornstein, & Stein, 2016), it appears that we are shaped by the things that we are drawn to by our senses in a unique way throughout our lives.

An acknowledgement of the role played by the senses in healing is standard in many indigenous cultures (Howes & Classen, 2014); this has also been the case historically for people living in the Western world (Bynum & Porter, 1993; Howes & Classen, 2014). Through their ethnographic and historical research, Howes and Classen (2014) found that “what makes sensations so forceful is that they are lived experiences, not intellectual abstractions” (p. 7). They explain that the senses still play a significant role

in contemporary health and wellbeing. For instance, there are currently many sensory-based healing modalities available, including acupuncture, aromatherapy, spa treatments, sound therapy, tactile therapy (such as massage), and colour therapy. While sometimes not accepted by mainstream medicine, these modalities can find popularity with members of the general public.

Moreover, research has found that the senses do play a role within mainstream medicine (Howes & Classen, 2014; More & Srivastava, 2010; Sternberg, 2010). For instance, studies have shown that “many patients make judgements about their medications (which in turn affect how regularly these are taken) based on the simple colour of the pills—red is good for the heart, pink is sweet, and so on” (More & Srivastava, as cited in Howes & Classen, 2014, p. 62). Sensory research conducted on post-surgery patients found that the experience of listening to music reduced feelings of pain and discomfort. As well, access to a window in the recovery room post-anaesthesia, with a view of nature, appeared to contribute to a faster recovery (Sternberg, 2010). After reviewing the available research, Howes and Classen (2014) have concluded that “humans are sensuous beings who respond emotionally and physically to the world of sensations and their associated meanings in whichever period or culture they live” (p. 62).

During the first part of LCM, clients are encouraged to describe their relationship to each of their six senses. Given the important role that the senses play for an individual, the facilitator needs to respect the client’s sensory choices; the clients are therefore placed at the centre of the LCM process. Through describing their relationship with the senses, clients create words or phrases, called “code words,” which represent the person’s unique sense strengths. These strengths can be utilised in any area of life for example, family, friendships, work. Code words are gathered through a dialogical conversation with the individual about something they enjoy in each of the six senses. For instance, “What is it you enjoy about eating chocolate or a particular kind of fruit?” An example of one person’s code words are: *certainty* (intuition), *competence* (sound), *special* (smell), *delight* (touch), *newness* (vision), and *difference* (taste).

Language used by the facilitator during Part One is very specific. The focus is always on the person’s experience of the senses; clients are not asked about feelings and their thoughts are not probed or analysed. For instance, the LCM facilitator never asks “Why...?” This is primarily a cognitive question and can result in clients becoming stuck, unable to locate their connection to their senses. There is also a deliberate avoidance of emotional encounters. For instance, one would never ask the question:

“What are you feeling?” Or, “How does that make you feel?” This can shift the person away from a connection with their senses.

In tapping into their significant code words, clients are able to access important elements of identity (or sense strengths). Linking to their code words allows a client to progress in the present. The facilitator will encourage clients who complete the first part of LCM to connect every day to a chosen sense experience found easily in their environment; the clients will then relate this sense experience back to their code word until that sensory connection becomes a habitual strength.

### *Part Two: Body work*

The second part of LCM is a whole-person experience (not just a verbal conversation) and uses “body work” to assist individuals to bring together their identified strengths to create a visual metaphor that reflects their unique identity. The client is invited to enter a creative sensory process in order to build a bridge from the cognitive description of their sensory experience into the “felt sense” experience, held with body sensations.

This “felt sensing” aspect of LCM is predominantly aligned to Focusing, a method developed by Eugene Gendlin (1981, 1993). As a student of Carl Rogers, the originator of Client Centred Therapy, Gendlin (1993) learned that when people are enabled to accept themselves, change in their lives also takes place: “experience is felt rather than spoken or visual. It is not words or images, but a *bodily* sense. It does not fit the common names or categories of feelings. *It is a unique sense of this person or this situation*” (p. 24). Following Rogers, Gendlin discovered that through awareness in the present, a person can intuitively tap into the physiology of their condition. As a result of accepting this physical “felt” experience, a change takes place that is generally positive and healing. Focusing is therefore the ability to consciously experience body sensations and allow them to become a symbol through the body’s own language (Gendlin, 1981, 1993). It involves being attentive, caring, and “open to sensing that which is there but not yet in words” (Cornell, 2005, p. 14).

