

Group Therapy, Individual Therapy & Psycho-education: Towards a broader 'therapeutic response environment'

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In this article I will explore the relationship between group and individual therapy, consider the role of psycho-education, and inform you of a new venture, which aims to develop the links between these different areas in order to raise the public profile of therapy in our region. My aim is to consider how together – as the field of counselling and psychotherapy – we might provide a more accessible, proactive, and dynamic response to the psychological, therapeutic and mental health care needs of our community – a response which is more visible, more flexible, and better understood than we have so far achieved. How can we help other referral agencies as well as clients themselves to make well-informed decisions about what is the most suitable, cost-effective and ultimately successful therapy they can find?

Introduction

Since setting up in private practice in the 90's as a psychotherapist, I have noticed that there was and still is a relative scarcity of what I will refer to as 'therapy groups': encompassing everything from group therapy, offered from a variety of different orientations, to support/focus groups tailored to address specific needs such as anger management, eating disorders, men's or women's concerns, etc. It seems valid to gather these under the umbrella term 'therapy groups' on the basis that what the general public considers 'therapeutic' is a relatively broad and fuzzy area of activities - whilst there aren't many people who claim that tree hugging is a panacea for all ills, I recently heard someone talking on the radio about how he only came out of his deep clinical depression when he discovered a new relationship with trees – there was no doubt in his mind that for him trees are 'therapeutic'. There have been many occasions over the years when I have wished I could find a particular type of group to refer a client to, that could support their therapeutic process (without ignoring the various tricky aspects of making such a referral - I shall return to this issue later).

I have also noticed a lack of workshops and groups addressing personal development or emotional literacy. I shall refer to this area of work collectively as psycho-education, which can provide a useful educational and preparatory springboard into both individual and group therapy. And again, I have often thought about what difference it might make to the process if clients were already more psychologically educated by the time they arrive at my door for their initial interview: better informed, better prepared, with a more developed internal psychological mindedness which they might then bring to the work.

Before we consider the links, conflicts, challenges and opportunities of the relationship between therapy groups, psycho-education and individual therapy, however, I want to bring in a second strand to this article, which will be useful for us to think about in relation to the first. I don't know how many of you have ever been to Edinburgh, but if you visit the commercial centre of the city, you can't fail to notice how there is shop after shop, all selling tartan. There is so much of it, that without a photographic memory, and an obsessive nature, the ordinary tourist can't tell the differences between the over 13000 tartans listed!

The world of therapy has developed a similarly rich diversity, with various professions (counsellors, therapists, psychoanalysts, psychologists, life coaches and others) and many therapeutic approaches and countless integrative combinations between them, as well as our own individuality bringing variance to each of those.

However, given the success of those tartan shops, all in one location, all selling what look to the general public like very similar items, it is the difference, not the similarity between tartan sellers and therapists, which has struck me over the years. Where amongst ourselves we emphasise the distinctions and variations between our therapeutic approaches, to the general public it appears that we are all selling very much the same thing. The tartan sellers have worked well together to market Edinburgh as a city that people want to visit; which tartan item is purchased when you get there is generally a secondary consideration. Can we say that as a profession we have collaborated to make it easy for the public to access therapy?

This article, then, considers how we might combine an exploration of the links between psycho-education, group therapy and individual therapy, and how working together may raise the profile of the work we do. Generating more interest and understanding of the work, both amongst the public and potential referring professionals, will result in many more people 'visiting Edinburgh'. For the first part, I want to make a case for improving psycho-education in our region.

The Case for Psycho-Education

I am using this term to cover any activity, group or workshop which specifically aims to educate people about emotional literacy, mental health and wellbeing, and to engage people in a conversation to explore their psychological and emotional worlds and that of others.

I think it would be a good thing for therapists to be more proactive in educating people about what we do. Creating an environment where therapy is accessed more easily and readily as a natural part of life is more proactive than waiting for someone to be in crisis before they pick up the phone or send us an email.

When I first started out as a practitioner, I had a pretty 'green' set of therapy skills but a well-developed set of business skills together with a background in psycho-education. It was through psycho-educational talks that I built a full practice within three months. For a new practitioner this was not without some major downsides, as you might imagine, but that is a story for another day. The point I am making is that people want to learn more about who they are and how the world works at a deeper psychological level, even when they aren't in crisis. This is a good platform for them developing an interest in counselling and psychotherapy, rather than them just holding the commonly held view that it's only when the shit hits the fan in life that you need a therapist.

