

Flicking through *Therapy Today*, you can't miss the pages of adverts offering counselling training in all its guises: introductory courses, diplomas in counselling and postgraduate qualifications. In a recent issue I counted 17 pages of adverts promising a future career in counselling. In the same issue, there were just three vacancies advertised for paid counselling posts.

In a tough economic climate, with ongoing cuts in counselling services in the independent and voluntary sectors alike, and with the Office for National Statistics reporting 2.67 million people out of work,¹ what are the job prospects for counselling trainees? What motivates people to sign up for vocational courses that cannot guarantee a vocation at the end, or any realistic chance of an income, and that demand a huge personal investment, financially, practically and emotionally?

As a workplace counsellor, I know the conscious and unconscious processes that draw us into any career often emerge in the counselling room. Family dynamics, birth order, loss and history can all play their part. Using my local networks and LinkedIn, I talked to trainees, the newly trained and experienced practitioners about their career paths, and asked the question: 'Why did you become a counsellor?' In this article I reflect on my own path into counselling training and their responses.

This was a very small-scale piece of research with a self-selecting group. My aim is simply to contribute to the current debate about counselling training and our growing profession. All contributions to the survey are anonymous and I am grateful to all whose responses informed my thinking.

Why counselling training?

Why do people embark on counselling training? Vicki Palmer, a therapist working in the field for over 30 years and former tutor on my diploma course at the University of Bristol, offers her views, based on her experience: 'I think the majority of trainees come onto courses hoping for a career in counselling. For some this is a strong motivation. There are also those who want to add counselling to their skill set to help them in their careers. Then there are those who have been helped by counselling themselves and want to give something back. Often there is little awareness prior to training of all that is involved and how few actual counselling jobs are available for that last group.'

A trainee, in her 50s, in the first year of a two-year diploma, put it more bluntly: 'These courses are taking people's money for a vocational course. But where is the vocation?'

I put this point about the scarcity of jobs to Lynne Kaye, Director of the Centre for Personal and Professional Development (CPPD) Counselling School. She told me: 'When I interview for the diploma, I really lay it on the line. I never say it's easy. I always say, "It's hard graft all the way." It's a misrepresentation for a training provider to say, 'It's easy' and, I think, very disingenuous. People are paying a lot of money for counselling training. But I lay it on the line, and I'm challenging, and I think people like a challenge.'

With a two-year diploma costing between £5,500 and £7,000, plus the hidden costs such as books, placement training, supervision, therapy and loss of income on top, counselling training is a not insignificant investment.

At most CPD/networking events I attend, there is usually a point when discussions shift to concerns about 'all these new courses offering counselling training' and 'all these new counsellors being trained'. So who are all these new trainees? And where are they coming from? Reflecting on 20 years in the profession, Lynne Kaye says the profile of the trainee counsellor has changed: 'We have trainees from social services, teaching, advertising, journalism, fashion, retail, secretarial, property development, music industry, just about every sector.'

Setting the scene

Val Potter writes in *Is Counselling Training for You?* that in the early 70s it was not easy to find a counselling course.² It couldn't be more different today. BACP collects data on counselling training courses across the UK. To qualify as practitioner training, the course must be a minimum of one year full-time or two years part-time, with a supervised placement as part of the training. In 2007–2008 there were 249 courses running. Since then, there has been only a slight trend upwards. Numbers peaked in 2010, with over 276 courses offered nationwide. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the academic year 2011–2012, there has been a drop to 258 courses.

Rebecca Grace, Quality & Standards Manager at BACP, says feedback suggests that recent government changes in the allocation of funding to higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) could be a significant factor in this reduction. HEIs and FECs no longer receive funding for students who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to or lower than a qualification

Who wants to be a counsellor?

Nicola Banning asked fellow counsellors and trainees what motivated their decision to train, and how hopeful they are of finding paid work today

Illustration by Laura Carlin

they already have. Counselling/psychotherapy is typically a second or third career choice, which means that potential students usually have other qualifications in other disciplines.

In addition, the high staffing–pupil ratio for the non-theoretical side of the course, such as skills practice and personal/professional development groups, means that cohort sizes are restricted and are smaller than those for other courses. Counselling courses come into the category of ‘low yield, high cost’ and, in this economic climate, they appear to be a casualty of the financial squeeze in higher/further education.

Having a calling

Many counsellors described a sense of vocation – having a ‘calling’. This seems to be no less the case for counsellors embarking on training today than it was for those who trained decades ago. One counsellor told me: ‘I had a very strong gut sense that that would be the right work for me. I decided that I would train as a counsellor “when I’m old enough”.’

Life-changing events, such as bereavement or trauma, may motivate some to seek greater self-awareness and understanding through counselling training. A counsellor explained how her journey into counselling training was prompted by the death of her husband, when she was 29 years old: ‘There was not only a massive void, but a deep questioning for me about life and coming to terms with the situation I found myself in. I realise now that I was trying to make sense of the rawness of my own life... Compassion and understanding, empathy through personal insight can be the catalyst of a therapist in the making and who I have become today.’

