

Empathy Zone and Person-Centered Approach

The theoretical foundations of the Person-Centred Approach were laid by Carl Rogers more than 60 years ago. Neuroscientific research findings support his theories to a remarkably high degree ([Lux M, 2010](#)).

I am a seasoned therapeutic counsellor, practicing in the effectiveness ([Cooper M, 2019](#)) of the person-centred approach to psychotherapy. Person-centred practice is, in its nature, organic rather than mechanical, seminal rather than technical (Tudor K & Worrall M, 2006). What resonates deeply with me is the focus on non-judgemental empathic communication, maintaining belief in the actualisation tendency and utilising organismic wisdom.

The starting point in all person-centred therapy must be the therapist's trust in the client's actualizing tendency (Worsley R, 2009). In infancy, and through healthy child-adulthood, human beings engage in an organismic valuing process (Barrett-Lennard T. G, 2007). Person-centered counselling has a lot in common with organismic psychology (Tudor K & Worrall M, 2006) in seeing human beings as persons in process, not as set beings. The approach is rooted towards exploring, understanding and accepting subjective experience in relation with self, others and the environment. Accurate symbolisation of both positive and negative experiences expressed in the organism encourages movement towards organismic integrity, (Thorne B, 2001).

I find aligning my presence within the promptings of the emerging organism refreshingly freeing. Being at ease with the tension between self and organismic experience, enhances my empathy for clients undergoing such processes during counselling. Empathy, calibrated within such a range, enables the development of unique, authentic, and a deeply attentive listening experience with individual clients. Throughout its application, person-centred therapy aims to meet the client at the level of the client's experiencing (Mearns D, 2003). It has taken years of exposure to various clients, their complex expressions, reflective practice and deep domain-specific knowledge ([Miller D Scot, 2013](#)) to fashion my organismic wisdom (Bazzano M, 2018) at this level.

Practice Experience

March 2004, I enrolled on a ten-week introduction course to counselling. Encouraged by the taster course experience, I attended both the level 2 counselling skills and level 3 counselling studies part-time classes over the following years. Gaining these two certifications enabled me to secure a space on the part-time level 5 professional diploma in therapeutic counselling course. Qualifying in 2008, I have facilitated one-to-one therapy sessions with adolescent and adult clients in various settings ever since.

- Online practice July 2015 – present
- Telephone practice October 2013 - present
- Private practice (Empathy Zone) February 2012 – present
- Alternative (female gender) school provider May 2014 – November 2014
- Alternative (mixed gender) school provider April 2013 – May 2014
- Secondary school August 2009 – December 2012
- Alcohol/Addiction agency July 2007 – August 2009

My private practice – Empathy Zone – was established in 2012 to support individuals empathically in resolving abusive (sexual/physical/emotional) experiences that had their origin in childhood. It was at the agency and school settings when I began to encounter the damaging reality of unprocessed childhood trauma, especially at the sensory, visceral and emotional levels of disturbance. I also discovered the enormous therapeutic benefits a purely non-judgmental, empathic dialogue offered to traumatised children and adults. However, discussing such observations in group supervision, with technically minded practitioners and

management, sometimes proved disheartening. Moreover, the way empathy, feelings and emotions were packaged – as avenues towards burnout, only compounded my bewilderment. I found a very limited appreciation of empathy, feelings and emotions in general, and of person-centred practice, in particular. Faced with such viewpoints, I would return to the agency or school and proceed with caution lest I might cause unintentional harm to my client and myself by grounding my therapeutic practice in person-centered approach. However, this state of low-confidence would dissolve once I made empathic contact with my first client. Then, with my passion, resolve and vision to advance empathic communication beyond surface platitudes, any negative impressions clinging to my psychic would vanish.

Two of my published articles *Empathy Reigns* (2012) and *Extending the Empathy Zone Embrace* (2015) demonstrate my therapeutic credentials practising person-centred style with traumatised children and young people.

Psychotherapy performs two equally important tasks: one reparative, the other experimental. The later, however, has not been sufficiently explored in psychology or psychotherapy (Bazzano M, 2019). Person-centred therapy is a way of working with people founded on the alternative paradigm that people have an innate tendency towards the actualisation of their potentialities (Joseph S & Worsley R, 2012).

