

Beliefs that hold us in place and beliefs that allow us to sail

Metaphorical Cards in Supervision for Working with Supporting and Limiting Beliefs

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Abstract

This article explores the use of metaphorical cards in supervision, focusing on supporting and limiting beliefs. Beliefs act as an inner compass - influencing perceptions, decisions, and personal growth, yet deeply rooted limiting beliefs can hinder development. Metaphorical cards provide a safe, creative space for reflection, helping clients to visualize and articulate their experiences while the counselor guides the process with open-ended questions without imposing interpretations. The author shares insights from the workshop at ANSE Summer University, highlighting how the cards facilitated self-awareness, reflection, and meaningful group interactions. The article emphasizes the value of metaphorical tools in promoting personal development, insight, and transformative learning in supervision.

Introduction: Supervision as an Ocean

Supervision can be conceptualized as an ocean. It is a dynamic environment where we can explore various depths and perspectives. The ocean is diverse and multifaceted, much like the people and organizations we encounter in our work. It can be unpredictable and compelling, mirroring the topics we engage with and the opportunities for meaningful intervention.

This year, the central theme of the ANSE Summer University, An Ocean of Possibilities, provided a valuable platform to introduce my self-developed, metaphor-based card technique for raising awareness of limiting and supporting beliefs. In this article, I will provide an overview of my workshop's content and personal experiences, complemented by a theoretical examination of beliefs.

Beliefs—Our Inner Compass

Core beliefs (or fundamental beliefs) are broad and deeply rooted convictions about oneself, the world, situations, the future, and so on, which a person often takes as facts. These beliefs develop over a lifetime through interactions with the environment, experiences, knowledge, and relationships. Their formation is influenced by factors such as parental attitudes, educational environment, past experiences (especially emotional), and cultural values (Purdon, 2021). Therefore, beliefs act like an inner compass—they give meaning and direction to our actions and life.

Core beliefs related to self-image and self-esteem reflect a person's internal knowledge and interpretations of themselves. They are generalized, relatively stable, and influence how a person perceives themselves within their social context. These are thoughts about oneself—whether conscious or unconscious (Mussel, 2025). Here, I would divide them into limiting and supporting beliefs.

Limiting beliefs maintain dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and hinder change - like anchors that prevent a sailing ship from moving forward. They may appear as automatic thought patterns like:

- *"I must never make mistakes."*
- *"I have to please everyone."*
- *"I am not lovable."*
- *"Nobody cares about me."*

These beliefs often stem from cognitive distortions—where a person focuses only on information that confirms their existing beliefs, while ignoring or dismissing contradictory information as irrelevant. In negative moods or anxiety, these schemas become especially active, affecting attention, memory, and judgments, and deepening negative feelings about oneself (Purdon, 2021).

Core beliefs are considered relatively stable because they are deeply rooted in personality (Mussel, 2025). Consequently, challenging these beliefs requires time, awareness, and repeated experiences that help shape a new, more supportive perspective. The desire to restore inner harmony often motivates individuals to seek ways to alter these beliefs, thereby changing their attitudes and behavior.

Supporting beliefs, on the other hand, create self-confidence and provide inner strength and energy. They support motivation, growth, and the implementation of change, acting like wind that helps the sailing ship move forward. For example:

- *"I have the right to make mistakes."*
- *"I am in charge of my life."*
- *"I know what I need."*
- *"There is a solution to every problem."*

Working with beliefs is often associated with cognitive-behavioral therapy. However, it is also important for a supervisor to have a basic understanding of how to recognize and support clients in matters related to beliefs. When a client aims to achieve a goal but feels held back by limiting beliefs, it is useful to know how to address this topic within the professional boundaries of one's competence.

This topic is important to me because I believe our beliefs shape our self-perception and the world around us. Over time, I have come to understand how deeply ingrained beliefs can influence us, particularly those that are limiting. They can quietly, and often unconsciously, direct our decisions, relationships, and self-worth. In my work with individuals, I have observed how limiting beliefs hold them back while empowering beliefs open possibilities, provide strength, and create movement. This theme is deeply meaningful to me because I believe that working with one's inner beliefs can be a powerful step towards greater self-awareness and personal transformation, whether in therapy, supervision, or everyday life.