During the second part of LCM, clients are encouraged to make a sense connection between their code words and their body. For example, during Part One clients might state that they love the sound of a roaring stormy sea, and their conclusion (from their senses) is that the sound gives them an experience of freedom. In Part Two, when asked what the experience is like in their body, they might say the experience is felt in their legs but nowhere else. It is heavy and dark. It is green and blue. It is liquid and hot. It is expanding and outside their legs but not a felt sense anywhere else in their upper torso. When asked if they would like it to expand into the rest of their body, they say

“yes” and they might then be invited to allow that expansion to occur through a hole in their stomach. After that expansion happens, the whole body experiences a sense of being heavy and dark, liquid and hot, expanding outside their body, and green and blue. They are able to experience “freedom” in this way throughout their body.<sup>3</sup> As a result, in any circumstance the sound of the roaring sea can instantly be recalled to connect them again through their body to the strength of “freedom.”

When the process of making a sense connection with each code word is completed, the client is then guided to create a visual metaphor. As discussed above, the metaphor is not consciously chosen; rather, it emerges for the person; they become conscious of it. The facilitator starts by asking clients to write their code words on tear-shaped discs. Participants are then asked to connect each code word in a visual pattern that seems meaningful to the individual. An image/metaphor (Life Code Matrix) emerges as a reflection of the way the code words have been placed in connection to each other when there is a “felt” and embodied sense by the client that this ordering is correct. Because the metaphor emerges out of sensory and bodily knowing, it has been experienced as emerging in a numinous way by many clients.

Each metaphor is unique. Once the client has a grouping of code words they are happy with, they are asked to describe how the grouping connects for them through metaphoric and sensory language. An answer may be: “Strong and still like a mountain,” or “It moves like a chandelier,” or “It smells like a honeycomb,” or “It feels like silk,” typically before they realise that their pattern actually *looks* like a chandelier or a honeycomb or like silky fabric.

For example, a client decided to do LCM with Sturt because of relationship struggles he was experiencing and a lack of self-confidence. During Part One of the process, he identified the following strengths, or code words: peace, joy, content, comfort, love, confidence. His LCM metaphor (made up of these code words) was “a mountain.” The first picture in Figure 2 below shows his original grouping of code words. The second shows a picture he chose to represent his metaphor visually.

After completing LCM, a client’s metaphor is likely to yield foundational support, plus ongoing inspiration and motivation. For instance, the client with the mountain metaphor explained to Sturt:

Being a mountain reminds me of what I can be—but not what I feel. It has vastness and reminds me that I don’t need to feel small. It reminds me of all the possibilities I have when I feel there is no way out. The mountains stretch all the way to the horizon so it’s endless. I have always preferred mountains to



**Figure 2.** A client example of a mountain metaphor



*Client's original grouping of code words*



*Picture the client chose to visually represent his metaphor*

the sea and this is just so me. I am a small person in size, but this reminds me that I have a big, big heart and I am important. I am big, and good, and strong, supportive, and flourishing. I have endless purpose.<sup>4</sup>

For each client, the metaphor is like an “an internal selfie” (an inscape), reminding clients how they can connect to their strengths. It is also a safe place from which to connect to the world and to others. In other words, the goal is to provide clients with a positive and inspirational version of their selves, which provides a powerful guide. In Sturt’s experience, metaphors can help bring about a shift for a client, moving them out of places where they feel “stuck” towards positive change.

