Volume 10 Issue 02
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University & College Counselling

For counsellors and psychotherapists in further and higher education

Adventure therapy
connecting with
the great outdoors

Working with trauma
using imagery
in therapy

Ukraine
supporting our
international students

The hills are alive

With the sound
of outdoor therapy

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Editor
Rick Hughes
ucc.editorial@bacp.co.uk

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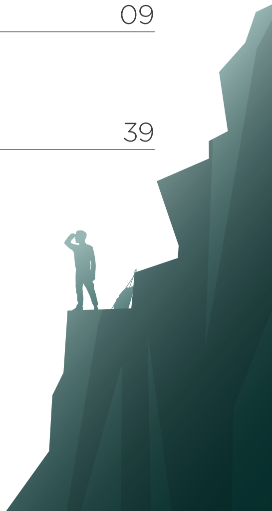

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Chair
Mark Fudge
markfudgecounselling@gmail.com

Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS) special interest group
Vicky Groves
Cardiff University
grovesvc@cardiff.ac.uk

Further Education special interest group
Mary Jones,
Newcastle-under-Lyme College
mary.jones@nscg.ac.uk

Staff Counselling group
Yvonne McPartland
Yvonne.mcpartland@admin.ac.uk

BACP links
Divisional enquiries
Email uc@bacp.co.uk

Front cover: library image, for illustration

From the Editor

Rick Hughes
ucc.editorial@bacp.co.uk

Reading the headline on the front cover of this journal, I'm sure now you'll be humming along to a familiar song from a popular Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. This track and, in fact, most of the others from the show, have been swirling around my head while editing this journal. That's the power of music for you.

But it's not just music that has the power to stimulate, motivate and invigorate. During COVID lockdowns, many of us sought sanctuary in the outdoors, getting exercise, fresh air and a bit of grounding, literally. It made us realise that when we were stuck indoors under pandemic-imposed restrictions, we missed something fundamental to our soul and to who we are.

> During COVID lockdowns, many of us sought sanctuary in the outdoors, getting exercise, fresh air and a bit of grounding, literally

I'm delighted to introduce **Heidi Shingler**, from the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), in Fort William. Heidi, a lecturer and researcher in outdoor and adventure therapy, and also a counsellor, maps out the evolutionary path of adventure therapy and provides some insightful considerations for therapists interested in embarking on this form of therapy.

I offer my appreciation also to **Ruth Whittle**, who shares with us her ongoing research into student learning. People come to college and university to be educated and, hopefully, pick up some qualifications along the way. But the act of learning doesn't come easily to everyone. The struggles involved may invariably trigger visits to student support and counselling services. It's helpful, from our side, to understand how learning impacts the overall student experience.

Grateful thanks also to **Jane Darougar**. Many of our international students studying in the UK have come from countries experiencing armed conflict. Jane reflects on the work at her university to support these students, including those from Ukraine and Russia.

Finally, a welcome back to **Susan Dale**, coincidentally also from UHI, but this time from its Inverness campus. Susan shares a therapeutic experience with a client who had been struggling with a past trauma. By tapping into the power of imagery, the client was able to articulate in a way that words could not.

This issue taps into the power of the outdoors, the power of imagery, the power of learning, and the power of the therapeutic community. The meaningful work we do collectively unleashes a lot of power. ■

News & resources

A summary of current issues and opportunities in our sector

Notes from the Chair

As the academic year draws to a close, I'm sure many staff and students will feel a sense of relief: both working and studying in our institutions bring pressure points, which arrive around assessment periods and the transitional move to the next chapter of our students' lives and careers.

This last academic year has presented the sector with many challenges – the war in Ukraine, an increase in the cost of fuel and the ever-present adaptation to COVID. All these impact on students and staff. Within higher education, the Augar Review into funding rumbles on, with the implications for funding presenting yet more uncertainty for support services, staff and students.[1] Amid this are some very unhappy students, seeking support from services that seem to be cut, restructured and 'modernised' on a weekly basis… usually at the behest of an ambitious manager whose track record is often three or four years at an institution before moving on to the next challenge… leaving, of course, the chaos for someone else to 'reconfigure'. The rush to be 'corporate' across the sector is lamentable – not least as it's a bastardisation of a corporate model which pays lip service to staff wellbeing, evidence base and a sense of involvement.

