



Therapeutic Potential of Metaphorical Cards in Psychosomatic Practice: Integration of Body-Oriented and Spiritual Methods

Korobeinikova Olga Ivanovna

Director General Autonomous Non-Profit Organization of Additional Professional Education “Academy of Conscious Thinking” (ANO DPO “AOM”), Madrid, Spain.

Abstract

The article presents a theoretical and analytical overview of the therapeutic potential of metaphorical cards in psychosomatic practice, with a focus on the integration of body-oriented and spiritual methods. The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining clinical psychology, body therapy, cognitive science, and existential frameworks. Special attention is given to the analysis of empirical and qualitative studies that explore the mechanisms of action of visual-symbolic images in working with somatoform symptoms, chronic anxiety, and repressed emotional experiences. Key modalities of metaphorical card impact are identified: activation of embodied experience, symbolization of repressed affects, emotional desensitization, restoration of subjective control, and the formation of bodily-felt meaning. The article presents a classification of therapeutic effects and application formats of the method in individual, group, and digital settings. The necessity of moving from linear models of intervention to holistic strategies is substantiated—strategies that combine bodily perception, metaphorical representation, and spiritual-meaning transformation of symptoms. The specifics of co-design and narrative accompaniment of visual images are analyzed, highlighting their role in enhancing self-reflection and bodily integration. An original integrative framework is proposed, in which the symbol functions as a mediator between sensation, cognition, and existential experience. This article will be of interest to practicing therapists, researchers in psychosomatics, psychology educators, and all those interested in using imagery-based methods for deep work with bodily and emotional manifestations.

Keywords: Metaphorical Cards, Psychosomatics, Body Therapy, Symbolization, Figurative Thinking, Emotional Release, Bodily Experience, Inner Meaning, Collaborative Creativity, Holistic Approach.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary psychotherapeutic practice, both in clinical-medical and consultative settings, is undergoing a transformation driven by the need for a fresh perspective on working with psychosomatic symptoms. The rising prevalence of conditions with unclear etiology, increasing somatic anxiety, and widespread chronic pain call for methods capable of integrating the bodily, emotional, and existential dimensions of experience. There is a demand for approaches in which symptom work entails not only alleviating suffering but also exploring its symbolic significance.

Of particular interest to practitioners is the metaphor card method—a visual-associative tool that enables the client to project inner states onto images. Through symbolic representation of symptoms, the client can establish an indirect dialogue with their own pain, gaining the opportunity to transcend immediate bodily discomfort and

situate it within a broader context of personal experience. This process promotes bodily reflection, emotional release, and cognitive reappraisal, which proves especially valuable when addressing symptoms that resist linear, rational analysis [2].

The success of this work largely depends on the therapist's level of emotional intelligence: their capacity for empathy, subtle attunement to the client's emotional signals, and the ability to contain complex experiences within a safe relational space. An emotionally mature practitioner can interpret the chosen image and create conditions for genuine transformation in the client's relationship to their symptoms, traumas, and their own body.

Simultaneously, interest is growing in integrating meditative and spiritual practices into the therapeutic process to restore the connection between body, consciousness, and the individual's inner core of meaning. Mindfulness

Citation: Korobeinikova Olga Ivanovna, “Therapeutic Potential of Metaphorical Cards in Psychosomatic Practice: Integration of Body-Oriented and Spiritual Methods”, Universal Library of Medical and Health Sciences, 2025; 3(4): 01-05. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulmhs.2025.0304001>.

exercises, breathwork techniques, visualizations, and elements of spiritual reflection open access to the deeper layers of the psyche and bodily memory, enhancing the impact of metaphorical work and fostering the emergence of a cohesive, integrated self.

Within this context, the metaphor card method becomes a projective technique and a component of a broader holistic model aimed at restoring inner harmony among physical, psycho-emotional, and spiritual levels. Here, the symptom is viewed not only as a bearer of suffering but also as a potential source of meaning and personal growth.