Practice Experience – Accredited

I now bring a unique and much needed resource to the world of trauma – non-judgemental empathy. Like any learning journey, it takes time and sustained discipline, with many semblances of progress and regress along the way to develop (Varela F, 1999). And so, it was in March 2019 that, based on the work I did exclusively with Empathy Zone clients, I applied and received my [accreditation](#) from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. During the accreditation process, the level of my reflective practice as well as my therapeutic and ethical credentials were scrutinised, tested and validated. For certain, my accreditation award gives enormous credibility to the therapeutic value of non-judgemental empathic communication and supports the positioning of these inter-personal relationship qualities at client's sphere of immediacy (Goldstein K, 1995).

Learning to be a really good therapist is hard. That is why it is relatively rare. Twenty percent of therapists get eighty percent of the good results. And that is true within each model of therapy. It is really hard to become a highly effective therapist in any model of therapy ([Jon Frederickson, 2020](#)).

Therapeutic movement occurs within the client because of a change in the process of evaluating experience (Biermann-Ratien). Enabling clients to evaluate immediate experience without judgement is key to supporting intra-personal relationship development. Therapeutic progress follows from the client experiencing being empathically understood without judgement (Feltham C & Horton I, 2006). Having become aware of how a lot of mental health practice rests on unexamined, taken for granted 'knowledge' (Rachel Freeth, 2020) empowerment through non-judgemental empathic communication is wisdom realised.

The client and the counsellor tap into their wisdom by connecting and staying present with the immediate visceral and emotional realms. Person-centred psychotherapy has always championed the empathic exploration of emerging feelings arguing the ideal therapist is first of all empathic and that the emotional flow in the present relationship constitutes a far superior consideration than any formulised mode of relating (Rogers, CR 1980). Hundreds of thousands of words have been written about the therapeutic relationship. Nearly everyone acknowledges its importance, though few, I think, sufficiently acknowledge Rogers' as identifying precisely the factors which make it so important (Keys, S 2003). For me, empathy is one word which encapsulates the wide raging explorational possibilities, therapeutic

depth, respect and ideas underpinning person-centred therapy and beyond. Rogers' work was not, and still is not, accorded the respect it deserves. Many of his ideas, of course, have been accommodated within the boundaries of a common psychotherapeutic culture (Faber B, Brink D & Raskin P, 1996).

I would say, in most cases, Rogers' ideas have been accommodated at a reduced cost, such as, empathy. For example, when empathy is oversubscribed on an intellectualised basis, intimacy is compromised and clients (understandably) mask their vulnerability. In my practice, I never deplete the therapeutic value of empathy by shying away from intense feelings and emotions. I believe this uncompromising stance was born during my counselling training, evolved in early years of practice and has professionally matured. In a nutshell, I practice within the discipline of person-centred approach because its empathic demands resonate with me and my clients. Empathy, in all senses of the word, involves an ongoing, ever-changing process of self-transformation (Cinramicol A & Ketcham K, 2000).

Courageously Sensitive Presence

The versatility of empathy is depended on honouring two vital tenets of person-centred therapy – the actualizing tendency and the organism. Construct of the actualizing tendency is an organismic theory wherein the fundamental qualities in human nature are viewed as those of growth, process and change (Bozarth J, 1998). Furthermore, as I learnt to trust these principles, my creative-intuition, authenticity and non-judgemental empathy, crystallised into a courageously sensitive presence. This is me today, in practice with clients, offering an open, courageously sensitive presence which I define as being present in the moment, in touch with the sensory, instinctive, intuitive, visceral, emotional, physical, thinking and creative aspects of my experiencing nature. In other words, my courageously sensitive presence is a highly resourceful, holistic portal to connect safely with vulnerability.

Utilising an organism's full expression, offers refreshing opportunities to new discoveries and is vital to avoiding an external locus of evaluation bias. Empathy, sourced from a finely-tuned, courageously sensitive presence, ensures a judgement free counselling experience. When experience flows from trust, integrity and autonomy, not only is empathic communication enriched, but client's perception also increases and their actualising process (Mearns D & Thorne B, 2008) is better promoted.

The certainties of societies that were structured around religion and tradition have been swept away over the past 100 years. As individuals, we have to fashion our own lives now, and find our own meaning in the world (Moncrieff J, 2020). I believe, empathic individuals are at the cutting-edge of this endeavour and have the advantage in taking us past the Age of Faith and the Age of Reason and into the Age of Empathy (Rifkin J, 2009). Empathic communication is the ultimate non-invasive mode of engaging with vulnerability. Empathy disempowers the darker dynamics underpinning denial processes. Will you invite me to accompany you on your empathic development journey?

Peter Ryan
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