Within this, the true casualties are our students. Staff might lose jobs and feel the need to leave institutions, but often students are misled by all-singing-and-dancing packages and models – all of which of course are cheap and often pass on the responsibility to other agencies. A corporate institution has little space and tolerance for difficult emotions and behaviour – the shoulder pads and sharp suits commissioning cranes and plate-glass buildings need an institution which is tidy and presents an image of order. Students need to be able to feel a sense of containment, acceptance and belonging in order to learn about their own emotional strength, develop resilience and accept that the world, and every one of us, is imperfect. Counselling and psychotherapy can contribute immensely to this in finding understanding, self-compassion and a positive humility, which foster creativity and inquisitiveness.

My career in higher education has now ended and I'm grateful for 20 years of being a part of a wonderful community of people. I have many wonderful memories of conferences, meetings and of course the countless students I've had the pleasure of meeting. There is something cyclical about the current changes in the sector. In the early 1980s, amidst changes to HE, enforced by Margaret Thatcher, many counselling services saw staff redundancies; most of these were incrementally reversed. A hope would be that wisdom and intelligence will prevail in the coming years and our work will continue to help the most disadvantaged and vulnerable within our communities.

Mark Fudge
Chair of BACP UC
markfudgecounselling@gmail.com

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NEWS

Living Black at University

Unite Students, claimed to be the UK's largest owner, manager and developer of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA), has released a new report into Black students' experience in UK student accommodation: *Living Black at University*.

While targeted at accommodation providers, it sheds light on the student experience of living in student accommodation.

www.unitegroup.com/living-black-at-university

Highlighting refugees' resilience can boost their confidence and engagement at university

Characterising refugees by perseverance and the ability to cope with adversity may help to increase course engagement, which would lead to greater university and career success.

digest.bps.org.uk/2022/01/24/highlighting-refugees-resilience-can-boost-their-confidence-and-engagement-at-university

Social media ain't all bad

Research from University of Aberdeen and University of Wollongong, Australia suggests that limited screen time (up to three hours per day) might benefit young people by enabling them to develop more meaningful and positive peer relationships. But over four hours usage per day could damage self-esteem and emotional health, and increase hyperactivity, inattention and conduct issues.

www.abdn.ac.uk/news/15778

Notes from Colleges

The world still turns, despite all manner of horrifying events and revelations. Where does that leave us as counsellors? Do we become overwhelmed and drown or bob along like corks among the flotsam? Is it really possible to avoid the news bulletins? Is it even ethically/morally right to do so? How do we stay grounded, both for ourselves and our clients? Now, more than ever, we need to be very conscious of our own process and self-care.

I'm also very aware that many of us crave face-to-face meetings again, despite the apparently overwhelming tsunami of COVID cases. Is this what living with it means? Who or what should we believe?

As we tumble headlong into the back end of the academic year, we're supporting young people taking exams for the first time. Previously, they would already have had several opportunities to experience that unique feeling. We've certainly tried to prepare ours with mocks and various assessments. Many of my clients are also managing to take driving tests. So far, so normal, and yet it isn't. Maybe it's time to abandon 'normal' as something that never was and never will be. Let's be fully present about this: right here, right now, is what we have and what is. Bobbing corks or saturated bodies? Sink or swim?

A colleague had the best Secret Santa, a jar full of 52 quotes, one for each week of the year. Here is this week's, attributed to Stephenie Meyer: 'I like the night. Without the dark, we'd never see the stars'.

Totally makes my Monday.