There are potential pitfalls as well as benefits with this ambition, and to illuminate this, let us consider one particular scenario.... How often has someone come through your door for the first time, in relative crisis, to ask at the end of the first session - 'How long will it take?' and 'Do you think you can help me?' You have perhaps got some idea of their history by then, and you will have your own internalised construction of therapy ready to assist your response. Depending on this construction and, for example, whether you practice short term or long-term work, you might immediately feel the dilemmas and difficulties in responding to this

request, or you may have a standard response around which you feel no difficulty. Either way, you might prefer it if they came through the door already having a better understanding of who they are and their needs in relation to what you can offer - perhaps a short-term focus on a specific issue, or longer-term support with their process and experience of life, or an appreciation that therapy is a co-created experience in some way.

You may well think that would be good thing but it might also mean that clients come to us with a different set of questions, which may be more challenging, such as 'How do I know if you are the right person for me to see?' In shopkeeper terms - 'what's so special about your brand of tartan?'

Educating the public about therapy gives people more power to think about whom they are choosing to work with. This is an important issue, but it is frequently 'under the table' rather than made explicit, as clients are often more focussed on themselves and whatever has brought them through the door, at least initially. There is not space here to explore how we might answer such questions from clients, but having such questions on the table can engender a more solid working alliance than keeping it under the table, where it may remain unaddressed though still active as a tension.

The Limitations of Individual Psychotherapy

Clearly, all clients, whilst having various neuroses and/or pathologies in common, are all different, with differing needs. It is impossible for us to 'know' everything that might be of benefit to them. So this inevitably leads us to ask whether 'we' can be 'enough'; can we offer anything more or different; should we offer anything different or additional?

Given that we have all had clients who 'don't seem to change', or leave in an unsatisfactory manner, for example, we ask ourselves whether we could have done anything different. Sometimes it is very difficult to know, and we can't start from the beginning again with a client to test out these considerations. We inevitably experience limitations in our work, no matter what reasons we conceive of for their existence.

If you could envisage the perfect 'therapeutic response environment' for clients, what would it look like?

In the field of 'Early Intervention' the professionals involved with children often set up TAC's and TAF's ('team around the child / family'). There is something about this model of response environment that is very containing and includes an appreciation that no single professional has all the answers. It is a model that follows on from and can be connected with the principle that it takes a whole village to raise a child.

There are aspects of this model that the field of psychotherapy and counselling can and should learn from when we consider limitations and failures both in the work that we do and how our field might continue to develop. In the NHS the current slogan is all about increasing 'patient choice' and a similar expectation applies to therapy: how can we become more accessible, maximising the relevance of the therapy that is available and appropriate to individual needs, conditions and contexts?

If we accept that we can't realistically meet all of our clients' needs, then we have to consider

how we develop and use other resources that can also support our clients. Do we just leave it up to clients to find additional resources, which is one way of doing it, or do we make general or even specific recommendations? As Irvin Yalom suggests, "Invent a new therapy for each client and allow choices to flow spontaneously rather than following any standardised protocols." If we are going to be proactive in this regard, then we haven't got much structure in place to help us be creative or inventive.

In writing this, I am not ignoring the pitfalls and implications which arise from developing a broader therapeutic response to the various difficulties which people come to us with. Over the years, I have come across practitioners who take quite a pragmatic attitude and who readily recommend a book or a group/workshop to their clients, and others who are reluctant in principle, concerned about the unconscious meanings which making such suggestions might acquire for clients: that they are too much or too difficult for us, or that we aren't enough for them.

However deep the regressive tendencies, at some point in the therapeutic process, clients *do* grow towards a realistic understanding that we as individual therapists can't meet all their needs. The outcome of therapy can depend on how the therapeutic couple negotiate this developmental fulcrum and how the inherent disappointments (in Kleinian terms of the depressive position) can be processed. – The client can arrive at this point unprepared, or 'somewhat' prepared and informed. Psycho-education can prepare clients for these disappointments and negotiations. Over the years, I have had a number of clients who have left a previous therapy in a state of disappointment. Enquiry has often shown that they did not feel able to address their disappointment in their therapist with their therapist. Psycho-educational workshops can be specifically tailored to support the process of individual therapy, encouraging and educating clients about the therapy process, and the inherent disappointments that can arise.

