

Empathy reigns

Peter Ryan explains why his focus on empathy, backed by sound ethical and safeguarding boundaries, leads to meaningful interventions

Carl Rogers said: 'The ideal therapist is first of all empathic.'¹ Of course, we are first and foremost empathic counsellors because we are empathic people – I have not always been a counsellor, but I have always been a person. I then trained and practised as a person-centred counsellor, offering the core conditions: unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence² to traumatised children, young people and adults. Person-centred counselling is unique among talking therapies as its central focus is to listen without judging and to communicate with empathy.

For nearly three years, I worked in one of London's secondary schools, offering empathic counselling to children and young people. For the purpose of this article, I want to focus on the engaging, energising and therapeutic role that successful empathic communication played in the therapy. We must bear in mind – and the research evidence is there to back it up – that empathy is not simply a necessary condition for healing, it is the healing agent itself³. And infusing the empathy with an authentic, non-judgmental attitude and a depth of congruence makes it even more potent.

It is also important to remember that empathic understanding can be accomplished only by people who are secure enough in their own identity to move into another's world without fear of being overwhelmed by it⁴. Once a person overcomes their fear of learning to communicate in this way, the rewards are boundless, for empathy offers direct access to the foreign self⁵. Over the years, I have managed to tame my fear of letting myself be immersed in the world of the foreign and traumatised self. Overcoming the anxiety associated with stepping into the unknown of the other's emotional world

is no small feat, if you take into consideration that the self incorporates aspects of physical, biological, psychological, social and cultural constitution⁶, interlaced with hundreds of emotions, along with their blends, variations, mutations and nuances⁷. One of the things that helped me achieve this was the realisation I made during my counselling studies that my sensitivity was a strength. This discovery ignited the embryo of empathy, and resulted in me having the courage to use my sensitivity when wishing to engage empathically with the foreign other.

Empathic listening is always centred on the other person, and its goal is to make the other feel uniquely understood⁸. In this way, the complexity presented by the troubled other can be shared in encounters without ever devaluing our differences.

When meeting troubled young people from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, as I did when counselling at the secondary school, it is easier to establish therapeutic relationships with each of them when empathy guides the way. I therefore owe a debt of gratitude to the young people I worked with for providing me with the opportunity to nourish and enrich my style.

I want to share some examples with you to illustrate my points, but the nature of counselling is such that it is carried out behind closed doors in confidence. In order to respect this privacy, as well as to ensure that clients' identities are not compromised and that the ethical principles of the counselling contract are upheld, I will not be using original material from counselling sessions. Instead, out of my years of counselling interactions, I have distilled two composite sessions with fictional clients, adding a generous dollop of poetic flare and constructing the detail from multiple counselling encounters.

Taking the risk and learning to trust myself

I was not always willing to trust the sensitivity of my mind. I recall one of my earliest counselling sessions with a young person, during which the power of metaphorical, empathic images helped enormously in getting the client to talk about their feelings and emotions. In the end! The reason I remember that session so well is because it nearly went wrong. During the first half, there was very little verbal communication between us. It felt to me as if we were both shrouded in shyness. My client's face was lowered – now and again peeping up at me, only to blink away instantly.

When I decided to inject the silence with a verbal intervention, whose aim was very clear in my head, I nevertheless experienced it as off-target – more an interruption than a connection. What I said was: 'You know, the way your head is held, it's like you're wearing a heavy crown.' The client reacted quickly, with a tone of snapping anger: 'I am thinking.'

There was possibly useful material there. But instead of reflecting the strength of the anger, I let it go. I settled into the safety of silence. Some minutes later, I was tempted to invite my client to play a board game. Over the years, I have amassed tools and techniques from a range of disciplines to help create contact and build rapport, but this time, I refrained and stayed faithful to the principles of my modality, which believes in empowering individuals to discover in themselves what works best for them, and to draw on their own inner resources. Besides, I did not want to sacrifice my modality on the altar of tension, simply because I experienced difficulties with the rising uncertainty of the silence.

I glanced at the clock. A worrying 17 minutes had passed and I thought I was losing my client. And that was when I decided to share with my client the image that had been nagging me from the first moments of the session. It was an image of a park and a fountain. When I opened my mouth to speak, I was not sure what I would say, and it felt as if the sentence had to almost articulate itself. I simply said: 'I see a park and a fountain. I wonder if this means anything to you?' My client looked up at me and I noticed a new alertness. My client said this was the place where they went when they were sad, adding with fresh engagement: 'It's a playground in my mind. I have skates, mountain bike, swings, swimming pool and a diving board, and sometimes I dive from the board on my bike.'

I now felt a sense of confirmation grow in me as I said to the client: 'It sounds like you have a lot of fun there. You now have a big smile on your face.'