Mary Jones
College counsellor,
Newcastle-under-Lyme College
mary.jones@nscg.ac.uk

BACP UC CALLOUT:

Your feedback

We welcome readers' letters and comments. If you've read something in *University & College Counselling* that you would like to comment on, please do get in touch:

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NEWS

Graduate turnover rates peak

Graduate turnover has risen to the highest level since 2011 when the data were first collated. High inflation and stagnating salaries may add further pressure. With employment vacancies hitting a 20-year high, 54 per cent of employees are considering leaving their current role. Forty-three per cent would leave for a pay hike of five per cent or less while 22 per cent would move elsewhere for the same pay.

www.hrreview.co.uk/hr-news/graduate-turnover-rates-peak/141359

WORLD

In solidarity with Ukraine

BACP stands in solidarity with the people of Ukraine as they face the devastating human tragedy of a catastrophic war. The aggression unleashed on them, their loved ones and their country in the past few weeks has been shocking. Individuals, families and communities are dealing with indescribable losses, grief and uncertainty.

The humanitarian crisis and the long-term psychological impact of this war will likely continue for many years.

We know this war is also extremely concerning for people in the UK, raising feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, sadness, anger and a sense of injustice and helplessness. For some, it may stir up past traumatic memories; and for others, it may exacerbate psychological issues they've faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As therapists, you may be dealing with your own emotional response as well as supporting your clients through theirs. We've brought together a series of self-care resources for members, available here:

www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/self-care-resources

Notes from staff counselling

COVID numbers generally are rising; they are rising particularly quickly in our area, and prevalence locally is high. Of course, this is largely due to the cessation of all restrictions, though we continue to operate in the workplace with as much caution as possible. Nevertheless, as a team, we seem to be taking it in turns to succumb to the virus, and we encourage staff to recover fully before returning to work. I was pleased to hear on the news this morning that the rate of increase in cases is slowing. Who would have thought two years ago that we would still be talking about COVID? Not only is it still here, but the suffering and loss left in its wake are enormous and still unfolding.

In contrast, some positive news is that several of our counsellors have opted to resume face-to-face work and, along with their clients, love it. We are now delivering therapy using a variety of media, tailored to both client and therapist needs and preferences; counsellors are working in a truly blended way, delivering therapy from home and the workplace and in so doing achieving an improved work/life balance. We are de facto living with the virus in the same way as we coexist with any other circulating infection. We hope that the more intense hygiene regimes of COVID serve us well.

Reflecting on the last few years, where we have faced issues affecting large numbers of our clients, our general response has been to develop tailored support; two examples are Brexit and, of course, COVID. Without time to pause for breath, we were all shocked and heartbroken by the outbreak and subsequent horror of the war in Ukraine. Aside from the general effect on us all – it is so upsetting to witness the graphic news reports and deal with the accompanying feelings of helplessness – we have many staff impacted directly. Our team, as always, have risen to the challenge of responding quickly to those in distress. With a consequently rapidly lengthening waiting list, we have also reinstated our groupwork offering, which we designed to help clients manage the consequent longer wait times.

We are also poised for the fallout from the rapidly rising cost of living that is hitting our most basic of human needs – to stay sheltered, warm and fed. This is already adding to the suffering of many people, often compounding other difficulties, and it seems likely to become a feature of our client work in the coming weeks and months. These are indeed challenging times.

Staff counsellors recently had a very belated Christmas lunch. It was a real reminder of the absolute need for a sense of team, the pleasure of some downtime together and the need for self-care!

Yvonne McPartland
Deputy Head of the University Staff Counselling Centre, University of Cambridge
yvonne.mcpartland@admin.ac.uk

Notes from the Chair of research SIG

Writing this piece while COVID infections continue to impact daily life and study, in addition to the disturbing events in the Ukraine, motivated me to lift the mood with new research that highlights the benefits and value of our counselling work. Two new research articles focusing on student mental health and counselling in embedded services, replicate previous research demonstrating the effectiveness of embedded support in improving students' academic stress,[1] highlighting the value of continued empirical research in this area. Scruggs et al (in preparation)[2] report on the results of counselling service outcome data, which included CORE-Outcome Measures and the Counselling Impact on Academic Outcomes (CIAO) questionnaire results, developed by Wallace on behalf of our division, then known as AUCC.[3]

