

Chapter 4

Beth and the Reorganising 'B' Strategy



Introduction

This is Beth, age 38. Beth is applying to be a foster carer, and she and her long-term partner, Nicola, are undergoing a foster-carer assessment. Beth and Nicola are the same age, and have been together since they were 26.

Before they began to consider fostering a child, Beth and Nicola were keen to have children of their own. However, they faced insurmountable hurdles: Beth tried artificial insemination but found that she was unable to conceive. Nicola had previously been pregnant with an ectopic pregnancy which resulted in near-fatal haemorrhaging. She decided that the risks were too great if she were to become pregnant again.

Beth and Nicola wish to become fosterers with a view to possible adoption later. They are both being assessed, and we are focusing on Beth's interview.

Beth grew up in a household where both of her parents were alcoholics. She was often neglected, and learned quickly how to become self-sufficient; by age four she managed to meet most of her own everyday needs. Beth has two younger sisters and one younger brother who are four to seven years younger than her. As the eldest, Beth did much of the caretaking of her siblings and of her parents, a role she developed as a means of surviving in very distressing circumstances.

During her teens, Beth faced a long and difficult struggle to come to terms with her own sexuality and then to be open about it with others.

Beth always performed well at school, which served as an escape route from her troubled home life. She attended university and earned a BA degree, and went on to train as a primary school teacher.

Beth's first long-term relationship was with Rachel, who was eight years older than her. The relationship began when Beth was 22 and lasted two years. It ended when Beth left Rachel after enduring persistent emotional and verbal abuse, usually when Rachel was drunk.

In her work as a primary school teacher, Beth once gave an assignment to her class asking them to investigate their own personal history. Beth was profoundly struck by one girl's story in particular, partly because it was so close to her own. She cried when she read her pupil's account of a family in distress, worried about an alcoholic father. The child wrote about her desperate wish to have her father gone, and also her shame at having such thoughts.

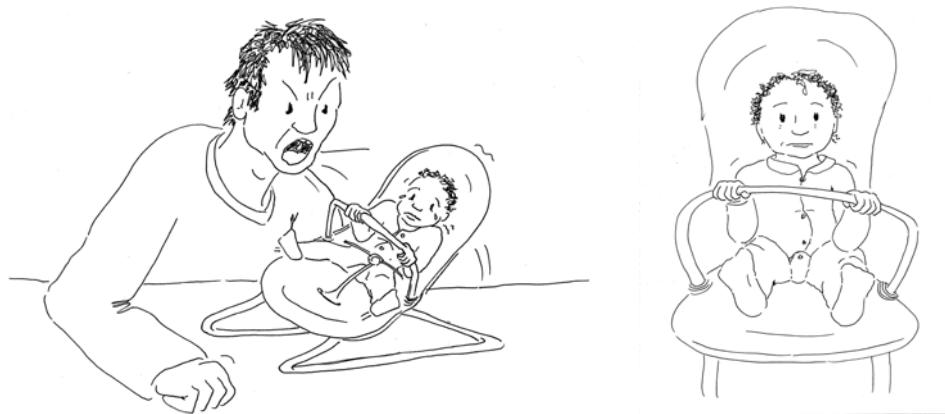
At the same time as she read her student's autobiographical essay, Beth's relationship with Rachel was near its end. Beth recognised that she was repeating a pattern begun in childhood: just as she did with her own parents, she was taking care of and trying to save her alcoholic partner. When Rachel was drunk, she would become physically and verbally abusive towards Beth, but would then minimise her drinking by saying she was 'just a social drinker'. After some months of wavering, Beth ended the relationship.

After the break-up, Beth went through a period of deep introspection about her life, her family history and her choices. She spoke with friends, read self-help books, and kept a journal of her progress towards what she called, 'being who I am'.

After two years of living on her own, Beth found her partner Nicola when she was taking part in a spiritual retreat. They were both 26 years old. She and Nicola were both very clear about the sort of person they were looking for, and were delighted when they found each other.

Milestones in Beth's development

Beth at six months old



Beth is six months old. She is wet and needs changing. Even though she is only six months old, she is learning that crying or displaying any negative emotion, such as anger, sadness or need for comfort, will result in her feeling worse because when she does this her father consistently either ignores her or shouts at her. Her mother

reacts in a similar way. So Beth stops herself from showing these emotions. She grows distant from her own true emotions, and stares in what is sometimes called 'frozen awareness' or 'compulsive attention'.



