

# About Therapy

The difference between counselling and psychotherapy is mainly about time and depth of engagement. Counselling tends to be short term, weeks to months, psychotherapy months to years. Both are about understanding and change, but with psychotherapy the aim is to change the deeper seated structures of the self, and this takes longer. Counselling can turn into psychotherapy, or not, it all depends on what you want for yourself.

Generally, therapy is about being supported to know ourselves better, through detailed self-observation we can investigate what is driving us to be the way we are, and then understanding and integrating those insights. Change happens, not by attempting to change directly (which rarely works), but through new awareness and understanding of ourselves, and through taking increasing responsibility for ourselves. To me therapy is about being supported to deepen our holistic awareness of our actual here and now experience, facing all of our feelings, challenging our thoughts and obsolete self-stories, and attending to our bodies.

Our difficulties in living come about because we can't face what life is presenting us with, we turn away from the here and now and react based on our past patterns of avoiding anything connected to the trauma we have buried inside. Trauma usually comes from the lack of love or the surfeit of judgement, criticism or abuse, often from both, and in its widest sense, it affects most people. It forces the self to desensitize itself in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the hurt, fear or distress that was unbearable.

In order to keep it buried, we unconsciously split the connections between our head, heart and body. But this "adjustment" becomes a deep habit which limits our relationship to our lives, limits our ability to get our needs met, our ability to live in the here and now, our ability to grow and develop, and our creativity. It leads to conflicted and confused ways of being, because the parts of ourselves cannot communicate properly with each other, and we don't know ourselves. We don't know what we feel, we can't access the wisdom of our body, or we give up thinking, or some combination of all three. We are left stuck with all sorts of compulsive compensatory motivations and reactions. This splitting of the self often cause us to identify with only one part of ourselves. Either our thinking becomes over dominant, or our feelings become hyper sensitive, or our bodies take all our attention.

Avoiding the hurt, distress, pain, fear, grief that we keep locked away is what causes us to become insecure and defensive in all sorts of ways, making us fearful of touching the feelings we buried and repressed. Whenever feelings get stuck in the shadows they always stagnate, turn sour and negative. Feelings need to flow. This stuckness causes us to have a victim part of ourselves that feels bad, of no value, inadequate, not good enough etc. These are woven into our negative self-stories which re-activate each time we are triggered, resulting in over re-active feelings and self-destructiveness, in anxiety, disassociation and depression. Despite our best defensive efforts, life is always pressing the buttons of our trauma and causing us to react in regressive and shameful ways.

To heal, we need the presence and wisdom that can only flow from re-integrating our self, which is what psychotherapy is designed to help with. It is the process of healing and changing the adapted and stuck structures of ourselves. It is no wonder that it takes time, and that its emphasis is different from counselling and especially "life coaching", which are more aimed at "symptom relief" or superficial change.

One first step in this conscious reintegrate of ourselves, of re-connecting our head, heart and body, is about attending to, listening and sensing the energy of our bodies. This helps to reverse the

agitation of our nervous system caused by the flight/fight/freeze stress responses that trauma trapped inside us. Bringing our attention back to our bodies, grounds us in the here and now so that at least some of our nervous energy can be let go of, or “earthed” as it were. Quietening down this stress can give us with space for self-enquiry. Developing a habit of returning to our bodies, giving them attention, is, to my understanding, essential for our healing and development.

This supports us to face and see the details and depths of our here and now feelings. Either to become of what we are feeling or to see past the “loud” top layers, to those underlying feelings. This is all about trying to see what is driving us to be the way we are. For instance, behind anger there is often hurt. Behind withdrawal or deflection, or acting into some “extrovert” role, there is often shame. Behind anxiety there is self-judgement or grief or distress or fear, and behind depression there is defeatedness, and so on. We need to acknowledge, hear and see our feelings at as deep a layer as possible so as to access the vitally important “compressed” information they contain. It is through this looking, facing and questioning of our feelings that we can start to really understand and know ourselves.

We also need to consciously develop our thinking, taking the time to think through, to question and take responsibility for understanding ourselves and our relationship to our lives and world. Understanding how trauma formed us, helps enormously in forgiving ourselves for being the “dysfunctional creatures” we are. This is often about seeing how we are adults with deeply childish parts. Understanding how it is trauma that creates all the compulsive negative and destructive parts of ourselves helps us to understanding that people are fundamentally good. It helps us to stop blaming ourselves and others, and to take more responsibility for being the way we are.