The aim originally was to determine how much counselling improved students' academic outcomes, as well as give a voice to the students' experience, with many services utilising the survey as part of an ongoing evaluation process. Scruggs et al sought to determine the perceived impact of counselling on academic outcomes, and found it was again similarly perceived to significantly reduce students' problems, so they were more able to achieve their academic outcomes. This research shows the necessity of collective action for developing an effective minimum dataset to demonstrate the role of embedded services in supporting student wellbeing necessary for educational achievement and satisfaction.[2]

O'Donnell et al[4] go on to explore the views of counsellors working in the college and university sector with regards to utilising routine practice data and what they viewed as important to collect towards developing a minimum dataset to inform the sector. Content analysis of the 10 focus groups, from 41 participants across 26 university and colleges, identified the following categories for inclusion in a minimum dataset: student characteristics, demographics, clinical assessment and service evaluation. Thematic analysis showed counsellors voiced the need for a culture for using and improving data collection and sharing, to effectively respond to evolving sector needs. In short, this research highlights the importance of developing a standard minimum dataset for the sector, to evidence our work, ensure continued funding and share best practice.

All the reported research comes from the SCORE consortium, where embedded counselling services are sharing their data collected during routine clinical practice and working with academics to improve knowledge on student mental health and counselling service provision. By doing so, counselling services become stakeholders in empirical research and contribute again to the wellbeing of students and staff in their educational communities, a priority of the mental health charter and the step change strategy.

If you are interested in participating, see **www.scoreconsortium.group.shef.ac.uk**

Dr Afra Turner
Chair of Universities & Colleges Research SIG, Chair of the SCORE consortium and project. CBT and psychodynamic psychotherapist and supervisor. BABCP and MBACP accredited, Kings College London
afra.turner@kcl.ac.uk

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BACP UPDATES

CPD Hub

Don't miss out on over 300 hours of online resources, which you can use towards your CPD requirement. For just £25 per year, you can access content from the CPD hub and enjoy new content that's added monthly, including video recordings and audio files.

Some of the new content includes:

Working online and in person
Are we paying sufficient attention to the psychological impact on clients and therapists of moving between online and offline spaces? **Kate Dunn** and **John Wilson** ask therapists a question we need to ask ourselves.

Why pronouns matter
Have therapists really embraced gender diversity? **Luan Baines-Ball** shares their thoughts about this question.

Refuge and risk: how vulnerable young people experience life online
Adrienne Katz explores the growing disparity between the digital lives of already vulnerable teenagers and their peers.

A systems approach and the role of other stakeholders in returning to work and mental health in workplaces
Dr Jo Yarker explores the role counsellors and related practitioners can play in supporting individuals to return to work safely and confidently.

Managing digital burnout
Nicola Neath helps you to make sense of these factors and how it might affect your work with clients.

Neurodiversity: the storm within
Tasha Walsh explores the emotional storm that neurodiverse children and young people can experience, and how they manage and contain it.

Social class and counselling
Roxy Birdsall addresses the potential reasons why social class is a neglected topic, why it is important to consider social class and ways to engage with social class for personal and professional development.

Supervision in an educational context and school staff wellbeing
Rhian Miller explores the need for supervision for school staff and goes on to discuss the supervision service which currently is run as a pilot in Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.

Understanding the cultural perspective in black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) clients within the therapeutic setting
Uzma Durani shares her research findings on how therapists work within the therapeutic setting with multicultural clients.

NEWS FROM BACP

Research Digest

The latest issue of BACP's *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research* journal includes a special section on international counselling, which is guest edited by Dione Misfud and Catherine Smith. It is available here: **www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/counselling-and-psychotherapy-research-journal**

In particular, the following might be of specific interest:
[Open access] ***Student counsellors' experiences of mindfulness as a component of their person-centred counselling training: an interpretative phenomenological analysis***, by Elizabeth Holt. Mindfulness is increasingly integrated into counselling and psychotherapy practices, as well as being introduced to students in academic institutes, with the aim of supporting them to balance the responsibilities of academic study, placements and other commitments alongside university life. Despite mindfulness routinely finding its way into counselling settings and being incorporated into counsellor training, there has yet to be any research conducted to explore the experience of student counsellors who have received mindfulness as a part of their undergraduate person-centred training. This study explored the reflections of counsellors who had attended a mindfulness module during the first year of a counselling degree.
https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12524

Updated Good Practice in Action resources

Our GPiA resources are based on current research and evidence and are updated regularly. Our newest resource **GPiA 124 *Social media, digital technology and the counselling professions*** is available now.

