

Counselling in the Pandemic

Last week I saw my first snowdrop of the year and my heart lifted. A few days later I brought home a bunch of daffodils and enjoyed watching them come into bloom. I also became aware of birdsong in the mornings and the days slowly lengthening. Spring is on the way which can lift our spirits and help us through these difficult days of living through the Pandemic

I work as a counsellor at The Mulberry Centre and have been there for 17 years. The Centre opened twenty years ago and it will be celebrating the occasion next year when the current situation allows. Over the last few years, I have seen many changes but especially now. The Centre has had to close again for the second time while we are in lockdown but will re-open when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, we are doing as much as we can by working remotely and by telephone.

Some clients have seen this as a lifeline. We are supporting many people who have cancer or Covid, are depressed, anxious, lonely, bereaved, traumatized and struggling to cope. This is a short-term Service but we always direct our clients to further support eg: coaching sessions, on-line yoga, meditation, relaxation sessions, on-line Book Club, Writers group, Legal advice sessions, Welfare Benefits advice, Group support sessions etc., all within the Mulberry Centre framework. We can also advise where to go for further Counselling support if needed.

Working during the Pandemic has meant that there are now considerable changes in the way we operate. I have been a Counsellor for 25 years, working both in private practice and as a volunteer. In the past this has always meant working 'face to face' but at present that is no longer possible. Since the first Lockdown in March last year all my counselling has been done by telephone, which has its pros and cons.

The Pros as I see it are:

1. We can still carry on providing the service albeit in a different way.
2. Working from home means no travel involved for either party and no parking issues.
3. Some people prefer the anonymity that this provides.
4. For those that are unwell it is much easier to manage a phone call rather than travelling to the Centre.
5. Talking on a phone maybe less threatening or challenging for some people.

The Cons for me as a Counsellor are:

1. Not seeing the client face to face means we have no visual clues to pick up on or to respond to.
2. There are sometimes issues with hearing or understanding clearly enough, particularly if the client has a strong accent or dialect.
3. Not being at the Centre means we don't have the connection and social interaction with other volunteers and staff, or the instant access to administrative procedures which we need to follow.

I think we all miss being at the Centre, which is a warm, peaceful and welcoming space and where we feel much more part of the Organisation. However, we are well supported by our Counsellor Lead/Psychological Support Worker, our Supervisors with whom we discuss our work and by the Admin Staff and all who work at the Centre.

How can Counselling help?

First and foremost, our Clients need to know that their sessions are completely confidential and safe. Also, that the counselling is non-judgmental and that the 50 minute session will be their regular space, without interruptions and in which they can bring their innermost thoughts, fears, anxieties and concerns.

How do we share that space, as a Counsellor? The American Psychologist Carl Rogers suggested that the most important qualities for a Counsellor to have are 'empathy, warmth and genuineness', also to be able to demonstrate 'unconditional positive regard'. This rings very true to me and I certainly aspire to use those qualities in my approach. I trained in Integrative Counselling, so use several approaches when it is suitable or useful, as well as the Carl Rogers person-centred model.

Returning to my opening paragraph and appreciation of the arrival of Spring, I sometimes find it useful to suggest that clients keep a diary and note down one or two things that have brightened their day. This could be as simple as a greeting and a smile from a neighbour, or any small achievement or change that they have been working on. Reading the diary later on during a dark moment, can help to lift the spirits and renew hope.

Many of the clients we see feel a great sense of relief as they progress with their counselling. We help them to feel heard and understood, held and supported, and enabled to find ways of dealing with their fears, anxieties and losses. During this Covid crisis, it feels even more important to reach out to people and give them this experience, which is also enriching for us as Counsellors.

Penny Baddeley (MBACP Counsellor)

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