We need the support of the alive here and now awareness of our bodies, as well as understanding ourselves, in order to face and meet the hurt, distress, fear, pain, of those traumatized parts of ourselves that remain in the shadows of ourselves, in whatever degree of unconsciousness they are being held. We dumped our trauma into our unconscious so that we could survive. If we are to heal we need to bring our trauma back into consciousness. This inevitably means re-experiencing the emotional turbulence, the difficult thinking, and those unpleasant sensations that we buried, but this time with the support of a more conscious and resourced adult part of us. This, together with the support of a therapist, helps us to now hold and contain the almost unbearable wounds we have for so long been defensively resisting. This is difficult work, it needs to be done with support and much self-care and self-compassion, as well as a ruthless honesty.

Our unconscious has enormous innate wisdom and that wisdom is always trying to find a way to heal us, our inner conflicts exists because of this. So, undoing the knots we tied ourselves up in, releases this wisdom and we can start participating consciously in our evolving development, towards living ever more authentically and satisfyingly in the here and now.

With our head, heart and body communicating better we have greater presence and the ability to observe ourselves, this enables more awareness and insight and understanding. As part of this we can also re-find our creativity. The totally extraordinary thing about human beings is that we are designed for growth and development, it is embedded in the depth of everyone’s unconscious, in every fibre of the self’s structure. Which is why whenever we are stuck, for whatever reason (usually trauma induced) a deep conflict arises within us, the force of development comes up against a dam and if we cannot find a way of removing the dam we end up in all sorts of trouble. It can take decades for this process to come to a head, but for the lucky amongst us, this intolerable conflict leads to the search for a way out.

When we arrive on this path of self-discovery the deep innate forces of growth and development are always there to support us, so that, as Rumi put it, all we have to do is “remove the obstacles within us”. We cannot “do” growing, it just flows when “what’s in the way” is healed. The further extraordinary aspect of this innate creativity is that this deep wisdom of the self (and of life itself) is always presenting us with the most relevant and suitable “obstacle” for us to deal with at any particular time. We may not want to, we may well rail against having to deal with it, but our task and path is simply to attend to what is right front of our noses, just now. The rest miraculously takes care of itself. It really is the case that each and every “obstacle” or problem we have is the doorway to our further growth and freedom. We can trust life at this deep level!

Our therapy journey is through symptom relief, to self-understanding, to self-responsibility, to realising that “What’s in the way, is the way” (lovely book by Mary O’Malley). This is about consciously using every difficulty we face to grow and heal rather than being caught defensively avoiding them. This process of slowly healing through ever greater self-awareness, enables us to find compassion for ourselves and others, to love ourselves. It is gradually frees us from fear.

The process of becoming consciously aware of our experience is a miraculous one. It is one of “making an object out of what we are subject to “ (Robert Kegan). It is about developing our observer “I”, that part of ourselves that is separate and aware of ourselves, un-identified with our mechanical compulsive compensatory self. We then become a participant in the unfolding developmental process that is ourselves. As awareness increases and we integrate our self, our ability to choose the freedom to “Be” that we so deeply desire, slowly increases. It is self-knowledge and the truth that set us free, but it takes time for the structure of our self to loosen, for our behaviour with its ego driven compulsive and compensatory motivations to change and move towards the non-egoic, fundamental, transpersonal unconditional Love, Consciousness and Energy that exists deep within us all. This spiritual or transpersonal aspect of ourselves is always there, waiting patiently, wanting to be met and realised.

Especially over the last twenty years or it has become increasingly clear that our developmental needs to combine the psychological and spiritual dimensions of ourselves into this clarifying “psycho-spiritual” approach. Ken Wilber, A H Almaas, Jack Cornfield, John Welwood, Peter Levine and Gabor Mate and many others have been establishing this path. We need to first heal ourselves psychologically, what Wilber has called “growing up”, before we can fully take on the task of working towards the more profound spiritual freedom of “waking up”.

Throughout this website I have tried to share my understanding and enthusiasm for this psycho-spiritual form of therapy. It has a clear understanding of the processes of change and development through deepening our self-awareness and taking responsibility for ourselves. Whilst therapy supports us to heal and grow, in the end it is only each of us that can know our truth and heal ourselves. Choice is an essential part of this process. Therapy needs to be both support and challenge to really help us on this journey towards our authenticity and freedom, towards realising our extraordinary potential as human beings.

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