

PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH TO THERAPY

“clients are the only experts in their own internal world”

Person-centred therapy is the model of therapy that provides the foundation for my client work. Meeting a prospective client for the first time, I will describe this approach and how it may apply to that individual (or couple). I believe it is right to offer such an insight: it will allow people to decide if this therapeutic approach may be appropriate for them, offer a greater sense of 'ownership' and control of their prospective therapeutic process and, if they have experienced counselling therapy before - perhaps using another model of therapy - an opportunity to understand possible differences between the therapies.

The person-centred way of working may be viewed as humanistic: it recognises the capacity of people to find their answers to their problems from within their own resourcefulness. To do this however, it is often necessary to experience conditions which will enable them to achieve personal goals. A set of six 'core' conditions or values lie at the heart of the therapeutic relationship. These were described in a 1957¹ article by Carl Rogers, the originator of the person-centre approach to counselling.

- Two people (three when working with a couple) have *psychological contact*.
- The first (the client) is in a state of *incongruence*, being vulnerable or anxious.
- The second person (the therapist) is *congruent* or *integrated* in the relation-ship.
- The therapist experiences *unconditional positive regard* for the client.
- The therapist experiences an *empathic understanding* of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client.
- The *communication to the client* of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a degree, achieved.

Rogers had an unshakeable belief that if the client can experience these six essential conditions for therapeutic growth, then nothing else is required to enable change to take place in the client. These conditions are both necessary and sufficient in themselves.

The therapeutic relationship takes great care to 'build' the therapy around the client that both recognises and values the individuality of that person. No two people are the same and it is therefore right that each person can feel valued and understood as the unique individual that they are.

¹ Rogers, Carl R. (1957) "The necessary and sufficient conditions of psychological personality change", *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21(2): 95-103

Personal uniqueness stems from experiences - both of events and of people - that 'shape' someone's view of the emotional world within which that person lives. From a young age, children absorb information from family members, teachers, friends and so on. Emotional development is greatly influenced by all that is encountered - whether these enhance emotional development or adversely affect it in some way.

Sometimes we may believe that if we adopt a way that others want us to be, we will be rewarded with love and a sense of feeling cared for. This is something that starts when we are very young and continues - in some form - throughout our lives.

The result can be that our understanding of our inner Self consists of feelings that are truly our own as well as ideas or constructs learnt from other people or the product of experiences we have encountered. It can be confusing: we might think we should act in a particular way even if, deep down, we may feel very differently. Others may want us to be cheerful and value that in us: so appearing to be happy even when feeling low. People are less likely to associate with someone who is quiet or unhappy. We may therefore do what is expected of us but resultant need to expend emotional energy in 'putting on a front' can be draining and de-energising.

The therapeutic relationship (in terms of the person-centred model) seeks to provide a safe therapeutic space so we can have an opportunity to work things out: to try to understand what makes us the way we are and to offer a way of becoming more trusting of our feelings. Being emotionally more confident and trusting will allow us to use this resourcefulness - now and in the future - to guide us and our relationships with others, in ways that may not have been possible in the past.

The Person-Centred approach can be distinguished from some therapies by the role of the practitioner. I bring my Self to the therapeutic relationship in the service of my clients. When I experience a feeling about something described by a client, I will express my feeling within the framework of the 'core' conditions described above.

My feelings guide me in my work which I use to facilitate my work. At times, this can provide clients with an alternative view of their circumstances. In turn this may, for example, allow them to slowly question some previously held thoughts about themselves.

For instance, some people - hurt by the ending of a relationship may believe they must prevent others getting close enough to cause yet more emotional pain. Understandably, this can lead to increased caution about entering a new relationship. Unless it is possible to find a "safe" way forward, emotional openness may be hard to achieve. Clients do not have to continue to follow previously well trodden or familiar paths upon which they may have relied in the past and, it is within this context, that counselling therapy can be facilitative.

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If you would like to find out a bit more about person-centre counselling, an accessible guide has been written by Roger Casemore (2006) 'Person-Centred Counselling in a nutshell', published by Sage Publications

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