We've also recently updated the following resources:
GPiA 038 *About the Ethical Framework for the counselling professions*
GPiA 040 *Social media, digital technology and the counselling professions*
GPiA 047 *Working online*
GPiA 048 *Mental health literature within the counselling professions*
You can view all the resources by visiting our website:
www.bacp.co.uk/gpia

NEWS

New mental health resources for FE Colleges

The Anna Freud Centre has recently released free mental health resources developed specifically for staff working in further education (FE) colleges, to support their students.

The resources, from the Centre's Mentally Healthy Schools team, were developed with clinicians, and in collaboration with college staff and experts, including the Association of Colleges. The five free mental health resources are designed for tutors and lecturers to support students on topics including anxiety, exam stress, unhealthy relationships, eating disorders and self-harm.

In the press release launching this resource, Richard Caulfield, National Lead for Mental Health at the Association of Colleges, says: 'Colleges across the country are reporting higher and higher numbers of mental health referrals and seeing increased complexity in the needs of their learners. Whilst there has been a deluge of excellent resources for schools, we often find they are not relevant to the post-16 sector. At the Association of Colleges, we are delighted to be working with the Anna Freud Centre as they develop resources that are relevant to the college setting and help colleges provide the best possible support for their students at a time of greatest need.'

www.annafreud.org/insights/news/2022/03/new-mental-health-resources-for-fe-colleges

Notes from HUCS

HUCS met as a group, online, on 15 March 2022. It was great to see so many familiar faces and some new ones too. Being a busy time of the year and with so many people and services affected by the recent surge in COVID cases, it wasn't clear if many would be available to join. In the end, over 30 people attended. This helped create a lively atmosphere and generated lots of ideas about the potential future and further evolution of HUCS.

We split into three groups. The first explored the future potential focus for HUCS and what the future challenges might be. The second discussed membership of the community, as many senior heads of universities have left their posts recently. It's not clear why there has been a recent exodus, but I wonder if this is due to a mix of people reaching a natural retirement age and also the institutional and corporate pressures impacting their roles. This group concluded it could be useful to extend invitations to professional groups beyond, but connected with, HUCS, perhaps at an annual event.

The third group explored the recent experience of working in blended or hybrid teams, and they shared some of the challenges and benefits for their services, the impact on students and on their teams. We are writing up the feedback from this event and will share this in due course.

Our next meeting has been scheduled for 10 June 2022 and we agreed that this would remain a virtual online event. We will be canvassing views from HUCS to determine themes and topics for this gathering.

Vicky Groves
Student Counselling Manager, Cardiff University, Chair of Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS)
grovesvc@cardiff.ac.uk

Protecting your mental health – a practical guide for postgraduate research students in STEM

Recently, a new resource has been published by Jonathan's Voice and the Charlie Waller Trust. The guidance, specifically for postgraduate research students in STEM subjects, focuses on ways to protect their mental health and wellbeing. It covers:

- Taking preventative measures to look after yourself
- Keeping motivated and managing criticism and feedback
- Combatting unhelpful behaviours or thinking patterns
- What to do when self-care is not enough
- Talking about your mental health
- Managing challenges.