Metaphorical Cards as a Tool for Exploring Beliefs

In counseling, a range of creative and analytical methods is employed to assist clients in identifying contradictions in their beliefs, expanding their understanding, and recognizing that not every thought necessarily represents the truth. This process becomes truly effective when the client independently reaches these insights. This personal discovery strengthens their self-confidence and supports the development of future independent coping mechanisms (Purdon, 2021).

One such creative tool is metaphor cards, which help clients explore their inner world through images and symbols. They facilitate the expression of feelings and thoughts that can be difficult to articulate while also creating space for new meanings and perspectives to emerge. Visual design often serves as a mirror of a person's inner experiences, enabling them to examine beliefs and internal conflicts in a safe, indirect manner.

Metaphorical cards are specifically designed for use in counseling and therapy processes. They depict life situations and symbols but do not provide a fixed or single meaning (Ayalon & Siso-Ayalon, 2012; Popova & Miloradova, 2014). Some cards include a verbal element, such as a keyword, phrase, or question, enabling work with images, text, or a combination of the two. Metaphor cards create a safe space for individuals to express their experiences when words are insufficient. The multiple possible interpretations of the cards reveal connections that might otherwise be overlooked, acting as mirrors of a person's inner world. Metaphor cards are effective in both individual and group settings with clients of all ages.

As I have previously written (Saard, 2024), metaphorical cards can be applied to a wide range of topics, including relationships, identity, values, change, the future, loss, goals, and beliefs. Working with beliefs is not straightforward because they are deeply rooted in personal identity. Awareness of beliefs is often a prerequisite for change in supervision. When a client identifies an internal belief that is holding them back, the first step is to make that belief visible. Metaphorical cards help achieve this creatively and in deeper layers without the pressure to find the 'right words'. This flexibility and multilayered nature make cards an effective tool.



Working with a person's deeply held beliefs is a complex and emotionally sensitive process that requires the client's conscious readiness and demands attentiveness, empathy, and careful action from the counselor (Purdon, 2021). Conversely, if the client is willing to engage with their beliefs, it can lead to positive change. As a supervisor, it is important to assess whether we have sufficient knowledge and skills to act competently in these processes.

In supervision, metaphorical cards can be integrated into various stages.

- **Goal setting:** Exploring the beliefs related to the desired change and the intended goal.
- **Mapping obstacles:** Identifying factors that are hindering the client's progress.
- **Opening resources:** Highlighting supportive beliefs or inner strengths.
- **Visualizing change:** Creating an image of the future that represents the desired change.

Cards support reflection and facilitate a deeper exploration of self-experience. They also enable the creation of meaning and the safe exploration of complex or painful topics, creating a distance between the situation and the personal experience. Metaphor cards help to make beliefs visible. The choice of cards is typically guided by personal intuition, often based on initial impressions, feelings, or a sense of recognition. This approach allows the exploration of beliefs without judgment.

The thoughtful use of metaphorical cards in supervision helps to:

- Become aware of and articulate one's limiting and supportive beliefs;
- Explore the role of a belief in relation to the problem: identifying which belief is maintaining the problem and which is the client's.
- See and verbalize one's belief(s);
- Enable a critical and flexible view of one's thoughts;
- Use the image to explore the possible origins of the belief.
- Critically review one's internal convictions, broaden perspective, and shape more realistic beliefs;
- Find more creative and flexible ways of thinking that support change.

All steps should be undertaken calmly and at the client's pace. If the counselor attempts to direct or persuade the client to change their viewpoint too quickly, it typically does not lead to the desired outcome. It is more important to create a space where the client's inner world can be explored, understandings expanded, and different perspectives and interpretations courageously experimented with (Purdon, 2021).