The aim of this study is to analyze the therapeutic potential of the metaphor card method in psychosomatic practice, to identify its effects on emotional-bodily regulation, and to substantiate its role within integrative models that combine body-oriented, symbolic, and spiritual therapeutic methods.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted as a theoretical-analytical review aimed at uncovering the therapeutic potential of metaphorical cards within contemporary psychosomatic practice. Its methodological framework rests on the interdisciplinary integration of clinical psychology, body-oriented therapy, cognitive science, and existential psychotherapy. Primary attention was devoted to the practical analysis of models in which visual-symbolic images serve as tools for working with the bodily and emotional manifestations of symptoms.

Publications were included in this review based on their substantive relevance to clinical, body-oriented, and psychosomatic contexts, with particular emphasis on the presence of empirical data and qualitative descriptions of therapeutic processes in which metaphor functions as a means of symbolization, emotional expression, and restoration of bodily awareness.

Platonova et al. [6] were among the works reviewed, considering metaphorical cards as an innovative technology for developing social intelligence in students. Although set in an educational context, their findings demonstrate a marked impact of visual projection on participants' capacity to conceptualize and verbalize internal states—insights transferable to therapeutic settings. The digital dimension of visual interaction was further examined by Ji and Isbister [3], who presented MetaphorChat, a platform designed to facilitate the expression of feelings through imagery; its practical value lies in creating a safe, interactive environment that supports symbolic representation.

A distinct strand of analysis addressed the use of visual metaphors in virtual reality. Rasch et al. [8] illustrated how engaging with metaphorical imagery in VR promotes the reconstruction of negative states and the formation of new cognitive-emotional connections. Theoretical grounding for the interplay between bodily and conceptual levels was provided by Daikoku and colleagues' triadic model of bodily

emotion localization [2], which frames visual metaphor as a cognitive interface linking sensation, reaction, and meaning.

Empirical support for the efficacy of metaphorical therapy in managing somatoform disorders is supplied by Maroti et al. [5], whose data underscore the importance of emotional awareness and expression as prerequisites for successful treatment. Qiu et al. [7] complement this perspective by demonstrating the role of metaphorical language in diagnosing and transforming deep traumatic patterns. Smakowski et al. [9], in turn, explore the phenomenon of functional somatic symptoms and highlight the necessity of symbolic processing that extends beyond biomedical models.

Thus, the analytical foundation drew on sources spanning both clinical research and theoretical work, enabling a delineation of the therapeutic framework for metaphorical card use and identification of the conditions under which a visual image mediates between bodily sensation, emotional state, and existential meaning. Special attention was given to the therapist's role—anchored in high emotional intelligence—as the pivotal figure who creates a space of safe contact and deep reflection essential for engaging with the symbolic nature of symptoms.

RESULTS

Therapeutic effects of metaphorical cards in psychosomatic practice manifest through several key directions of impact, each associated with a specific level of regulation and inner transformation of the client. The method activates hidden bodily-emotional patterns, fosters their symbolic expression, and facilitates the transition from unconscious sensations to articulated internal images. This process bypasses the cognitive and behavioral defenses characteristic of clients with chronic anxiety and somatoform symptomatology. Qiu [4] demonstrated that the use of metaphorical language eases access to traumatic experiences via symbolic projection, circumventing rational barriers. A similar effect is described in the case analysis by Rasch et al. [8], where visual engagement with imagery in a virtual environment activates emotional representations previously repressed from conscious awareness.

A further direction is the cultivation of bodily awareness and the enhancement of emotional verbalization. As Maroti et al. [5] show, working with images restores dialogue between somatic sensations and their semantic interpretation, which is especially important in cases of alexithymia and somatic anxiety. Qiu et al. [7] complement these findings by demonstrating how symbolic representation of a bodily symptom creates a safe channel for affect expression and expands self-regulatory capacity. Of particular note is the effect of emotional desensitization and the restoration of subjective control: visualization of internal conflicts and their symbolic embodiment in images, as Maroti [5] notes, contributes to reduced tension and emotional overload.

Platonova et al. [6] additionally find that metaphorical cards can bolster communicative confidence and a sense of internal autonomy, especially within group dynamics.