Experience of therapy

Many trainees and counsellors said their own, personal experience as a client was a motivating influence: ‘I trained as a counsellor because I’d had a positive experience years beforehand, which had been quite life changing... during which time I felt heard and taken seriously for the first time in my life.’

Another said: ‘I chose to train because I’d had such an amazing experience with personal counselling and had quite a “light bulb” moment which ignited my emotions and seemed to enhance life. I carried on with my job following my personal counselling but I couldn’t get it out of my mind. I wondered if I could give that amazing gift to someone else.’

With greater self-awareness and a shifting sense of self, clients can find themselves thinking about their counsellor and asking: ‘I wonder if I could do that?’ The therapeutic space is an environment where seeds are planted that may just be the beginnings of another counsellor.

Filling a skills gap

Many began training to supplement their skills to cope with the complex demands of their job. This response came from former teachers, social workers, paediatricians, human resources officers, nurses and journalists – all recognising that something was missing from their skills sets and believing that counselling training had something to offer. Val Potter says there is now ‘wider recognition that anyone working in a field of endeavour that involves good human relations can benefit from knowledge of counselling skills’.

One respondent told me: ‘I wanted to get better at the counselling side of

the psychology work that I do. A lot of psychologists get very bad counselling training and I include myself in that. I really saw a shortfall in my own practice.’

Another said: ‘I was a lecturer in education and many of my students were coming to me with personal problems. I realised that I did not have the skills for many of the issues they were bringing.’

A third explained: ‘I started with a Certificate in Counselling when I had a specific role in equality and diversity and I was supporting a lot of people coming to see me because they’d experienced bullying and harassment.’

‘I decided to train as a counsellor because of my experiences as an intensive care nurse and the many difficult discussions we had with patients and relatives in this setting.’

I embarked on counselling training during my career in the BBC, when I was repeatedly interviewing women about their experiences of domestic violence. Experienced though I was at conducting interviews, I was ill-prepared for the impact of cumulative encounters with severely traumatised women. Psychotherapist and journalist Mark Brayne has written extensively about the impact of trauma on journalists and the need for trauma awareness and education in the media/journalism.³

Counselling training made me more resourced and resilient and deepened my capacity to respond to the demands of my role. But it also led me (albeit over a number of years) out of one career and into another.

As a workplace counsellor, I know how much the counsellor’s role can (and does) offer organisations. Counselling has much to contribute to training and staff development in communication

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skills and emotional intelligence, trauma work, teamwork, mediation, coaching and educative work to promote wellbeing and resilience. Some organisations that are committed to staff development fund employees to take counselling diplomas, but many don't or can't afford to. What does this cost the organisation when staff retrain as counsellors and take their valuable skills out of the organisation? And what might these organisations be like if more of their staff had these skills and used them in the workplace?

Theodore Zeldin is a philosopher and writer with much to say about the workplace. In his book *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Our Lives*, Zeldin argues that the workplace is increasingly a place of talk. 'In the old days they used to have notices in factories saying "Talk less. Work more". But today try calling someone at the office, and they're always at a meeting.'⁴ So modern working life is all about talk. But what we're crying out for is transformative conversations.

Zeldin puts it like this: 'The kind of conversation I'm interested in is one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk.' Conversations of this nature are going on in many a counselling room and are often about our clients' working lives.

Zeldin believes that most of us are working in jobs that make use of only 20–25 per cent of our potential. He suggests we have become too specialist. Furthermore, 'an increasing proportion of those searching for a career feel they have talents which no single profession can nurture and develop'.

In my survey, one counsellor vividly described her experience of 'withering at

a soul level' in her civil service job before she decided to train as a counsellor: '... there was hardly any communication with people. It was dry and fleeting and there wasn't much meaning to the work. I would have to email people who were sitting next door to me and I wanted to be more involved with people.'

In interviews in the media, Zeldin has highlighted what interests him about the workplace. In a BBC programme broadcast to mark the new millennium, Zeldin commented: 'My work is very much inspired by what young people today are seeking and they are – particularly young women – [...] they are facing obstacles and some of them say, "Well, can I find a place in the system?" But some are saying, "That system isn't worth finding a place in". And it's this ambition to enter a world that's worth entering into that stimulates me.'⁵

That is certainly what drew me into counselling training. In personal therapy, one's core values and beliefs may emerge and we understand them more clearly (so often an aim in therapy). Conversely, however, this may produce tensions at work as we start to question our personal integrity or capacity for authenticity within the organisation. I'm indebted to the skills I learned in broadcasting, but counselling made me ask: 'What are you aspiring to in this place? Who inspires you here?'