### **Research aims and methodology**

The research discussed in this article aimed to investigate the impact of LCM in 12 areas of the lives of working-age adults: family, friends, belonging, fun, discovery, creativity, spirituality, sexuality, nature, work, body, contribution. These areas were chosen as they

are discussed during the second part of the LCM process with a client. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the study explored the experiences of 15 research participants to assess whether they felt LCM had a positive impact. Narrative research is concerned with the stories people tell about their lives, in the belief that the ability to tell stories is essential to humans in making sense of their lives and who they are (Hoshmand, 2005). In lay terms, a narrative involves some kind of “before and after” story, as it arranges incidents in sequence over time (Le Guin, 1990).

Narrative research is an appropriate methodology when examining strengths-based identity work (Ingamells & Epston, 2012). Hoshmand (2005) explained that narrative research, “with its focus on meanings and the storied nature of human life, can be especially useful in discovery research on identity development and the experience of counselling and life transitions” (p. 178). During the research process, the researcher and participants created the “before and after” story of the LCM for that participant, identifying any shifts in wellbeing in key areas of life since completing the process.

## **Method**

### *Participants and recruitment*

Fifteen adult participants aged between 22 and 80 took part in the study: ten females and five males. Research participants were recruited through a combination of purposive (through emails sent out by the researcher to networks) and snowball sampling (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2014). A key criterion for inclusion was that each participant had recently undergone some kind of significant life transition involving a period of confusion and disorientation (Bridges, 2009; Yeatman, 2015). Examples of transition included career change, returning from overseas, children growing up, spouse dying, or a romantic relationship ending. Each person’s transition involved negotiating significant personal relationships, including with family, friends, and/or work colleagues. Adults who were interested in participating in the research had an initial phone screening discussion with the researcher to determine whether this criterion was met. Full informed consent was also gained from participants.

### *Procedure*

Two interviews were undertaken. First, a pre-interview (around 30 minutes long) was conducted with each client prior to their commencing the LCM process. This provided an opportunity for the researcher and the participant to become acquainted and to discuss briefly how the participant currently felt in each of the 12 areas of life.

Second, a longer in-depth interview (between 90 and 120 minutes) took place, which was recorded and later transcribed. This interview occurred within six weeks of the participant completing LCM with Sturt, to capture the initial impact of the LCM process and to assess whether there had been a shift in wellbeing in each area of life since completing the LCM.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used. Questions asked during the interview included: “‘Why did you want to do LCM?’ ‘What transitions were occurring for you?’ ‘What was your experience of LCM like?’ ‘Has it helped you in your transition/s?’ ‘Has it provided you with a greater sense of wellbeing in areas of your life?’ ‘What kind of impact (if any) has it had on your life?’ ‘Would you recommend it?’” (Owler, 2012, p. 68).

### *Analysis*

In-depth interviews were transcribed and the data from the second set of interviews were analysed and coded manually in two stages. First, coding occurred in relation to the 12 areas: family, friends, belonging, fun, discovery, creativity, spirituality, sexuality, nature, work, body, contribution. Second, coding occurred across all the data, ascertaining any common themes (Owler, 2012).

### **Findings**

A common theme for 13 out of the 15 research participants was that LCM had provided them with a clearer or stronger sense of self. This knowledge was associated with their personal metaphor, made up of their sense strengths (code words). They felt that they would be able to draw on these strengths in the future. The two remaining participants did have some affinity for their metaphor, but did not feel that they were able to utilise it in the future with confidence (Owler, 2012). One of these participants did, however, experience some significant positive shifts in family relationships after doing the LCM.

LCM had a significant influence in the area of personal relationships. The majority of participants indicated that the LCM had positive effects in the areas of family relationships (12 out of 15) and friends (13 out of 15). In knowing (and liking) themselves better, participants appeared better able to understand how best to relate to others. This included a reference point to make important relationship decisions. One notable component was the ease with which persistent relationship difficulties had shifted. Actions and decisions regarding previous difficult relationships flowed

naturally; there was no sense of struggle involved in the shift. Such changes occurred for eight of the participants and included relationships with young children, adult children, friends, parents, siblings, and work colleagues. Three examples are discussed below, beginning with a summary of the transition each participant was experiencing from information gathered by the researcher.

