

Caring for Chaotic People

Background

The aim of psychotherapy is, broadly speaking, to improve the client's life by helping them to change their behaviour and overcome problems through talking. There are many forms of psychotherapy, but they generally share a few features in common.

- The therapist and the client usually meet for multiple sessions, often on a weekly basis.
- They will agree on a goal or desired outcome.
- They will continue the conversation from week to week, aiming to build on what has been discussed previously.
- The client will often be expected to do something differently in the coming week, or to consider some part of the conversation, and to feed back their experience or the results of their reflections in the next session.
- Therapy often involves uncovering problems the client was unaware of, which can in the short term make the client feel less happy and more vulnerable.

With a few exceptions, access to formal therapy is mainly restricted to people who are reasonably well-off, as they are the people who can afford the cost of the therapy – in both time and money. Very little psychotherapy is available on the NHS, and voluntary groups who seek to make it available and accessible to the wider public normally find themselves with long waiting lists.

In this context, it is probably inevitable that psychotherapeutic practice will tend to develop along the lines of helping the people who make use of the services provided – which is a good thing for the people concerned.

However, there is a significant number of people who suffer from serious mental health problems alongside other issues such as addiction to alcohol and drugs, family breakdown, homelessness, debt and unemployment. Their lifestyle can be described as 'chaotic'. Traditional psychotherapy is not designed to help these people.

- They struggle to keep appointments, forgetting when they are supposed to meet or what day it is, or finding that something more urgent demands their attention.
- The issue they are most concerned about will change from week to week: this week's crisis will make last week's problem seem unimportant.
- They are unable to remember what was said the previous week, or mis-remember significant aspects.
- Commitments to act in a certain way or spend time thinking about something are rarely followed through.
- They often feel 'on the edge' and unable to cope with life as it is, so they are generally very resistant to anything which will make them feel worse or make life harder, even in the short term.

One approach is to say that these people are not suitable for psychotherapy: they are told to go away, get cleaned up and come back when their life is a bit more stable. Very often, this seems to be the only viable option.

But many people who work in hostels and homeless centres report that thoughtful, compassionate and appropriate conversations can significantly help their clients. This may not be a recognised form of therapy approved by BACP, but even so, it is clearly therapeutic.

It might be argued that such conversations are only of limited benefit to the client, but the same thing can be said of much traditional therapy; and when a person is so fragile, even a little help can at times be life-changing.

The best form of therapy is surely the form which provides genuine benefit to the client. If it is possible, through talking, to help people who are in the middle of a chaotic lifestyle, then their other problems can be more effectively addressed. This not only benefits them greatly, but also reduces the cost to the state of helping them and clearing up the problems they cause. It is both an ethical and an economically wise strategy.

A Therapeutic Strategy

This is simply an attempt to list some of the strategies which have been reported as helpful when seeking to help people with a chaotic lifestyle.

People need to feel heard and valued. Giving them your time, really listening to what they say and trying to understand it – this is always important, and it is especially important when they feel excluded and forgotten.

Issues of power and authority are often both important and problematic. You may be a therapist, but your relationship with the client needs to be human-to-human, not an expert showing the way or a healer fixing a broken person. The less power you have, the easier it is for people to be honest.

People need perspective: they need to know how other people see the things that matter to them. Perhaps your views and opinions should not matter very much to them, and in an ideal world, they would not. If you have taken the time to listen and show you care, then they often want to know what you think: it is an invitation to act in the normal way one person relates to another, not a request to be told what to do.

Personal boundaries don't follow middle-class norms. This doesn't mean you forget about setting and managing boundaries, but they must be appropriate for the situation. The context in which you are working should provide you with guidance about setting appropriate boundaries, and beyond that you need to be clear that your boundaries are your choice – they are not simply a matter of you following the rules someone else has set.

Once you have listened, you can challenge their assumptions and question their motives, you can tell them when you are not sure if what they have said is true, or the whole truth. Sometimes people lie, just to see if you can spot it, and if you have the honesty and courage to say what you think. This may appear impolite, but if you seem to believe any old rubbish they tell you, you are unlikely to be of much help.

Change is always difficult: the familiar becomes comfortable, even when it is unpleasant; the unknown is always threatening, even if it is desirable. Therapy is about helping the client make good changes in their life, but sometimes this aim has to be set aside in order to help the client simply ‘hold it together’.

Affirmation is vital: specific, limited but honest affirmation. The fact that you have survived what life has thrown at you may well be impressive. Recognition of what you have achieved says that other achievements are possible; any success, even partial, means you can succeed, which helps you believe in and work towards other successes. Finding the good and building upon it may be harder, but more important, than finding the things that are wrong and fixing them.

Therapists tend to like their clients to gain insight, to ‘work things out for themselves’. This is understandable: people are more likely to act on something when they have worked it out. But a balance often needs to be struck between the benefit of personal insight later and the benefit of understanding an important truth sooner. Insight doesn’t always come quickly enough; you can’t, in good conscience, always wait.

Some Common Issues

Personal responsibility is a vital, but slippery area. It is common for dysfunctional people to seesaw between seeing nothing as their responsibility (‘you made me angry’) and seeing everything as their responsibility (‘if I hadn’t shouted’). It is surprisingly difficult for many people to get the idea that they are responsible for their own actions, even if they have been influenced by others, and other people are responsible for their actions, even when my behaviour has impacted them.

Linked with this is the question of blame – again, often handled in an all-or-nothing manner: if someone else is to blame, then it’s not my fault; if I am to blame, then it is all my fault. When something bad happens, it is very tempting to pin the blame on someone else, so that I will feel and others will see that I’m not responsible. And if someone else is to blame for the mess I’m in, then it is their responsibility to fix it. A healthy perspective says: perhaps I am not responsible for this mess, perhaps someone else really should fix it – but this does not change the reality that I am responsible for what I choose to do from now on.

Time is another tricky area. People can get so bound up with past injustices and failures, they are unable to function well in the present, unable to choose and plan for and work for a future they want. Or sometimes they are so bound up with the future they want that they are unwilling to consider the challenges they face today as a result of the events of the past.

Very often, the challenges come down to an understanding of cause and effect: understanding that my actions in the past affect how people see me today and shape the options I can choose for tomorrow. If I have repeatedly lied to them in the past, I can’t really expect them to trust me today, but it is often easier to believe their refusal to help is a result of malice on their part than to see it as a result of my own behaviour. Perhaps I have changed, turned over a new leaf, but that does not prevent my past actions from affecting me and those around me.

We often need to return to basic life lessons such as these over and over again, identifying the principles, seeing how they work for us and the people around us. The challenges faced by dysfunctional people are the challenges we all face, writ large.

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