Finally, an important effect is the integration of body image, personal meaning, and symbolic representation. Through metaphorical work, the client can transform the symptomatic

experience into a resourceful image that imparts a new context to their inner experience. Qiu [4] describes how symbolic reappraisal of a bodily symptom promotes reconstruction of self-perception. Rasch et al. [8] point to the initiation of semantic restructuring of the symptom during visual engagement with its image.

Table 1. Therapeutic effects of applying metaphorical cards (Compiled by the author based on sources: [4], [5], [8])

Mechanism of impact	Clinical outcome
Symbolic expression of difficult feelings	Release of repressed affects; reduction of emotional tension
Bodily reflection	Enhanced bodily awareness; restoration of connection with sensations
Emotional desensitization	Decreased anxiety; stabilization of psycho-emotional state
Integration of symbol and meaning	Increased agency; formation of a new relationship to the bodily symptom

The use of metaphorical cards in psychosomatic therapy activates clients' deep symbolic resources through visual images that carry high subjective significance and potential for therapeutic transformation. This method shifts from a linear verbal description of the symptom to its imaginal embodiment, facilitating access to bodily reactions, emotional memory, and latent feelings that often lie beyond awareness in cognitively oriented approaches.

In individual therapy, the capacity to spatially arrange images and dynamically transform symbols reflecting the client's inner states plays a crucial role. Maroti [5] demonstrates that visually representing a symptom heightens its awareness and promotes emotional expression—especially valuable when addressing somatoform presentations that lack objective somatic causes yet entail persistent subjective suffering.

The group format opens additional therapeutic possibilities by eliciting empathic resonance and collective projective reflection. Platonova et al. [6] emphasize that working together with metaphorical images fosters the development

of social imagination and the ability to understand others' emotional states.

Co-design, as a distinct mode of interaction, involves the client in the joint creation of metaphoric images and narratives alongside the therapist. Rasch et al. [8] show that this shared visualization positions the client not merely as interpreter but as co-author of their therapeutic narrative, significantly enhancing agency and internal control. Image work thus becomes less an intervention than a co-creative process in which meaning emerges through dialogue rather than being imposed externally.

A separate significance attaches to visually symbolic interpretation of traumatic patterns, wherein therapist and client explore arising images in the context of repressed emotional conflicts. Qiu et al. [7] demonstrate that visual metaphor supports identification and representation of unconscious affects linked to trauma.

The principal therapeutic formats for using metaphorical cards, their corresponding aims, and clinical tasks are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Formats for applying metaphorical cards and their therapeutic objectives (Compiled by the author based on sources: [5], [8])

Format of application	Therapeutic objective
Individual session	Symptom work; activation of bodily and affective content
Group interaction	Development of empathy; enhancement of social imagination
Co-design (joint image creation)	Emotional reflection; strengthening of client agency
Visually symbolic interpretation	Identification and processing of traumatic patterns

The choice of therapeutic format depends on the clinical goal, the client's readiness to engage with symbolic material, and the nature of the symptomatology. Individual sessions provide deep focus on bodily signals and personal meanings, whereas group practices activate intersubjective processes and bolster capacities for shared understanding. Co-design strengthens the client's agentic engagement, and visually symbolic interpretation enables the integration of traumatic material into a new narrative that supports restoration of integrity and continuity of the self.

DISCUSSION

Work with metaphorical cards in the psychosomatic approach rests on the premise that bodily experience constitutes the primary source of meaning-making. The image arising from the client's engagement with a card serves as a mediator between sensation and concept, between body and mind. This image forms a bridge linking sensory awareness to cognitive processing. The visual elements of the cards activate lived bodily experience, enabling the client to recall and "re-live" a particular state through embodied engagement.

The key mechanism of metaphorical cards lies in symbolization—the transformation of an unstructured affective impulse into a coherent, articulated internal image. Symbolization aids in regulating internal tension, particularly in situations dominated by alexithymia or impaired emotional differentiation. Through the process of working with metaphor and symbol, distress is rendered controllable and subject to narrative reconstruction and therapeutic processing.