*Lizzie, Pākehā (New Zealand European), 22, health practitioner<sup>5</sup>*

As a teenager Lizzie was a successful competitive athlete. However, in her late teens she suffered an injury and had to stop competing. At the time of the second interview, she was still coming to terms with this career rupture. She was also experiencing some relationship difficulties with her mother. This relationship improved markedly after doing LCM.

Lizzie had often found her mother's influence slightly overbearing. Prior to doing LCM, comments her mother made would often "take the wind out of my sails" in terms of knocking her confidence. However, since doing LCM, Lizzie had felt more confident. She explained that "I've been able to see [the comments]...more as a reflection of her and her view on the world, rather than me. This is quite empowering, because before it would just bowl me over."

Lizzie had discovered through doing LCM that one of her strengths was her "confidence," which was one of her code words:

[Prior to LCM] I was very easily swayed by the confidence I perceived other people to have in me. So, if I thought that my mum might think I couldn't do something or even probably my friends, then I would believe that. And so I was really easily knocked about by even things that were said intended as a joke.

Through doing LCM, Lizzie developed clearer boundary delineation between herself and her mother. It seems that doing LCM helped give Lizzie a more solid sense of self and a greater sense of her personal capabilities. Prior to doing LCM, she was "getting to the point that I was thinking maybe I should cut her, my mother, out a little bit. I felt that, just because it was getting me down." However, after doing LCM she could establish a more positive dynamic: "I now don't feel the need to do that [distance myself], which is good, because it's probably not the right way to go about things anyway."

*Adrianna, 31, Samoan, full-time caregiver for a family member*

Adrianna had recently stopped paid work to become a full-time caregiver for her father. She experienced a very significant shift in her family relationships after doing

LCM. A tense relationship dynamic had formerly existed between her and her older sister, which had become quite entrenched and affected the rest of the family system. As a result of LCM, her relationship with her sister radically improved, as did the family dynamic. The most significant code word that Adrianna mentioned as relevant to this relationship was “hope.”

*So, what's been the change, what's been the shift there with family?*

I think normally with my sister [who has moved overseas]...we had a weird love-hate relationship. We were always on the defensive. But with the [code words I discovered] I had “safety,” “belonging,” “contentment” [and]...my main one [code word] was “hope”...My sister used to play heaps of mind games on me...Because she's six years older than me...I was always scared to be myself, I always wanted to be what she wanted me to be and be happy and now I feel more confident and I can be myself. It's a whole 360-degree turn. Not in that I'm now being manipulative to her, but now I'm not a little kid anymore and now we're equals.

It is evident from this extract that in knowing herself better, Adrianna was able to choose a more differentiated way of relating to her sister. To further illustrate this improved relationship, Adrianna goes on to explain that since doing LCM:

We've done a lot of talking over the phone. We've talked about the LCM. And I think there's more honesty. Whereas normally that's probably going to cause crap and then we're going to get into an argument and now because there's not so much hostility and anger from, well, initially from my side, it feels easier to talk to her and she's been able to talk back just as easily. So yeah. It did improve, a lot. And I thought it had to do with the hope [code word]. I think hope was the biggest thing.

Other people in her family have noticed the change in Adrianna's relationship with her sister:

Especially my two nieces...20, 21, who noticed a big change. Because prior to that I always called her psycho (laugh). Now I can actually say her name (laugh). Some people used to refer to her, how's psycho?...And [now] I'm actually happy. I think prior to us doing it [LCM], even though we were talking, if she did ring...unless she actually asked for me I probably wouldn't have gone

to the phone. But now it's oh my God I'm actually making phone-calls. Not just because it's cheap. But because I want to ring her up.

Improving relationships with her sister had also had a positive impact on other family relationships:

My dad gets worried about us all fighting because he's so old...Because our relationships worked better [since doing LCM], it's enhanced my dad's relationship with us. It's not so tense. Even my brothers and sisters who are here in Auckland can feel that when we're all together. This is probably the first time we're going into Christmas where we're actually all on goodish terms, without one of us being crappy at the other one.