The Guide is free to download from:
charliewaller.org/resources/protecting-your-mental-health-a-practical-guide-for-postgraduate-research-students-in-stem

Exploring the therapeutic **adventure**

The pandemic lockdowns and restrictions have created a yearning for outside spaces and the great outdoors. Heidi Shingler explores the practical and philosophical considerations for outdoor and adventure therapies

In this article, I invite readers to consider the potential of outdoor therapies and to think about what it would mean to step outside with a client, engage with the natural environment, and to embrace an element of adventure within the therapeutic process. I'm not suggesting that every counsellor should pack up a rucksack and head out for the hills with their clients. As with all therapeutic approaches, careful consideration should be given to exploring the questions: 'Why this approach?', 'Why with this client?' and 'Why now?'. This article will offer insight into the potential benefits and applications of outdoor approaches that draw upon the restorative power of forests, beaches, parks and other landscapes. However, I also hope to dispel some of the idealistic notions that can be attributed to working outdoors with a client and to consider the practicalities that impact upon the therapeutic relationship, to help practitioners make informed and ethical decisions about outdoor approaches.

Unbinding binary assumptions

Before diving into the field of outdoor therapies, let's first pause to acknowledge some of the binary assumptions that are sometimes surmised from the names attributed to this practice. The provision of four walls is thought to afford safety, containment, confidentiality and professionalism; all ways in which the indoor environment has become synonymous with the therapeutic frame.[1] Outdoor therapy can be posed in opposition to indoor therapy, alluding to a practice which may be thought of by some as 'other', 'alternative' or possibly even 'radical'. Cooley et al's recent study captured organisational perspectives on outdoor talking therapy, noting that practitioners often have fixed preferences for the therapy environment and rarely explore the possible benefits of alternative environments or consider involving clients in the decision-making process.[2]

However, there is a well-established and ever-growing body of evidence informing us of the physical and psychological risks to our increasingly indoor and sedentary lifestyles, factors which have been compounded by the COVID pandemic.

It may be time to review what environments are best suited to our clients' wellbeing and to their perception of a therapeutic space, having spent the best part of two years under lockdown. Consequently, Cooley et al encourage practitioners to adopt a position of 'environmental safe uncertainty'; to be curious, open-minded and collaborative in exploring therapeutic environments.[2] In fact, Cooley et al suggest that being dynamic and open-minded can increase access and engagement with therapy for some populations.[2] The increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties in higher education students, and the possible aggravation of poor mental health throughout the pandemic require critical attention to understand the demographic needs and to consider innovative interventions and frameworks. The need to improve the mental health of students and encourage better states of wellbeing through adaptable and emerging interventions has been highlighted by Universities UK.[3] In 2011, Kyriakopoulos piloted an Adventure Therapy Project with higher education (HE) students, who self-reported enhanced intrapersonal relationships and improved interpersonal relationships, and identified the outdoor environment as useful for providing an experiential, secure place for achieving inner healing.[4]

It is therefore important during this shifting moment in society to reassess binary or taken-for-granted notions of the therapeutic environment and approaches that may work for clients and to embrace a dynamic approach towards working environments. However, in this article I argue that there is more to outdoor therapy than a change in the backdrop and that it is important for practitioners to engage with the ongoing philosophical and theoretical themes within the literature in order to achieve an integrated approach to outdoor therapy.

Understanding a field with many names

There are multiple names which have been coined for therapeutic approaches that utilise the outdoors, the natural environment and adventure, such as: 'nature-based therapy', 'wilderness therapy', 'eco therapy' or 'walk and talk' therapy (to name a few). This rich, diverse and idiosyncratic field of practice draws upon interdisciplinary sources from experiential education, psychotherapy and outdoor education. Practitioners may be encouraged to consider being part of a dynamic multi-modal practice while also questioning where their philosophical stance fits into the wider field of practice. Two distinctions that can be useful to note are the use of the natural environment and the use of adventure:

The natural environment: within this spectrum of approaches, practitioners may emphasise the restorative benefits of being outside or of physical exercise as a central therapeutic ingredient, or they may work to use nature-based therapeutic tasks, drawing on the rich metaphors of life processes observed in the natural environment.

Adventure: under this term, practitioners emphasise meaningful engagement with activities, novel environments and an element of journeying as the central therapeutic ingredient. Reflection upon the individual or group engagement in activities can provide experiential fodder for understanding behaviour, group dynamics and process.