On reflection, instead of going immediately

for sensitive empathy with the client, I had been juggling with clever feelings and thoughts, and now and again rummaging through the gifts of engagement stored in my training toolbox, to make contact possible with a young person – like pointing out the coloured pens and paper to draw with. I had not valued sufficiently the images that were shimmering quietly in the dismissive corner of my adult mind. And yet, I had seen those images of a park and a fountain almost from the beginning of our session, and had chosen to dismiss them as of no value. If I had been more accepting and less judgmental towards my inner awareness, perhaps my client and I could have made contact sooner. Having said that, the moment I made a conscious decision to act, I was primed with a touch of creative confidence in the above images. I believe the invitation to open the doors of our empathic imagination creates the favourable conditions in which to empower the client.

The magic of feeling what the young person feels

Enter invented client number two. This young person had a history of bullying behaviour both in and outside of the school environment. After several sessions, the client seemed to feel the pain of what they had been inflicting on others. Tears leaked, exposing a tenderness behind the hardness. They had already talked a lot about being teased and picked on, and about not knowing how to handle the frustration, other than to pretend it was not getting to them. Eventually, they would always lash out. Now, as the client wept, I noticed a shift in their physical presence and felt a sinking sensation in my chest. I offered: 'It seems to me that something has hit you right now.' The client paused, and was very still. Then they responded with a dismissive remark, that sounded off-centre to me. With matching moistness in my eyes, I said it was fine to stay with the feelings, that it was safe here, that it was OK. The client surrendered to the emotions with a torrent of tears that brought a cleansing victory. Empathy was the

magic that broke the spell and let the long-denied feelings surface.

The work of an empathic counsellor can be compared to the work of a safe-breaker – in order to gain access to the combination and unique content, we need to fine-tune an empathic ear to understand how the dial of feelings and emotions clicks. The formula I apply to open the emotional safe of the other says: I notice you, I feel with you and so I act to help you⁹. When I use this formula during my counselling sessions and reflect the emerging feelings, I rarely fail to engage therapeutically with young people who are traumatised, isolated and consumed by tormenting emotions and thoughts.

Finding a safe empathic connection via metaphor

Opening myself to my intuitive wisdom sweeps a clear path for empathy to emerge. But I have found it works best with my clients if I deliver this empathy using metaphors. It seems that if I let the poet in me develop, and refine his therapeutic voice, I am more likely to hit home – probably because more brain centres light up in response to metaphor than to any other form of human communication, indicating the formation of new neural pathways¹⁰.

In order to minimise the risk of re-traumatising a young person, a safe connection must be built between the present and the past. And the shadowy forces from the traumatic past lose their power when faced with the dynamic dance of empathy and metaphor. Reflecting empathically the emerging feelings, thoughts and hesitations, and giving them permission and space to be, does allow for a unique perspective and a blossoming of therapeutic healing. But it is important, also, not to lose the *as if* quality of empathy, in other words the metaphor, because it protects both the client and the counsellor from becoming engulfed by the empathic connection, which demands a shared separateness. For this reason, I believe the *as if* quality of empathy is a crucial aspect of the professional make-up of a person-centred counsellor¹¹.

What helps me uphold the *as if* attribute, as I journey with a young person into the dark forest of their traumatic terrain, is the Hansel and Gretel technique that I have developed. However, where Hansel and Gretel used perishable breadcrumbs as their safety markers, I identify the turning points with something more solid and longer lasting ie with interventions such as reflecting, paraphrasing or summarising. These reflections provide clear metaphorical spaces of safety within the tangled terrain, and inject light. I carve paraphrases on the face of tall trees, and plant sturdy banners summarising the confessions made during the journey of the counselling session.

The moral¹² component within an empathic person will ensure that the spirit of engagement is never ethically compromised. In addition to that, when I incorporate the values, principles and personal moral qualities of the person-centred counsellor with the six ethical principles promoted by BACP in its *Ethical Framework for Good Practice*¹³, I gain deep confidence, resilience and an ethical mindfulness. I then weave those six ethical principles into the boundaries of my therapeutic space. To visualise these, I have developed my own concept of a safe therapeutic environment, visualising the six ethical principles as the chess pieces on a chess board that surround the king and queen: castle – self-respect; knight – justice; bishop – beneficence; queen – counsellor; king – client; bishop – non-maleficence; knight – autonomy; castle – fidelity. With this image in mind, and equipped with solid principles of safeguarding my therapeutic work, I have the confidence to empathically promote the pawns of change (to continue the metaphor) in children and young people. Young people who are empathically and ethically protected learn to take full responsibility for their past actions and future behaviour.

I hope that the above reflections on empathy and empathic communication in the therapeutic setting demonstrate that 'empathy is felt and reasoned simultaneously. It is a quantum experience'¹⁴. ●

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