Adrianna finished by explaining that her family relationships are "heaps better" since doing LCM. And while, with her sister, "we'll have to sit down and heal heaps of wounds" at some stage, what's happened since LCM is "a nice starting point."

*Margaret, 52, Pākehā, experienced counsellor and speaker*

Margaret had always found it hard to be assertive. She had always been a "giver," sometimes to her own detriment. As a result, she had become quite depressed. However, since doing LCM she had been much better at valuing herself and identifying her own needs in a relationship. She had particularly noticed a difference with how she had behaved with several work friends and close work colleagues. Subsequently, her mood improved.

Since doing LCM Margaret felt that she was able to be more assertive in her friendships. She gives an example:

I had a friend who wanted to do something and I actually didn't make any excuse or anything, I just said "no I don't want to do that." I was very clear. She went, "Oh," because it wasn't like me either and she said "...I could pick you up" and I said "No I don't want to do that." And she went "Oh." And I said, "Look I've really got some things on that I have to pursue." And I said, "I'd love to catch up with you another time, but right now with everything," I said "I have to say no."

Margaret was pleasantly surprised at her own ability to be assertive with this friend:

I think it was as much a shock to me as it was to her. It was a definite no and that wasn't like me at all. I've always found it hard to say that. Normally, I'd go,

“Let’s have a look at my diary” and I’d try and squeeze it in. I just thought there’s just no way. And she was being pushy so I just went “No.” So I was really assertive. So I think LCM’s changed that as well.

Margaret realises that in the past, giving was “how I got my ‘you’re a good person’ from people.” As a result, she has often been taken advantage of. However, now she realises that “I can be helpful, because that’s my integrity [code word]. But I don’t have to try and get people to like me. And that’s freedom [code word].”

Because of that attitude shift “I am me, like me or not,” I’ll help you out, but it will also be for me too. I’m not going to go overboard. It’s a reciprocal thing. This is who I am. Yes, I can help you. But I won’t allow myself to be taken advantage of. That’s the baggage isn’t it? That’s the baggage, [in the past] you know that you do it and be taken advantage of so you feel that you’ve contributed more than enough so therefore you’re good.

Two of Margaret’s code words were “I’m enough” and “freedom.” These had allowed her to realise that she is good “enough” just being herself; in other words, she doesn’t need to prove herself. She became more empowered, which was useful in her relationships with work colleagues:

This is “here I am.” [If I decide to help someone], it’s not a reaction. It’s my response. If I do it, I do it. If I don’t want to, I won’t. And it’s OK. So I’m respecting myself. I think what LCM has given me is more of my self-respect, in that being enough and that is the freedom. I don’t have to impress someone. I don’t have to make somebody like me or go overboard to make them like me. I know I’m generous. I don’t have to go overboard to make somebody see that. Why would I? If I’m enough [code word]. It’s massive for me.

This attitude change in Margaret showed that she had become a more boundaried self. Her self-esteem had increased, and she was now less reactive and more empowered in her relationships. That is, she was no longer giving away her power to friends and colleagues she had perceived as more powerful than her; there was less of a victim mentality evident. Knowing her strengths and that “she is enough” had allowed Margaret to *choose* to be generous, rather than being generous in order that others would like and affirm her. Because of LCM she was feeling more in control of her friendships and work relationships. In addition, her depression had lifted.

## Discussion

### *Identifying strengths and improving personal relationships*

This research set out to assess the capacity of LCM to help clients locate strengths and improve personal relationships. The results presented above indicate that for the participants in the research, it was effective in both these ways.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of LCM as a strengths-based tool is its use of the *senses*. Most other strengths-based approaches rely on cognitive efforts to identify strengths, with the aim of shifting emotional states. This mental work of identifying (and employing) strengths is generally not a spontaneous process (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Jones-Smith, 2016; Macaskill & Denovan, 2014; Rashid, 2014) and can take some time. This is particularly the case if a specific area of life has been especially difficult in the past (Jones-Smith, 2016). For instance, prominent US strengths-based therapist and writer Jones-Smith (2016) identifies eight phases in strengths-based therapy, beginning with creating a therapeutic alliance and strengths discovery. She explains that the strengths-discovery phase can take multiple sessions.

