

## Travelling hopefully

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How often do we think about the nature and experience of hope in the clinical, therapeutic context? Speaking for myself, not enough. The subject of hope is one I have particularly wanted to touch on in these columns. I only wish that I hadn't left it until my final one! However, it feels good to write my last column for *Therapy Today* in a spirit of hope that I know hasn't often been apparent in my previous columns.

Over the past 18 months I have valued sharing my clinical experiences as a psychiatrist and, in a different setting, as a counsellor. In doing so, I have highlighted and commented on some of my own personal and professional tensions and struggles that arise from this dual professional allegiance, and those that arise from an organisational (and wider) culture that is dominated by medical model assumptions and values, with which I often feel uncomfortable.

I have greatly benefited from, and am therefore grateful for, having had this opportunity to express some of these challenges – ones that I know a number of readers also experience. Furthermore, I find writing is a good way to work out what I think and deeply believe – another reason to be grateful.

One of my other aims has been to affirm the value of counselling and psychotherapy, particularly from the perspective of a psychiatrist who sees in our mental health services, and other arenas, increasingly limited opportunities for the kind of therapeutic relationship, attentive listening and safe spaces

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that much counselling and psychotherapy can offer. I also affirm counselling and psychotherapy from the perspective of someone who works in this way too, witnessing the transformation in clients as they make use of that regular, weekly hour. (I do of course recognise that therapy doesn't help everyone, and in some circumstances may even cause harm.)

Returning to the subject of hope, I find myself wondering how, and how much, therapy has the potential to facilitate and nurture hope in clients. Is it hope that fuels the process of discovery, change, healing and meaning making? It also seems important to consider on what the therapist bases their hope when working with clients. What kind of hope enables the therapist to stay with clients whose distress seems endless and intractable? Is it hope that helps the therapist to visualise a more positive and healthy future for clients who cannot entertain this themselves, and what underlies this vision?

To me these questions have no ready answers and the nature of hope seems so mysterious. But I still enjoy the questions and I want to make more time to ponder them. Whatever its essence,

the capacity to hope is surely something fundamental to the human condition. This is not to disregard the states of despair that can grip human beings. But I don't see despair and hope as necessarily mutually exclusive. In my own clinical experience, quite often it has been an awareness and acknowledgement of despair that enables hope to break through – just one of the many paradoxes of being human.

Since starting to work as a counsellor again, I do feel to some extent liberated from the quite common expectation of my role as a psychiatrist that I will 'fix' people. That said, it has been noticeable how much more this expectation pervades the counselling room these days. It also feels liberating to be able to listen to people at length, with much less distraction from competing medicalised agendas. However, it can still be every bit as demanding as a counsellor to sit with someone in mental and emotional pain or confusion, exploring questions that have few easy answers, and *hoping* that just being there may be enough, at least for that moment.

Working in a way that pays particular attention to the therapeutic relationship, in whatever form of helping, may make considerable demands. Is it ultimately hope that enables me to continue working in this way, despite the costs? My answer is of course 'yes'. For there is nothing more inspiring than witnessing human resilience and healing.

Hope lies at the heart of effective therapeutic relationships, however this manifests. In hope, the journey goes on. ■