Integrating body-image metaphors into the psychosomatic model allows for a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay among physiological, emotional, and semantic levels. Daikoku's triadic model of bodily emotional localization [2] positions metaphor as a cognitive interface between the body and conceptual thought. Rasch's work [8] corroborates this view, demonstrating that visually symbolic representation of negative patterns in a VR environment supports meaningful engagement and emotional transformation of symptoms.

The imaginal dimension of therapy holds special value when working with psychosomatic manifestations, as it does not require prior cognitive articulation. This is particularly crucial in cases of traumatic experience, where direct verbal expression is blocked by defense mechanisms. Visual metaphor circumvents these barriers, granting access to repressed material through indirect yet ecologically sound perceptual channels. Table 3 compares the four levels of therapeutic impact of metaphorical cards, from the bodily to the spiritual.

Table 3. Comparison of therapeutic impact levels of metaphorical cards (Compiled by the author based on sources: [5], [7])

Level of impact	Process
Bodily	Awareness of sensations
Emotional-imagery	Narrative reconstruction
Cognitive-semantic	Symptom reappraisal
Spiritual	Search for inner harmony

The evolution of contemporary psychosomatic practice demands moving beyond reductionist models that focus exclusively on symptom elimination or modification of behavioral patterns. An increasing body of research and clinical observation highlights the need to integrate the bodily, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions within a unified therapeutic paradigm. This transformation aims to alleviate suffering and restore the client's inner integrity, fractured by chronic stress, somatic symptoms, or traumatic experiences.

A central element of the integrative approach is the abandonment of a linear causality model in favor of a holistic understanding of subjective experience as a system of interrelated layers: bodily sensations, emotionally imagistic constructs, cognitive interpretations, and existential meanings. Within this system, each layer functions both as an entry point and as a reflection of the others. For example,

bodily tension may serve simultaneously as a symptom and as a symbol of a repressed conflict, calling for meaningful insight and emotional processing.

Working with metaphorical cards enables activation of all three components—bodily, cognitive, and spiritual—within a single therapeutic process. The visual image that emerges for the client becomes a projection of their state and the basis for transformational work. It can be viscerally embodied, verbalized, and transformed, and in some cases reinterpreted in the context of spiritual or existential values. Such dynamics prove especially critical in chronic psychosomatic conditions, where habitual coping mechanisms are exhausted and engagement with deeper levels of experience is required.

In this approach, symbolic representation is not an auxiliary technique but the central axis of therapeutic transformation. Through images, the client names the problem and begins to move toward a new understanding of self and symptomatology. This trajectory—from bodily sensation to symbol, from symbol to meaning, and from meaning to action—establishes an internal developmental contour unattainable by cognitive restructuring or bodily relaxation alone.

It is important to emphasize the synergistic nature of the integrative approach. Image works in conjunction with movement, movement with sensation, and sensation with cognitive and spiritual processing. The therapist's role is not to interpret the client's images but to accompany the process of inner recognition and transformation. Thus, therapeutic intervention ceases to be a linear imposition from without and becomes a collaborative exploration of the internal landscape, where body, mind, and spirit engage in a productive dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirmed the significance of metaphorical cards as an effective therapeutic tool operating at the intersection of bodily, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions of psychosomatic experience. It demonstrated that visually symbolic representation of a symptom facilitates its understanding, symbolization, and verbalization, grants access to repressed affects, and integrates the bodily experience within a framework of personal meaning.

Analysis of various application formats—from individual therapy through group work to co-design—revealed the method's multi-level impact: reduction of anxiety, activation of bodily awareness, restoration of subjective control, and reconstruction of the internal narrative. These findings align with contemporary perspectives in body psychotherapy, affective neuroscience, and existential approaches, where the symptom is viewed not as a system error but as a message demanding symbolic dialogue.

Particular attention was paid to the synergy among image, bodily sensation, and inner meaning. It was emphasized that

the therapeutic efficacy of metaphorical cards depends less on the images' content and more on the client's opportunity to engage actively with their inner experience within a safe symbolic space. This approach enables a shift from reductionist symptom correction toward integration of the symptom into the client's personal structure and value field.