Adventure, journeying and the wilderness

These words may raise some eyebrows within the counselling and psychotherapy community. Questions may arise as to how physical or psychological risk impact upon the therapeutic process. As Michael Gass in the US constructively queries in his seminal text on adventure therapy: 'How can dangling off a cliff be therapeutically relevant?'.[5] However, there is a rich and growing evidence base for the therapeutic use of adventure that has formed since the 1960s, when modern

adventure programmes and journeys started to be used for therapeutic populations. The triennial International Adventure Therapy Conference (the ninth will be held in Norway in June 2022) showcases the vast research and practice which is happening across the world. In the UK, it is important to note that there are national governing bodies and professional qualifications for leading adventurous activities such as canoeing, climbing, caving and hill walking (all of which could be used as a therapeutic vehicle). Practitioners interested in the use of adventure activities should seek the appropriate training, insurance and outdoor-specific first aid course. While being aware of relevant standards, we must also have a rationale for the use of such activities within the therapeutic process and be aware of the metaphoric and therapeutic value that we can tap into, no matter how big or small the adventure is.

> Practitioners interested in the use of adventure activities should seek the appropriate training, insurance and outdoor-specific first aid course

Adventure is a journey with an uncertain end, a quest to find out more than we already know about the world around us and about ourselves, and a commitment that extends from the planning and packing phase right through to the point at which we decide to end the journey. For many young people, going to university or college might be the biggest and bravest adventure they have yet embarked upon – there may be much they have to learn about themselves and the way they approach life. Adventures take a commitment to achieve a goal, but they are often challenging, the process may not be straightforward, and bad weather may need to be endured. While university or college presents an exciting transition into adult life, it can also present academic, social, and financial pressures.[6] Adventure can teach us how and when to consult our maps when we get lost, how to reroute or accept when obstacles get in the way of goals, and how to connect with the inner strength we carry. If we accept that these elements are part of our work with all clients, maybe we could consider that we are all adventure therapists to some degree.

'The natural environment'

The therapeutic value of nature has been recognised by the earliest indigenous cultures and was explored by some of the forefront researchers of modern psychotherapy: Freud, Jung, Rogers, Perls and Erikson (read Chandler for a detailed exploration of the connections these individuals have with the natural environment).[7] 'Fertile ground exists for contemporary therapists to acknowledge their own theoretical roots, and to grow practices that integrate relationships with our wider nature.'[7] Despite this, awareness of relationships with wider nature plays little, if any, part in counselling training. In the UK, therapy training predominantly prepares counsellors and psychotherapists to work with individuals in indoor settings. Therapists are increasingly attempting to respond to the challenges of our times, such as the lack of contact with nature and the relationship of our psyche to environmental destruction. In response, outdoor therapies and 'green prescriptions' may offer a way to welcome a relationship to the environment into therapy. Further nature-based interventions are framed as an alternative treatment that can alleviate the strain on the health and social care systems in the UK, which have been struggling with budget cuts since the recession and which we might predict, given the current pandemic, may be under strain once again.

There are several theories which support the notion that the natural environment is important for human health, functioning and wellbeing. The biophilia hypothesis,[8] psycho-evolutionary theory[9,10] and attention restoration theory[11] are three foundational theories which have prompted further empirical research. It could be useful to explore our innate emotional affiliation with other living organisms and the impact of having become surrounded by technological developments and urban settlements on our sense of identity and mental health.[8] Richard Louv coined the term 'nature deficit disorder' to describe the impact of denying children the opportunity to form an attachment with their natural ecosystem.[12] There is also evidence which highlights the positive response to views of nature and the reduction in stress linked with the limbic system, which can have significant effects on our health and ability to recover from illness.[9]

Contact with nature helps to restore the capacity to concentrate as it offers a break from the fatiguing stimuli, and can provide fascination through both engaging activities (when we do something

so engrossing that we can suspend ourselves from our internal dialogue, for example mountain biking) and through effortless endeavours (when there is space for the mind to wonder, for example watching moving water). The importance of time spent in the natural environment for FE and HE students could be vital to combat the increasingly digital and media-saturated climate we live in (read Bragg and Atkins[13] and McGreeney[14] for some useful summaries of the supporting evidence for nature-based interventions).