What is the function of Beth's self-protective behaviour at age six months?

Here we see the early stages of Beth learning to inhibit or prevent the display of negative feelings. This strategy prevents her from being made to feel worse. However, this strategy for 'over-regulating' negative feelings will become embedded in her *procedural memory*, and will be inaccessible to Beth's *episodic* and *semantic memory* because she learned the strategy at such an early age and long before speaking her first words.

When people struggle with the question, 'Why am I like this?' or, 'Why do I keep doing that over and over again?' they are often struggling with patterns and strategies learned pre-verbally, ie. before age three or four.

Beth at age four



Here we see Beth at age four. Her father is drunkenly shouting, and Beth is comforting her mother, who is six months pregnant. Beth has added some new skills to her self-protective strategy since she was six months old: not only can she inhibit the display of her negative emotions, which she could do at six months, she has also learned to cover these emotions with cheerfulness, practical action and care-taking behaviour.



What is the function of Beth's self-protective behaviour at age four?

By staying problem-free and caring for her parents when they are vulnerable, Beth is able to stay relatively safe and to maintain proximity with her parents. Any display of her own authentic anger, sadness or need for comfort will draw a sharp reaction from her parents, or no reaction at all. At the same time, her helpful and 'happy' behaviour is looked on favourably by her parents. So she sacrifices her own point of view for that of her parents and organises her mind to protect, please and placate them. At the same time, she develops a core belief about herself as being 'bad' and 'full of trouble'.

Beth at age 15



At age 15, Beth dates a few boys, mainly to fit in with her peer group. One boy really likes her and pressures her for sex. When he makes a pass at her at a party, she pushes him away.

Beth has a sense that she prefers girls, but this is a 'no go' topic and she cannot really form the thought clearly in her mind. For the next two years, she withdraws from intimate or sexual relationships and works hard at her schoolwork. She also becomes involved in the drama department as a stage manager, which she takes to naturally because of her strong skills at organising and managing others. Beth also takes on other roles within the department: she builds stage sets, makes props and costumes, and helps to rig the lights. While spending so much of her time in the drama department, Beth forms a positive attachment to her teacher, Mrs Davies, who is the Head of Drama. Mrs Davies turns out to be a powerful and positive role model, who picks and chooses tasks and responsibilities for Beth that will give her a rounded experience and interactions with many different students. As a result, Beth becomes far more confident in establishing friendships and trusting others. She develops a strong identity in her role as someone who copes well and strives academically. This gives her some status and confidence, and also compensates for some of her inner insecurity.



What is the function of Beth's self-protective behaviour at age 15?

Adolescence offers some major new challenges for Beth, as it does for most young people. Beth's early solution is to avoid sexual contact and to stay focused on being a good student. These strategies work for Beth and help her to keep her emotions, and other people, at a safe distance. Eventually, Beth uses her well-established skills of organising and caretaking and finds a place for herself in the drama department. Gradually, with the help of her attuned teacher, who becomes a transitional attachment figure for her, Beth is helped to develop more confidence and a variety of roles and friendships. She is learning to be more comfortable in her own skin, and to recognise her own true feelings – feelings that she once had to keep at a great distance.

Beth at age 22



At age 22, Beth has fallen in love with Rachel, who is 30. Part of the attraction for Beth is that this relationship feels like a route to escape from her unhappy home life. So she impulsively moves in with Rachel. By this time, Beth has earned a BA in history and gender studies. This study exposed her to a wide variety of concepts and political writing, which helped her begin to make sense of her early family life. After university, she began to train as a teacher, and that is where she met Rachel. Unfortunately, Rachel drinks excessively and is abusive, like Beth's father was.



What is the function of Beth's self-protective behaviour at age 22?

When she forms a relationship with Rachel, Beth has repeated an old pattern. Once again, she becomes the caretaker and is forced to sacrifice her own point of view to an older and dominant attachment figure. During the two years she is living with Rachel, Beth continues her early pattern of prioritising the other person's feelings. She distances herself from her negative feelings and remains unaware of how lonely, sad and angry she feels inside. Towards the end of her relationship with Rachel, Beth asks herself some tough questions, such as, 'How did I get into this situation again?' She begins a serious period of reflection, re-thinking the story of her life and what she wants and does not want in her relationships.