The study identified that the key mechanism underpinning the method's effectiveness is the creation of bodily-felt meaning—a subjective state combining sensory activation, emotional expression, and cognitive reflection. This combination fosters profound transformation in the client's relationship to their symptoms and to their inner experience as a whole.

Thus, in contemporary psychosomatic practice, metaphorical cards should be regarded not as an auxiliary technique but as a standalone therapeutic method capable of structuring the client's engagement with symptoms on symbolic and existential levels. The method offers pathways to restoring inner integrity, deepening self-understanding, and strengthening the connection between body, mind, and personal meaning.

Future research directions include clinical validation of therapeutic effects on empirical samples, development of standardized protocols for visually symbolic interventions, and expansion of the method's application in digital formats for facilitating bodily and emotional self-reflection.

REFERENCES

1. Cojocaru C.-M., Popa C.O., Schenk A., et al. A Single-Session Process-Based Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention Combined with Multimodal Rehabilitation Treatment for Chronic Pain Associated with Emotional Disorders [Electronic resource] // Behavioral Sciences. 2024. T. 14, No. 4. P. 327. URL: <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14040327> (access date: 07/10/2025).
2. Daikoku T., Minatoya M., Tanaka M. Mapping Emotional Feeling in the Body: A Tripartite Framework for Understanding the Embodied Mind [Electronic resource] // arXiv preprint. 2025. arXiv:2504.14865 [q-bio.NC]. URL: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2504.14865> (accessed: 11.07.2025).
3. Ji C., Isbister K. MetaphorChat: A Metaphorical Chatting Space for Expressing and Understanding Inner Feelings [Electronic resource] // arXiv preprint. 2025. arXiv:2502.07125 [cs.HC]. URL: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2502.07125> (accessed: 12.07.2025).
4. Joshi A. Supervision in psychology and psychotherapy training in India: Insights and challenges [Electronic resource] // International Journal of Psychology. 2023. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.13064> (date of access: 12.07.2025).
5. Maroti D., Lumley M.A., Schubiner H., Lilliengren P. Internet-based emotional awareness and expression therapy for somatic symptom disorder: A randomized controlled trial [Electronic resource] // Journal of Psychosomatic Research. 2022. Vol. 163. P. 111068. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2022.111068> (date of access: 13.07.2025).
6. Platonova R.I., Vasyukov V.F., Vorozhikhin V.V., Akhmadieva R.Sh. Metaphorical cards as innovative educational technology for students' social intelligence developing [Electronic resource] // Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences. 2021. Vol. 16, No. 4. Pp. 1926–1935. URL: <https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v16i4.6059> (Accessed: 14.07.2025).
7. Qiu A.H., Tay D., Watson B. Metaphorical language and psychopathological symptoms: a case study of trauma victims' metaphor use [Electronic resource] // BMC Psychology. 2024. Vol. 12. Pp. 57. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01492-w> (Accessed: 14.07.2025).
8. Rasch J., Zender M.J., Sakel S., Wagener N. Mind Mansion: Exploring Metaphorical Interactions to Engage with Negative Thoughts in Virtual Reality [Electronic resource] // arXiv preprint. 2024. arXiv:2406.04871 [cs.HC]. URL: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2406.04871> (access date: 07.15.2025).
9. Smakowski A., Rosmalen J., Löwe B., Burton C., Toussaint A. Empirical assessment of functional somatic disorder (FSD): frequency, applicability, and diagnostic refinement in a population-based sample [Electronic resource] // BMC Medicine. 2025. Vol. 23, No. 1. P. 221. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-025-04042-w> (Accessed: 16.07.2025).
10. Van Zwam-van der Wijk M., Roor J., Ponds R., de Vroeghe L. Performance validity and outcome of treatment in patients with somatic symptom and related disorders (SSRD) [Electronic resource] // Applied Neuropsychology: Adult. 2025. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23279095.2024.2445715> (Accessed: 16.07.2025).