In contrast, these findings suggest that sensory information can effectively and easily facilitate self-knowledge. For instance, before LCM, Margaret had previously engaged in strengths-related counselling to help her deal, on a cognitive and emotional level, with her depression and relationship struggles. This included attempts to enhance her self-esteem. While this counselling was useful in many regards, it was not until after completing LCM that Margaret felt resourced enough to be able to fully know that "I'm 'enough,' just as I am." In other words, it was only after LCM that Margaret was able to fully accept herself.

For most participants, identifying strengths (and locating a stronger sense of self) also resulted in improved relationships with family and friends. For instance, the code words "safety," "belonging," "contentment," and "hope" enabled Adrianna to shift a largely negative and reactive dynamic with her older sister that had persisted for some years. Adrianna began to experience relating to her sister in a proactive and adult manner, putting positive energy into developing a new relationship dynamic. This capacity emerged almost effortlessly because of her knowledge of her strengths. The improvement in relationships evident from the research findings compares favourably to the stated goals of other strength-based approaches (Jones-Smith, 2016).

A striking finding was that many participants experienced a sense of ease in important relationships that had previously been problematic. For the three participants discussed, a stronger sense of self led to firmer boundaries. For instance,



Margaret had previously been “a giver” in important friendship and collegial relationships, finding her worth through giving to others. As a result, she often found these relationships unequal. After completing LCM, Margaret realised that she didn’t need to compromise her “integrity” (code word) to be liked. Drawing on her strengths, she could make deliberate rather than reactive choices about how to use her time. In sum, the majority of participants felt that the tools provided by LCM enabled them to attain pleasure and closeness in formerly difficult relationships.

There are, however, limitations to this study. Research data for this study were gathered within six weeks and so do not capture longer term impacts. The sample size is also relatively small. Thus, further research with a larger cohort of people, tracked over several years, could be enlightening.

We can, however, conclude that LCM can be a useful and effective tool in assisting clients to identify strengths and improve personal relationships. The LCM process can take place independent of, or as a complement to, counselling. In this research, it was used as a stand-alone tool. However, LCM is currently used by counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia to assist them in their counselling work. The research findings indicate that LCM could be a particularly useful tool for counsellors when working with clients in challenging relationships.

### *Sensory work and future counselling practice*

As mentioned earlier, Sturt is something of an innovator in her deliberate incorporation of the senses into strength-based practice. She continues to develop the LCM model and other related individual- and team-based practices. Given the positive results of the findings presented in this article, and other findings published from this study (Owler, 2012), undertaking further research into the LCM model seems worthwhile, as well as into the potential of sensory work in general to enhance human strengths and identity.

General sensory approaches are currently being utilised by some professionals working with specific sectors of the population. These include children with special needs, adults with learning disabilities, those suffering chronic pain or with stroke or traumatic brain injury, adults needing dementia care, and those in psychiatric settings (Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui, 2011). For instance, Tina Champagne’s use of sensory modulation has become influential in mental health settings (Champagne, 2011). Sensory modulation is promoted by Champagne and others as a way of reducing the use of seclusion and restraint in hospital mental health wards (Champagne &

Stromberg, 2004; Cummings, Grandfield, & Coldwell, 2010). Clients are encouraged to explore their sensory preferences, developing a plan that they can implement to calm and relax themselves when they become distressed. Sensory tools include weighted blankets, music, scents, and pictures (Champagne, 2011).

Patrick Carnes, a well-known writer on counselling, has discussed the use of senses in addiction recovery. He argues that because of modern lifestyles, we are removed from our senses and nature:

*Because of our stress and preoccupations, the fact that we spend our time in buildings far from nature, and our tendency to live vicariously through the media, we do not attend much to our senses. So while our bodies are capable of gathering sense data, we often ignore the information our senses supply.* (Carnes, 2013, p. 310)

As a way of moving forward from addiction, Carnes advocates finding more positive ways to connect with our senses (Carnes, 2012, 2013), including within intimate human relationships (Carnes, 2013). A growing body of literature highlighting the connection between nature and wellbeing (Greenleaf, Bryant, & Pollock, 2013; Reese, 2016) might support such claims.