Beth's interview

The following section is a verbatim transcript of the audio-recording accompanying this guide.

Introduction to the audio recordings

Voiceover

Welcome to this audio resource, which illustrates the LEARN Model of attachment-based interviewing. This audio-recording contains five partial attachment-based interviews and also a supervision session relating to one of the clients. The interviews are with clients being seen by different professional agencies such as social services, adoption and fostering, criminal justice, leaving care services, and child and adolescent mental health services. The clients being interviewed are fictional characters devised to represent actual clients, and they are played by actors. The interviews also contain analysis of the **discourse** used by the clients, with reference to different **memory systems**. If you are unfamiliar with these concepts, please read **Chapters 1, 2 and 3** before listening to this audio-recording.

Beth's interview – introduction

Voiceover

The following segment is from an interview with Beth, aged 38, who is undergoing a foster-carer assessment. Beth and her long-term partner, Nicola, are seeking to become foster parents.

In this segment, we can hear Beth reflecting on the interviewer's questions about her early relationship with her father. She is first asked for words or phrases to describe the relationship. This question encourages Beth to use her **semantic memory** – the memory system that helps us to draw together a wide variety of experiences and give them a verbal label – or script – which has meaning to us.

Beth is then asked to think of specific episodes, or events, that support the words and phrases she has used to describe her early relationship with her father. These questions encourage Beth to use her **episodic memory** – the memory system that helps us to remember specific events. These are often events that are connected with strong positive or negative feelings.

Beth is then asked questions about her understanding of why her father behaved the way he did, how his behaviour affected her as a child and as she grew older, and the sort of parent she plans to be. These questions encourage Beth to use her **working memory** – sometimes called **integrative memory** – in order to balance multiple points of view and to consider how her experiences have affected her over time.

We begin 30 minutes into Beth's second interview. In her first interview, Beth and the interviewer discussed in general terms her psycho-social history, including her early life, where she lived, who was in her family, who her key attachment figures were as a child, and whether her family moved around much. They also discussed her relationship history and her reasons for wanting to foster and possibly adopt.

In the second session, which we will listen to now, Beth and the interviewer have agreed to more deeply explore Beth's early attachment history, how it has affected her, and to what extent she has resolved the impact of the significant maltreatment she experienced as a child.

We join the session after Beth has spoken about her early relationship with her mother. The interview moves on to consider Beth's relationship with her father.

Interview transcript – Beth

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] Alright,
Beth. We'll move on to the
next part of the interview.
Can you think of three words
or phrases that describe your
early relationship with your
father? And what I'm going to
do is I'm going to write down
the words and phrases in the
order you say them.

Beth: Um, OK. Um, looking
back, I think it was ... well,
frightening, especially when he
was drinking ... he could be *kind*
if you caught him at the right
moment, and .. saying that, I
can remember that he seemed
remote .. no, that's, that's not
quite the right word: he seemed
very *selfish* to me at the time,
if I am thinking of my point of
view as a little girl, [**Interviewer:**
Yeah] and I can see now that
looking back, well he didn't
have much help when he was
growing up. Um, I suppose as a
consequence, he seemed, um –
lost, in his own misery.

Interviewer: [Step one:
Listening to the story] **Hmm.**
.. Okay, the phrases I have
written down are '*frightening*,
especially when he was
drinking', '*kind at the right
moment*' and '*very selfish*'.
Are those accurate?

Beth: Yes, that sounds right.

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] Can you
think of a particular time
when the relationship was

'*frightening, especially when
he was drinking*'?

Beth: .. Yes, em .. Gosh,
it's a really strong word
to say frightening, isn't it?
[**Interviewer:** **Hmm**] Um... Well,
looking back I've thought about
him a lot and the truth is that,
yes, I mean there were times
when he was very *frightening* to
me. Eh, for a long time I didn't,
well I didn't want to admit to
myself that he could be like
that with the drinking, and also
– recognising the violence and
– the really awful things that he
did to my mother. You know?

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] **Mmm.** Can
you say a bit more about that?
Can you remember a particular
time, or instance, that, that
would be an example?

