

No More Than 500 words on....
Psychotherapy and Complexity Theory:
By Russell Rose

The recognition of the psyche as a Complex Adaptive System is, for me, central to the development of a contemporary model of psychology, as it enables us to merge our experience as practitioners and our theoretical framework more closely with post-Newtonian laws of physics.

Complexity tells us that the psyche is a *spontaneously self-organising system* which, whilst influenced by and responsive to external stimulus, cannot be accurately defined or reliably controlled by it, any more than it can be accurately defined or reliably controlled by the conscious and wilful side of itself.

A Complex Psychological System has both *stable* and *chaotic* areas, and is invested in maintaining a relatively composed sense of equilibrium, as well as being drawn towards the *tipping-point of chaos*, from where spontaneous psychological re-configurations can emerge, in service of the developmental need for change, transformation, and evolution.

The most efficient state of tension for the complex system is *at the edge of chaos*, where there is sufficient stability to intake information and influence, and sufficient instability to allow for spontaneous re-organisation. Too much stability and the natural capacity for developmental evolution is impaired, as it is with too much chaos, but for contrary reasons.

Most of us know clients for whom stability is a robust investment, consistently rational and rigidly trapped in constricting patterns of thought and behaviour, unable to bear the chaos and lack of wilful control that is the environment for transformation; and likewise the overwhelmed, chaotic clients, so busy surviving emotional overload and the rigours of constant micro-adjustment that they are unable to really integrate and embody anything new, however much sense it might make; even to them.

Cause-and-effect Newtonian and dualistic Cartesian principles can only abbreviate an understanding of the dynamic relational psyche by applying a reductive causal-determinism upon a complex, intersubjective, non-dualistic, spontaneously emerging experience. In a Complex System the relationship between input and response is unpredictable, and *less can be more*; for example, a seemingly small realisation, memory, or therapeutic intervention might provoke a radical psychological transformation.

The complex psyches of the therapist and client will interact and form a *coupled-system*, a deep subliminal version of *embedded empathy*, wherein they operate as a third complex system that *contains but is greater than the sum of its parts*, each resonating with subliminal psycho-energetic information regarding the other in a feedback-exchange that is more geometrically akin to a vast series of intersecting circles than it is to Newtonian linearity; making unconscious psychological co-organisation inevitable.

And, crucially, Complexity Theory takes us beyond the comfortable parameters of the quasi doctor-patient relationship that we necessarily return to for pause, reflection, and analytic interpretation, but can also instinctively *retreat to* when the going gets tough. Even the *illusion* of observational-detachment, objectivity and certainty can be helpful, but Complexity Theory suggests to us that this experience is held in place by a dissociation from anything that threatens to disrupt it.