Therapy Groups

As well as being useful for clients who might not be able to afford individual therapy, therapy groups can contribute greatly to the individual therapy process, whether via open-ended group therapy or a time-limited focused group.

Many of us will have experienced discovering more about ourselves in experiential training groups (which form part of most training schools), as well as the support and challenge that they offered. Many of our clients would benefit in the same way, whether it be concurrent with, prior to, or following individual therapy. Therapy groups aren't just for clients who have social difficulties or anxieties, or for clients who might benefit from feeling less isolated in their personal struggle by being with others with a similar struggle. They can be useful to everyone. Yalom referencing the Johari Window is a good frame for thinking about why this is so:

'The Johari Window is a four quadrant window of self-knowledge. If the knowledge is known to our self and others, it is public. If it is known to our self and not others, it is secret. If it is not known to our self yet it is known to others, it is blind. If it is not known to self and also not to others, it is unconscious. It is the blind self that therapists target, helping clients see themselves as others see them. Especially useful in group therapy, using here and now experiences.' (This is not of course to say that the therapist is not engaged in the various ways in which the unconscious becomes conscious.)

	Known By Self	Unknown By Self
Known By Others	Public	Blind
Unknown By Others	Secret	Unconscious

Diagram: Johari window

If we can engage in an exploration of questions such as: ‘What are the limitations of individual psychotherapy?’ and ‘How can I offer more to my clients?’ then we can be more creative in responding to our clients’ needs. One size (or type of therapeutic response) does not fit all, and given the research on the importance of the client/therapist relationship, the debate over any one modality being ‘better’ than another is somewhat redundant. We could, however, work more cohesively and creatively as a body of practitioners towards responding more appropriately, more flexibly and more precisely to our clients’ needs.

So, psycho-education & therapy groups can be used:

- in creating a broader ‘therapeutic response environment’
- in the process of raising awareness for individual counselling and psychotherapy
- in preparing clients for the pitfalls and dilemmas of therapy, and how to gain most from it
- as a low-cost support to the individual therapeutic process
- as a low-cost alternative for clients who can’t afford individual therapy

However, working towards these potential benefits requires a further step. I have been ‘brewing’ the ideas for OTS (as described below) for some years, and been working on it more actively since early this year.

Oxfordshire Therapy & Self-Development (OTS)

Oxfordshire Therapy & Self-Development is being set up by Justin Smith, Annalisa Caldon & Michael Soth to develop a more accessible and comprehensive first port of call for therapeutic support as well as to raise the profile of, and grow interest in the work of therapy through a variety of marketing activities. Anyone unsure about the bewildering multitude of psychological therapies and personal development activities available in the area will find unbiased information, assessment and referral as well as educational events at OTS to help them clarify their needs.

Offering a range of referral routes and therapeutic options which can be tailored to an individual in terms of approach, intensity, frequency, cost and other factors, OTS will provide the one-stop solution for therapy in the region. From free educational events to workshops and ongoing regular groups, from low-cost individual and group therapy to in-depth psychotherapy & counselling, from short-term to long-term therapy within a wide variety of therapeutic orientations, OTS will develop the network and resources to meet clients’ differing

needs.

There are many more ways of addressing the psychological challenges of life than the average person knows about – OTS aims to make that accumulated richness of human understanding and wisdom available to everybody seeking help.

Invitation....

Our aim is to build a community of practitioners who are interested in creating and contributing to the type of therapeutic response environment discussed in this article. We are interested to hear from practitioners from all areas of psychological work who feel inspired by this vision and interested in the open culture of professional development which we are offering, and we invite applications from interested professionals. We also welcome enquiries from any therapists in training who may be interested in the new placement opportunity which will form part of OTS.

You can find out more on our website www.otscentre.co.uk

Justin Smith runs the Witney Therapy Centre, where he has his full time private practice as a relational integrative body psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer.

References:

Yalom, Irvin: The Gift of Therapy - An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients (Perennial first edition, 2003).