Beth: Umm, okay let me see
how I can put this, that it's right.
Um. Do you know, It's funny,
but I've just realised even after
all these years, I, I don't find this
easy to talk about. [**Interviewer:**
Hmm] Em, well, there is one
incident that sticks in my mind.
Particularly because I was so
young. I reckon I must have
been about five, maybe six.
Now, it wasn't the first time
he'd done this, but I remember
this day because, uh, well Mum
and I had baked a cake – I, I
used to bake with my Mamgu
– that's my grandmother –
[**Interviewer:** **Hmm hmm**] so
this was probably the first time

I'd ever baked with Mam – and, and that's why she hadn't got round to cooking *his* tea. And I remember my father burst through the door yelling at my mother, saying, 'Where's my tea?' And.. I remember climbing off the chair I'd been standing on to help her, uh, standing by the cooker when my father came through the back door. And, oh, he was just so angry with her. I mean I'd seen him shout before, but I'd never really seen him go off on one like that, you know?

[Interviewer: Hmm hmm, Hmm hmm] He threw this cake against the wall and he was really using bad language. And that's when Mam tried to calm him down, tried to get him *out the kitchen* away from me, and it was at that point that he, he lashed out with the back of his hand and he, he hit her across the side of her face. And I, I remember she fell on the chair, an, and I was saying, 'Mum, has he hurt you?' And she was saying to me, 'Oh, Dwi'n iawn cariad, dwi'n iawn' – em, 'I'm fine, love' you know? Um, I ran over to her to – I suppose I was trying to stop her crying, or something – I, I think in the back of my mind at the time I, I was scared that if she kept on crying, he'd keep getting angry, 'cause he was still shouting at her at this point. Umm, I turned around and, uh – I, I, I remember – I have a very clear memory of this: uh, he *raised his hand* to hit her again, oh, and he just had this

most awful look on his face, **[Interviewer: Hmm]** baring his teeth – *really angry*, you know? – em, and I think at that point he registered how, em, well just how shocked I was, because he left the kitchen and he went and sat in the next room. And [very slight laughter in her voice] it all went really quiet, and my Mum and I we just cleared everything up in silence, putting all the dishes away, trying not to, to make a sound in case we, we set him off again. So yeah, I mean *that's* an example of him being really frightening.

Interviewer: [Step one:
Listening to the story] **Mmm,**
**and that does sound really
frightening.**

Beth: Yeah. [very slight laugh]

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] **Why do
you think your father behaved
the way he did that evening?**

Beth: Well, it was partly the drink, of course. I mean, you could smell it when he walked through the door, and *that was it* – you knew – he was drunk. Em, but thinking about it now, you know, em, well, for him, tea was meant to be on the table. He'd grown up watching Tadgu – my, my Grandfather, **[Interviewer: Hmm hmm]** come home from work to find everything waiting for him, just so. And Dad did not like things not being as he wanted them. I think what sparked his violence that night was Mum trying to

quiet him, uh – she told him to mind his language. And he just didn't like being told. Um, yeah, and that's when he really lost his temper. ... I suppose ... you could argue that it's partly down to how men were socialised at the time, em, it's what he'd watched growing up, you know? But – beneath that, well I know now that he felt a *failure*: I mean, his father had undermined him since he was a boy, [Interviewer: **Hmm**] and then he'd been made redundant from work, he had no job. He just took out his frustration [Interviewer: **Hmm**] on Mum and me. So I guess while a part of me feels, uh, *angry* that he did treat us like that, I mean I can say now at least part of me – *understands* him more than I did then. But I can't say I have fully forgiven him. I mean – he's in his 60s now, and Mum, well, she passed away three years ago. [Interviewer: **Hmm**] Em, I don't know if I'll ever tell him how I feel about how he treated the family. And even if you do try, I, I mean, he, he just *closes down*. If you talk to him, he just goes on about sports, practical things, [Interviewer: **Hmm**] tells me what's happening with my sisters and brother, nieces, nephews, you know the sort of thing.

Interviewer: [Step one: *Listening to the story*] **Hmm.** It sounds like you're having to come to terms with the fact that that conversation with him may not happen.

Beth: Yeah, I, I guess you're right really. That's it.