However, purposeful utilisation of the senses to identify strengths is still not readily embraced by the mainstream health, wellbeing, and counselling professions. Aristotle once wrote that “as the eyes of the owl are to the blazing sun, so is the reason in our soul to the things which are by nature most evident of all” (Wolter, 1990, p. 96). Aristotle refers here to the struggle to grasp intellectually what is most vital to our being. Therefore, perhaps the reason the senses and their capacity are seldom deliberately explored by health and counselling practitioners is that they are so fundamental to our very being.

Additional research on sensory work and its ability to enhance human strengths, identity, and relationships could provide counsellors and other health practitioners with some important new tools. It has been argued that the senses are the way that humans first absorb information and become orientated and attached to the world (Neufeld & Maté, 2014). If this is the case, they are significant developmentally. Further research could include investigation into their role in human development.

It would seem important to open dialogue between practitioners and researchers who are working in the arena of the senses. A good place to start could be making the senses and identity a focus for conferences and counselling forums. Collaborative

research might then result; research projects might lead to practical helping strategies in areas critical to counselling, including the treatment of depression, anxiety, grief, addiction, and relationship issues.

In particular, we owe an investigation of the senses to our young people. There is growing evidence of the damage that contemporary technologies, including communication technologies and social media, can potentially have on young people's mental health, identity, and relationships (Ciarrochi et al., 2016; Jacobson, Bailin, Milanaik & Adesman, 2016; Pantic, 2014; Wu, Outley, Matarrita-Cascante, & Murphrey, 2016). These can disconnect young people from nature, their unique sensual identities (e.g. through online pornography), and healthy relationships. This disconnect may be the most pressing and compelling reason to date to step up research efforts into the senses and identity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has investigated the role of LCM in locating strengths and improving personal relationships. Results from the research indicate that after doing LCM, participants' sense of self was positively strengthened, which in turn improved their relational dynamics: for many, there was a sense of ease in relationships that had formerly been problematic. LCM is unique in its use of the senses to help a client identify strengths. Given the positive results of this research, there appears value in conducting further research into the model, as well as exploring the potential of sensory work in general, to enhance human strengths and identity.

## Notes

1. Approaches include but are not limited to Solution-focused Brief Therapy, Possibility Therapy, The Strengths Perspective, Narrative Therapy, and Ericksonian Hypnotherapy. Other influences include Adlerian Psychology, Person-centred Therapy, and Reality Therapy (Davidson, 2014).
2. A mihi (shortened from mihimihi) is a process of introduction followed by Aotearoa New Zealand Māori (indigenous Aotearoa New Zealanders) in formal or semi-formal contexts, which has become meaningful and used by many other Aotearoa New Zealanders of various ethnicities. It is a way of stating one's identity in a form that is rooted in the past and in place, providing a solid foundation for both present and future living. Here is a definition: "Mihimihi (*Introductions/Speeches*): At the beginning of any hui [meeting], following the pōwhiri (*formal welcome*) or the mihi whakatau (*a welcome*, as practised off marae across the

Ngāi Tahu tribal region), a round of introductions and speeches—or mihimihi—usually occurs. During this time, people ordinarily stand to share a little bit about where they come from and who they are in relation to this (i.e. share their pepeha, or *tribal aphorism*); many share significant parts of their whakapapa (*genealogy*)” (University of Otago, 2010).

3. Sturt has found in her work with hundreds of clients that the sound code has an impact on “voice;” that is, the ability to confidently express oneself. To have their voice recognised, and heard, it is vital for the client that the sense experience of their sound resonates all the way up into their chest and throat. If their awareness remains only in their legs, they may be held back from their own sense of personal “freedom.”
4. Permission was obtained from the client for the pictures and words related to his mountain metaphor to be published.
5. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

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