

It's all about Connection



Sue Black

There are times in my life when I have felt low and depressed. What I have noticed is that these are also the times when I have been most disconnected from people, either by chance or by choice. This has led me to wonder whether there is a correlation between the two. Perhaps it is my lack of connection which has led to my unhappiness. Or perhaps my unhappiness leads to a lack of connection. I notice that when I feel low I withdraw from people, which increases this feeling of alienation and disconnection from the world. When I make an effort to reconnect, or when life events allow me the opportunity to engage with others, I recognise a lifting of my mood.

What is it, then, that we offer as therapists? Is it the tools of our trade, those techniques allied to our approach? Or is it simply a relationship, a connection, a joining of core to core. Is it not merely the relationship which is therapeutic, but rather a linking of inner selves so that a client feels connected to us, the world and the universe? Perhaps the process of therapy is more about enabling the client to re-engage with him/herself and the world rather than a cognitive retraining of thoughts or understanding of the past. Could it be that supporting the client to find connection with the world is the most effective tool we therapists might employ?

We humans are social creatures. We are also all uniquely different. However, the word difference conveys a separating off. Thus, when we feel different we feel isolated from the pack, cut off from society. Person centred therapy, which is the modality in which I am trained, offers an acceptance of difference, an empathic understanding that allows the client to feel accepted and belonging. Perhaps this is why Rogers (1951) proposed that the six conditions for growth were “necessary and sufficient”. Through the offering of these the client can feel that connection, from the core of him/herself to the core of the therapist. Perhaps that is sufficient.

However, from my perspective, it is the first condition – that there is at least a minimal level of psychological contact – which is pivotal. Without this the counsellor’s offering of congruent acceptance and empathic understanding cannot be communicated to the client and is therefore ineffective. While I recognise that there might be different degrees of contact between client and counsellor which contribute to the quality of the therapy, without any contact I cannot see how therapy can be effective, regardless of how accepting and empathic the counsellor is, since there is no therapeutic relationship. Thus, perhaps it is the contact, the connection, in itself which is healing.

Another of Rogers’ ideas was that counselling can help the client to develop self-awareness. In my view this is about the client developing a core connection with him/herself. When we are disconnected from aspects of ourselves we can feel unsettled and unhappy. The Buddhist Chain of Causation teaches about the interconnectedness of everything. In the same way we can feel content and at peace with ourselves and others through reintegrating and reconnecting with all aspects of ourselves.

Connection is at the heart of person centred theory. Mearns and Thorne (2000) observe that “the relationship *is* the therapy”. They also comment on their unease around the separate distinctions of the core conditions of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence, stating: “It is in their dance, their intricate interweaving, that the core conditions reveal their vitality and their potency as a healing force”. Again, the importance of connection, rather than separation, is emphasised.

When we look at the language we use to describe our feelings this idea of connection, or lack of connection, is expressed: “I feel in bits”, “I went to pieces”, “I need to pull myself together”, “I fell apart”, etc. The word dissociate comes from the Latin “dis-”, meaning “do the opposite of”, and

“sociare”, meaning “to join”. Prevalent, even in our language, is the importance of connection.

Considering the different therapeutic modalities I can still find this link to connection and wholeness. In psychoanalytic theory there is a focus on the connection between past and present, conscious and unconscious, inner and outer worlds. In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy the focus is on the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviour. In Humanistic theories the connection is between perceptions and feelings. Clearly this is a huge oversimplification of these differing approaches but at the core of each there is an acknowledgement that what affects us is the interconnectedness of differing parts of ourselves. When there is a lack of connection, an incomplete connection, or a mis-connection, then that person shows a tendency to feel unhappy, unsettled or unwell. Regardless of theoretical approach, it is all about the connection.

So often, in our profession, we find ourselves defending our own approach and promoting the differences as if these are important. From my perspective, it is far more useful to look for the similarities and connections between the approaches. This mirrors the similarities and connections between people, which I think it is important to focus on. Of course, it is necessary to acknowledge the differences but surely what connects us is our humanity and our similarity. In this way perhaps therapists can live more harmoniously with one another, in the same way as we hope our clients learn to live in their worlds, through their connections.

It seems that, in these modern times, the connection most individuals seek is that of the internet. It may be that people believe that through social media they are gaining a connection – but with what, I ask? To me it feels as though people are connected to their gadget or to the internet but there is no core to core connection with others. What is being met is the façade that is portrayed of ourselves and others. I have worked with a number of clients who have had difficulties through their use of social media and these individuals seem more isolated from others rather than connected to them. The gadget they use to connect is not only in the middle physically but also metaphorically. Somehow the very thing that is designed to bring people together is driving them apart.

Loneliness is increasingly becoming a problem, leading to other difficulties such as substance

misuse, depression and rising suicide rates. To me, this underlines the importance of socialisation and connections with others. How is it that in this overpopulated country we can find ourselves alone and isolated? What has happened to the communities where people used to support one another? During the Second World War, it seemed to me that spirits were buoyed up by these communities. Perhaps the ability to do most things online from the comfort of our armchairs is not such a benefit to us as we thought. Or rather, perhaps we are missing out on another benefit – that of getting together with others and sharing what it is to be human.

I’m not suggesting anything substantially different to Rogers’ original thoughts, and those of others who have developed his theory further. I’m merely considering whether the focus is even more basic. Many current theorists are beginning to suggest that it is the relationship between client and therapist that is healing. I would go further to suggest that it is the relationship between two humans, the *shared connection between two human souls* which is the most effective healing factor. Being in the presence of another, being seen, heard, understood, accepted and cared about; these are, for me, the things which nurture and heal suffering. Meeting that need for connection which is a core part of the human experience is, perhaps, all that is required to enable individuals to feel at one and integrated with themselves and the world.

Biography

Sue Black is a person centred counsellor, supervisor and trainer with Rowan Consultancy in Perth. She also trains on the postgraduate diploma with Persona Development and Training and the undergraduate diploma at Perth College UHI, as well as having her own private practice.

References

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