Interviewer: [Step two: *Exploring the story*] **How do you think his behaviour affected you over time, or has affected you over time? For instance, in your ability to form close and intimate relationships?**

Beth: Okay, em: well, looking back on it now, one of the things it has left me with, em, yeah, for a *long time* really, was a belief that I could control his behaviour by controlling mine [Interviewer: **Hmm hmm**]. Like I would think ahead, and I'd try to predict what was going on in his mind, what he needed, [laughs at herself] I mean I was such a *twpsen* (Welsh colloquialism) – such a silly person – but I, I was trying to stop things happening that I knew would make him angry, you know, em, [Interviewer: **Yeah**] constantly being one step ahead all the time. But I know now that I wasn't able to do that, or, or, well, that it only went so far – and yeah, I suppose that's been quite hard to come to terms with, really. [Interviewer: **Hmm hmm**] Em, but it's been an important lesson for me in relationships. I think if I'd known that earlier, I'd never have moved in with my first partner, Rachel. Um, well, she turned out to be a lot like him, with her drinking and then, well, shouting when she was drunk. I mean it took me,

whew, two years, I, a good – two years, umm, to figure out that she wouldn't change for me, or ... well, I realise now, anyone, really. Um, her closest relationship was with the bottle, [Interviewer: Hmm] just like Dad. Um, .. and yes, I, I was repeating a pattern with her – em, trying to make everything okay and taking on that role of peacekeeper – again, just, just [Interviewer: Hmm] like with Dad. Um, and in the end I decided to break free from all that. ... In a way, um, yeah, I am *grateful* for what happened, because, well, I think it made me stronger. And, it forced me to go on a journey when I was in my mid-20s – of course I didn't appreciate it at the time [slight laugh] – [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] after I left Rachel. I did a lot of soul-searching after that relationship. Um, I don't think I ever would have 'woken up' or .. been really comfortable with who I am – I mean, with my sexuality, uh, what I wanted – from *life*, if he, um – well, both he and Mum really – were not the people they were. I mean, sometimes I suppose you have to see how *bad* it can get in order to realise what you need to avoid and then what you need to do to, to live well.

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] **Hmm hmm.**
**Was there anyone else who
was important for you? I'm
thinking about outside the
family.**

Beth: [smiles] Oh, that's um ... [slight laugh] Well, that's got me thinking. Umm, I, I had some really great teachers in school, actually, yeah, em. Especially one teacher in secondary school – Mrs Davies – oh, she was fantastic! Um – Well, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say she saved *my life* when well, when I really hated myself, to be honest, and [Interviewer: Hmm] .. was struggling with boyfriends, and girlfriends – wha, what was really going on inside for me at that [Interviewer: Hmm] time. She – well, she took me under her wing, and, and she gave me [said with appreciation in her voice] the time that I, I really needed, em, and then also I had more responsibility in the drama department at school. [Beth and Interviewer laugh very briefly together.] And that was just a really fantastic experience.

Interviewer: [Step one:
Listening to the story] **She
sounds great.**

Beth: She, she really was a fantastic teacher. ... Em – And of course now, well, Nic, I mean she's accused me of seeing .. a *silver lining* where there are clouds, eh, but to me, I, I don't see how I could be any *different*, to be honest. I mean, if I couldn't see the silver lining and be able to keep going despite how bad things get, I mean, I'd just be miserable and .. well, I'd be doing things like Mam and Dad

did all over again. Em .. I know what depression looks like, [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] uhh, and I, I know what it *feels* like, um, and I've just decided that I'm not going to allow myself to get depressed and give in – to me, that, that's just giving up.

Interviewer: [Step one:
Listening to the story] **It sounds,
Beth, as if you've given your
past an enormous amount of
thought.**

Beth: Yeah.