The person who inspired me did not sit within the walls of the BBC. She was sitting opposite me in the counselling room. You may draw your own conclusions about this. But, for me, she modelled both respect and authenticity. Reflecting on this, I was not surprised to read Professor Cary Cooper's comment on workplace wellbeing: that 'the top

motivator for employees at work is respect – how valued and trusted by their organisation employees feel'.⁶ Given that value, trust and respect are core conditions and fundamental to the quality of the therapeutic relationship between client and counsellor, no wonder that the counselling process can have such transformative potential when it comes to our careers.

Just being there

It is well documented that vocational careers such as nursing, education and social care are increasingly burdened with paperwork, targets and bureaucracy, which can dehumanise what is essentially a human vocation.⁷ A social worker and manager, who used regularly to work 60 hours a week, told me that she trained to become a counsellor in order to have more control and autonomy over her working life.

Such stories are not news to Peter Piranty, a counsellor for more than 20 years who specialises in stress in the public sector – in education, the police, NHS and social services. To those who chose their profession because of a sense of purpose, empathy or compassion, the job can feel particularly futile when paperwork, targets and accountability take priority over the simple act of being with someone in need. 'It's hard to stand up to that kind of culture,' Piranty says. 'It chips away at the human job of "just being there" for someone. There is a lot of madness and crisis at work and a lot of people don't have much control over their professional or personal lives. They're burnt out at work, they don't see their children and their relationships are suffering. This leads to resentment that corrosively eats away at you.'

'I think there are people seeking refuge in the hope that counselling could offer something more soul-full, where they may have more control over their working life and their personal life'

This is when clients come for counselling, seeking some kind of perspective on their life and work but not hopeful that change is possible. Drawing on his experience, Piranty observes: 'I think there is a lot going on in the workplace right now that is disingenuous. There's a sense of betrayal and a sense of shame and guilt about how work is. There is an issue about people in the workplace being healthily at odds in terms of their personal integrity and what's being espoused by the hyperbole from the organisation. There's a sense of disconnect when individuals have to espouse something that they simply don't believe in. Managers will have to drive through change processes and may have guilt about this. But it's an employer's market and people have to pay the mortgage. I think a constant theme in my work from clients is, "I love the work but I hate the politics".'

Seeking greater autonomy and a way to use more of their humanity in their work, some people seek a path from one 'helping profession' to another. They may embark on counselling training. A former social worker himself, Peter Piranty experienced this transition and witnesses it also: 'I think there are people seeking refuge in the hope that counselling may provide a career that could offer something more soul-full, where they may have more control over their working life and their personal life and can escape their workplace. Clients I have worked with have gone on to do counselling courses and a high number of my clients come from the public sector. But how many of them have gone on to really make a living? I don't know.'

Life after training

I asked some current trainees and newly qualified counsellors to reflect on their career prospects as counsellors. A dominant theme emerged and its message wasn't optimistic.

A trainee in the first year of her diploma commented: 'I think some of my fellow trainees are in cloud cuckoo-land. They think they are going to get a nice counselling job in the NHS and they need a reality check. The chances of even half our group having any kind of career as a counsellor are very slim.'

'I am currently training and I don't think I was ever given clear direction on how hard it is to find a placement, let alone finding employment at the end of the course. I am now aware that, instead of this [counselling] becoming a new career, I suspect it will be something I do in addition to my current career. Part of the issue is the number of trainee counsellors. I do wonder if "train as a counsellor" is now a cash generator for some organisations. It is very sad and I do feel misled.'

'I am currently doing a course and the tutor is very evasive when students start talking about getting a job. The course has no supervised practice and yet some people think they will be "qualified" for getting a job at the end of the year. The advertising seems to indicate that you do this course and you'll get a job counselling. But the jobs are not there.'

When I did my diploma we were never told that becoming a counsellor would be easy, but nor were we told that it was impossible. I tried to contact the 16 trainees who completed their diploma with me in 2005. Eight of us are working as counsellors in some capacity, either

in private practice or counselling in an organisational context. I don't know what happened to the others.

Lynne Kaye at the CPPD acknowledges the lack of paid counselling jobs advertised out there, but says that many newly qualified counsellors end up finding paid work in their placements. That is what happened to me and I'm still there today.

Final thoughts

This article has only scratched the surface of this subject. For most trainees, counselling training is life-changing; a time of growth and self-development and learning that stays with us. One counsellor commented: 'I've never ever met anyone who's regretted their decision to train as a counsellor, because you learn so much.' But it seems that counselling training may, for many, also prove a very expensive form of personal/professional development.

Thinking more broadly about where we are in society, individually, organisationally, collectively and globally, Peter Piranty sets us a challenge: 'Counselling, in terms of the zeitgeist, is very much about people standing up for good practice in whatever situation they find themselves in.' At a time when so much that we value, individually and as a society, seems to be under threat, and when we need people who are able to stand up for good practice in so many arenas of life, counselling training could be educating us to do just that. ■

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Visit our website – www.therapytoday.net – to read Colin Feltham 'In conversation' with Nicola Banning.

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