Metaphor cards function simultaneously as a mirror - helping to look inward - and as a bridge - supporting the movement from limitations to possibilities. While they may not provide immediate answers, they create space and a language through which beliefs can become visible and workable. In supervision, where the goal is often personal development and increased awareness, metaphor cards can be a valuable tool. It is important to emphasize, however, that metaphor cards do not do the work on their own. A trusting and safe relationship, as well as basic counseling skills, including the ability to ask relevant questions, are essential. Examples of questions to use when combining beliefs and metaphor cards are presented in Table 1. These questions were also part of my workshop at the ANSE Summer School.

The counselor's role is to listen to the client openly and without judgment, striving to understand their experience as broadly as possible. Together with the client, various interpretations are explored and compared not only with their immediate thoughts but also with other relevant information. The aim is to help the client gain a broader and deeper understanding of their situation. The counselor can pose questions and support the thinking process, but final decisions, including any potential changes in thought patterns, remain the client's responsibility.

Table 1. Optional questions for exploring the limiting and supporting beliefs (compiled by the author).

Limiting Beliefs hold us in place	**Supporting Beliefs allow us to sail**
• Where do these beliefs come from? Who in your life has expressed or supported these beliefs? • What benefits have these beliefs brought you? • What harm or damage do these beliefs bring you? • What kind of life would you live if these beliefs were replaced with more supportive and helpful ones? What steps would you take tomorrow if this belief no longer held you back?	• How do these beliefs influence your professional or/ and/or personal life? • How do these beliefs support you in challenging situations? Give examples • Have these beliefs changed or evolved over time? If so, how? • What actions do you take when these beliefs are guiding you? Give examples • What have you achieved thanks to these beliefs? • Which strengths and competencies are highlighted or activated in you by these beliefs? • Illustrate your answer with examples from various life contexts • How do you consciously support or strengthen these beliefs within yourself?

This approach relies on trust in the client's inner wisdom and decision-making ability (Purdon, 2021). In a professional supervision process, changes arise from the client's own insights rather than the supervisor's judgments.

Workshop Experience: Beliefs as Anchors

I have developed a series of cards called 'Contemplation,' designed as tools for supervisors, coaches, psychologists, and therapists. At present, there are six different card packs. In recent years, I have shared my knowledge and practical experience of metaphorical cards within various courses and workshops in Estonia and abroad.

As a supervisor and psychologist, I have often experienced a lack of practical tools for working with beliefs. This need inspired the creation of 'The Power of Beliefs' card set. The deck includes 75 metaphor cards, 48 belief-completion cards, and a leaflet of options for their use.
My workshop, titled Beliefs That Hold Us in Place and Beliefs That Allow Us to Sail, aimed to explore and understand which beliefs limit us and which support

us. It sought to identify those that keep participants on the 'shore of thought' and those that enable them to 'cross the ocean and reach the shore of action'. As a tool, I used a new card set and pre-prepared worksheets to help participants analyze their beliefs, strengths, and competencies. At the end of practical exercises, participants had the opportunity to share their thoughts and receive feedback from their colleagues. Feedback confirmed that the workshop structure and metaphorical cards facilitated a safe and creative approach to deeply personal and sensitive topics. The worksheets thoughtfully supported self-analysis and reflection.

Leading this workshop was a personal and enriching experience. I was particularly impressed by the participants' responses to the personal insights that emerged through the cards and metaphors. A single meaningful image or phrase can sometimes unlock deeper issues. One participant shared that they had held a particular belief for years, but only now realized how it had held them back and its origins. This reminded me of the powerful potential of language through symbols and images when a person finds personal meaning in them.



The workshop reinforced my belief that working with beliefs does not always require large, complex methods. The most important aspect is to create a safe space where individuals can express their thoughts, explore them safely, and, if necessary, reinterpret them. Metaphorical cards and a clear structure facilitated the creation of this environment, and the guiding questions in working with beliefs supported the development of greater awareness of personal beliefs and enabled participants to create new meanings for them. The group served as a professional mirror for my work, and I am sincerely grateful for everyone's contribution to this process. ■

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