Debate

Self-awareness: a joy or a burden?

Cordelia Galgut questions the benefit of heightened self-awareness

The fact was though that training to become a counsellor/psychotherapist had already catapulted me into completely new terrain in some ways, even though I’d studied psychology as an undergraduate and been in many non-explicit counselling relationships with pupils as a teacher in my previous career. I think that part of my training that saved the seed that has ended up creating such a gulf between me and others outside the profession, and indeed some people inside it, is to do with raised self-awareness. This can be both a joy and a burden, I find. Why a burden? Well primarily because most of the people I meet do not appear to be that self-aware and this sets up an inevitable tension between the other person and me.

I’m aware that saying this might make me sound as if I think I’m ‘sorted’, which I don’t, nor do I think I ever will be. It’s rather that I have this heightened awareness of my own issues, not always very processed, but there all the same. If I’m honest, apart from when I’m working with clients, others’ lack of self-awareness irritates me. Maybe I also envy those who are, but decided I had a duty not to behave like that anymore, now I was a qualified psychotherapist. These colleagues also alluded to the impact of their job on their relationships, but there seemed a reticence to elaborate, which bemused me at the time.

Relationships

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I’m aware that there is a social context issue too in what I am raising, namely that we are taught within UK society not to dwell too much on things and that to do so is an indulgence, so this society doesn’t value self-reflection in any real way. We only have to look at the plethora of self-help books that often try to simplify that which is not simple and give people false hope of sustained recovery from that which is just part of the human condition. However, self-help books are extremely popular, as we know. We all have strong emotions and we share a common humanity. We all struggle at points in our lives.

An additional factor that affects my social relationships is the curiosity of others about their own psychology. However, I also find that mostly there is a distinct limit to how self-aware people want to be, and one could argue this is very sensible. When these same people try to tap into my knowledge and experience, answering their questions can end up backfiring on me. However, I find it can be enormously hard to refuse to answer them. Also when someone I meet asks me what I do, and I tell them, their reaction is, ‘Are you going to psychoanalyse me?’ I find it hard to dispel that difficult dynamic. I tend to respond by saying, ‘No, actually I’m too busy sorting myself out!’ But that’s not entirely honest because I do make judgments, which I don’t like doing, but I can’t stop myself because it’s an automatic pilot-type of reaction that largely happens in spite of me, as it is so engrained and largely unconscious.

Then there are those who think they know more about psychology than I do, based on no or very little training, and who consider themselves self-aware when they appear not to be. These same people don’t hold back in telling me how I’m going wrong in life, with alarming confidence if they get half a chance. I resist telling them how long I studied to do what I do, as the response has been, ‘Oh well, training counts for nothing. I’m a member of the school of life and hard knocks.’ All these responses irritate me, against my better judgment, though I believe we are all entitled to our opinions and they can be good and insightful ones, whether people are trained or not. Whether it’s because people feel threatened at the mere thought of a mental health professional and get defensive, I don’t know – it’s possible, I guess. However, I certainly believe that those of us in our profession get more of this kind of treatment than medical doctors, for example, and it can be hard to bear. Medical doctors also seem to get more respect from the public at large than the average mental health professional.

It comes with the territory, you may say, and I agree. My way through the mine these days is to focus on acceptance of the ‘it comes with the territory’ approach to my relationships and on trying not to expect too much. This approach does help, but often leaves me in a fairly lonely and uncomfortable place, even while surrounded by people. That’s an attitude of mind, you may say, you don’t have to feel like that, you’re being a victim. Well, but it nonetheless creates a gulf between myself and others when my heightened self-awareness gets in the way, coupled with my awareness of others’ lack of
I have often found myself wondering if the person who acts out, projecting all their emotions onto others without being aware of why they are doing it, is actually better off. 

Straight after my mother’s death I was so shocked and numb that I was immune to others’ judgement. As soon as I started to speak out about how I was experiencing her death, I was amazed by how much even those in our profession tended to minimise the impact of the loss of a loved parent on a person, and specifically me.Views raged from, ‘Oh, I’ll be fine when my parents die – you’re overreacting.’ To ‘Of course, you’ll feel bad for a year or so, but you’ll be over it soon.’ As time has passed, I have heard enough from bereaved parents to confirm that my extreme and enduring emotional reactions to my mother’s death are indeed normal. Nevertheless, as time passes, I am now one of the handful of awareness I have about how I feel about my mother’s death and about her. I also wonder whether others with a less heightened self-awareness can push things away more easily. They certainly seem to be able to.

I imagine that even when I retire, I will continue to have this same problem.

I’ve tried all sorts of therapies to help me switch off a bit, but to be honest they just tend to bring new awareness to my already over-cluttered table. Maybe colleagues have ideas that they haven’t yet projected onto other people, are actually in the minority.

Doesn’t this line of argument negate the worth of what we do? I don’t think it does, because the average client does not raise their self-awareness anything like as much as we do.

If you have any responses to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own.

Karin Brauner on developing a successful private practice while keeping a day job to pay the bills

Do you, like me, in a full- or part-time job and working to build your counselling practice at the same time? Does that job satisfy you to a point but would you rather be working more hours as a counsellor?

From counselling groups I belong to on Facebook and from conversations I’ve had with other counsellors, it is clear that many of us have to settle for jobs that might be related to counselling but are not quite counselling – in my case, working as a care officer in a children’s service. Many of us want to leave those jobs and gain more financial security from doing what we love: counselling.

It has already been well documented in the pages of this journal and Therapy Today that while the number of qualified counsellors continues to rise, there aren’t enough jobs to go round, and developing a successful private practice comes easier for some than others. I am one of those people who have been struggling to find clients and am a profitable living from my passion. This is not unique to us as a freelance counsellor and exists in other industries as well.

I want to enjoy my current work until my counselling practice is what I want it to be.

As Gina Trapani highlights in an article titled ‘How to Start Freelancing (Without quitting your job)’ posted on www.lifehacker.com, she gives a positive outlook on having a PAYE permanent job while developing a freelance presence in your area of expertise. Indeed, in this era of job insecurity, those of us who still have a job in the traditional sense may be the lucky ones, as we have a safety net. Counselling and the other freelance work we do (I’m also a writer, interpreter and translator) will be, to start with at least, a source of extra income.

About the author


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Your thoughts please

If you have any responses to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own.

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About the author

Karin Brauner is a BPS Chartered Psychologist, HCPC Registered Counselling Psychologist and MBACP (Accred) counsellor and exists in other industries as well, as Maureen Henderson counsels, borrowing the words from the popular song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: ‘…if you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.’

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