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] **How has
your parents' behaviour
influenced your own approach
when you think about possibly
raising a foster child?**

Beth: Em, of course it's been an influence. Looking ahead to being a foster parent, I suppose the main thing to say about what I took from my own parents and their approach to parenting – [slight laugh] um, well, I think I've inherited a series of 'what not to do's'! [slight laugh] Umm, the big contrast in my situation is this: em, Nicola and I, our relationship is s-solid, and I think it's fair to say that we are great communicators. We work hard at it. Em, and of course, there is no alcohol. Apart from the odd drink on special occasions. [Beth and interviewer both laugh very lightly at same time.] I think one big difference in the way I'd be a foster parent is that I hope my child could express

their disagreement with me, and I would be fine with that. Or if we had any conflicts, any of the usual teenage stuff, I'd be okay with that, too, uh, [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] willing to talk, to work through problems together. [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] Um, I mean I'd want my child to be able to do that, um I'd want them to know that they could have a full range of feelings and that me and Nic would listen and that it was okay. Umm, well, I very much think about bringing my own child or children up so they would be independent people, who know that they're loved, uh, but, I don't .. I think my main concern is that I don't want them to feel that *they* are responsible for *me*, [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] or that they have to *please me* in some way, because I, I really felt that very strongly when I was a [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] child, you know?

Interviewer: Hmm. Well, my next question actually kind of leads on from that.

Beth: Okay.

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] **What
special issues do you think
there might be for your foster
child or children in relation
to you being in a same-sex
relationship?**

Beth: ...Um, that's a good question. Uh, Nic and I have discussed how we would

approach that, and... I think we would explain to the child, or the children, that we are in a loving relationship and that we wanted to offer them, well, a safe and *loving* family environment – and we just happen to be two women. Um, if it seemed right, and they are the appropriate age for this kind of conversation, [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] uh, we would also discuss with them some of the *attitudes* that are out there about people in same-sex relationships, [Interviewer: Yeah] uh, some of the comments they might hear. Um, and I guess we could even discuss with them how, how they could *respond* to that. Uh, we would also need to form a good relationship with the school, when they get to that age. [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] Uh, try to find out how the school approaches that subject, because I, I know – unlike when I was growing up – schools do have a policy on teasing, bullying – well, prejudice against gays and lesbians – I think it's fantastic now; teachers and pupils are far more aware, and they can *talk* about people being [Interviewer: Hmm] in same-sex relationships. Em, and I do think another important thing is that we have *positive male role models* as well for them. Em, and we've got lots of male friends who are *really*

supportive of us [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] with this. So, em .. do you know, I, I just hope we could let them know that it's okay, and that they're cared for just as much by two women as they would be by a man and a woman, and also that they wouldn't be the only child in that situation.

Interviewer: [Step two:
Exploring the story] [agreeing]
No, they wouldn't. ... In the light of your experience,
Beth, are there any particular areas you think you may need support in if you were to foster a child?

Beth: Okay, umm .. Well, thinking about that now, um, I think it's really important that both Nic and myself have a really good understanding of the child – or, or the children's – history [Interviewer: Hmm hmm] um. Thinking about my own experience, em, developing a good understanding of, of *my* history really helped me to move through that. Um, so *anything* that people could give me, or give us, so that we could understand the child's history, would really help us in giving them the best care.

Interviewer: Hmm. Thanks,
Beth.

Beth: Thank you.

history and – just as importantly – their ability to reflect on their attachment experiences? What advantages might such an approach offer in terms of the selection, support and preparation of foster or adoptive carers?

- What issues might you want to explore in Beth's relationship with Nicola? How could you help them to anticipate the roles they would take in supporting each other as carers, in view of Beth's earlier role as a compulsive care-taker? How easy do you think it might be for Beth to ask for help if a placement was becoming difficult?
- How do you think Beth would respond to such invitations for reflection?



Activity: Bells that rang

1. Did 'Beth' remind you of any of current carers that you are working with?
2. If so, what speech patterns or discourse markers were similar?
3. What other discourse markers does your client use? (You can use the discourse marking sheet as a reference.)
4. What areas would be helpful to explore in more depth in order to understand the degree to which the carer has made progress toward becoming an 'earned B'? Are there areas that remain unresolved?
5. What questions might be helpful (look at the *Interviewing Guide*)?
6. What are the implications for this carer in terms of matching her with the person she/he is to look after?
7. What do the attachment patterns you have identified suggest about this carer's approach to relationships and in particular their responses when they feel threatened in any way?
8. What do you notice about your own responses to this carer? For instance, do you find yourself mirroring their patterns in any way? If so, what might this be about? Does their story ring any bells for you?
9. Who else is involved with or has information about this carer that it would be helpful to talk with?

For ideas about how you might work on these issues, take a look at Chapter 9 and the *Interviewing Guide*.