

Are we worthy of their trust?

Rachel Freeth

'I've told you a lot about myself but I still don't trust you.' Joanne had indeed just told me a lot about herself, including some of the despair and suicidal thoughts that had led to her referral to my outpatient clinic.

Like a number of young adults I see, Joanne's desire to live and persevere in a threatening world seemed fragile, along with her sense of identity. She had also, like many, described a story of abuse, neglect and abandonment in her early years and numerous unstable relationships subsequently. She had been profoundly let down by care-givers and those in positions of power. It is no wonder she struggled to trust people.

It is not unusual for me to encounter people who find it very hard to trust helpers. It is rare, however, that anyone expresses a lack of trust in me as directly and firmly as this. It was a powerful moment. And, while I welcomed her honesty and her highlighting something of how she perceived me, I also felt profoundly challenged.

This experience also opened up for me many questions about the nature of trust, particularly in the context of helping relationships. It has since occurred to me that we so often talk about trust as the bedrock of the therapeutic relationship or helping alliance but we rarely engage in in-depth exploration of what trust actually involves and consists of – psychologically, socially, philosophically and morally. We tend to assume we know what it is we are talking about. Yet coming up with a satisfactory definition of trust, or conceptual framework, is no easy task.

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It has also occurred to me that we tend to talk about trust almost as a physical 'thing' – as something that a person either has or has not got. To me it makes more sense to refer to degrees of trust (while resisting attempts to quantify it), and as something that exists as a process, subject to fluctuations throughout the course of a relationship, or even throughout a conversation. It seems to me that Joanne might have had at least a fragment of trust in order to tell me something of her story, as well as to declare she didn't trust me.

I have also become aware of how our professional discourse about trust and its importance in the helping relationship frequently focuses almost exclusively on the client. We talk about it as the client's problem, about whether they are able to give us their trust, referring to the developmental and environmental factors creating distrust. But I wonder whether we talk enough about our own trustworthiness and what enhances or impairs it. Do we consider what we need to do or how we need to be with our clients to make us more likely to be perceived and experienced as trustworthy?

For me this is not about adopting particular communication techniques. It is deeper than this. I think my trustworthiness has

something to do with my character, my beliefs and values. It relates to what I want for my client and what I want from our encounter. It concerns my feelings towards my client. Am I warmly disposed towards them and are my intentions essentially good ones? Am I willing to do everything I can to facilitate the best possible outcome for my client or will I just go through the motions?

Of course the client also comes with questions, many of which may be unspoken. When Joanne said she didn't trust me, her perception of my trustworthiness could have been influenced by much more than my demeanour, attitudes and whether I listened attentively. She may have had questions about my competence, about whether I could actually help, and how. Could she trust me to deliver what she wanted and expected?

There is an important issue here, particularly for those of us who work in organisations. Our practice is influenced and at times constrained by the resources available – for example, time or number of sessions. Clients' trust in us to deliver what they want in terms of outcomes will be inevitably influenced by what it is possible to deliver. This needs careful discussion and negotiation right at the outset of any therapeutic process.

I wasn't all that surprised when Joanne did not attend for her next appointment, and I probably won't see her again. I am nevertheless grateful to her for stimulating in me an enquiry into the nature of trust and for prompting me to think more about my own trustworthiness and what influences it, as well as how, for many people, trusting others is a tall order. ■