These three theories form the basis for the intrinsic benefit that is expected from nature-based interventions, and are described as 'passive' as they are at play as soon as someone is in contact with the natural environment and do not require enhancement or intervention from a practitioner. Research has demonstrated the shift in the therapeutic alliance that occurs when working outdoors and the emergence of a tripartite therapeutic partnership between client, nature and therapist, where each can be affected by the others.[15] The role of the therapist becomes the 'witness, container, and mediator'[16] or the 'partner'.[17] The way in which practitioners frame an outdoor experience can also have a big impact. For example, whether practitioners philosophically consider the engagement with nature as an 'escape' (escaping from urbanised and fast-paced daily lives) or a 'return' (returning and reconnecting to the natural environment) can have an impact on how the therapeutic work may be contextualised in the outdoor environment.

> "Therapists are increasingly attempting to respond to the challenges of our times, such as the lack of contact with nature and the relationship of our psyche to environmental destruction"

Impact on the use of 'self'

We often talk about offering our authentic selves to clients as the base of a genuine therapeutic relationship. So, it might be interesting to consider how our working environments inform, feed and support our sense of self. Possibly, affirmations come from the clothes we wear, the rituals or habits formed when preparing for a client to come through the door, the set-up of the client room and inviting positioning of chairs. From my research with outdoor therapists, one theme that stood out is the practitioner's ability to feel more attuned with their authentic self within outdoor environments. The connection with natural environment and the pace of physical and embodied movement feed the practitioner's sense of attunement with the present moment: *'I notice that when I'm outside I can be more immediate with what is going on in the moment, I can be more focused, perhaps more available for the client'.*[18]

When considering how we offer our best selves to the client, how we look after ourselves and our capacity to hold the client, it seems healthy that therapists may want to have the option of stepping beyond the realm of the office. Equally, before offering this type of work, practitioners may reflect on their level of competence and personal comfort with a range of outdoor environments and environmental conditions. Can we ensure both psychological and physical safety for a client who embraces a walk and talk session on a cold and rainy day, or pushes themselves too far? What other 'hats' do we need to be wearing in order to keep an eye on these aspects: navigator, first aider etc?

Process, embodiment and movement

Embodiment describes an active dimension combining sensory and bodily engagement with the lived experience.[19] From intimate interactions with the embodied experience, sensual and cognitive epistemologies can be explored.[20] Understanding the embodied experience can provide a holistic perspective to the therapeutic relationship. Corazon et al suggest that sight, smell, sound, tactile stimulation by vegetation, wildlife and elements can enrich bodily senses.[21]

The altered physicality of working outdoors has been reported to impact the therapeutic experience in a variety of ways. It offers nonverbal synchronicity between client and therapist;[22] contributes to a greater abstract conceptualisation;[23,24] increases thought processes ,which can loosen stuck thinking and forge new connections between different concepts;[25] and can exaggerate passions, mystical experiences and sensory appreciation.[26] A participant I researched described the ways of experiencing a client's inner world through observation of their engagement in the activity: *'He chose a route through some woodland paths and ended up going off track and over walls… it was almost quite playful, and quite a sense of lostness and re-emerging and all that kind of stuff he was experiencing, which mirrored some of our indoor sessions, literally as opposed to metaphorically'.*[17]

Outdoor therapies can create tangible, embodied and external references for the therapeutic relationship. Without the frame of a physical room, other rituals are created to transition into the therapeutic space. The lighting of a fire is one such ritual that often occurs and presents a different dynamic for the client and practitioner to negotiate: who will take responsibility? And how will agency, autonomy and support be enacted? There is opportunity to learn together, feeding the fire and letting it build strength. In such instances, the client and therapist become a team and the consequences of actions shared. Where the client takes the lead, the therapist can sit with the client, trusting in their ability to light the fire, even when it takes time to successfully strike a flame and light the tinder. Unconditional positive regard, acceptance of failures and quiet companionship can all be communicated with more immediacy than that which is usually communicated in the counselling room. The metaphors often appear to run deeper; the strength of the fire reflecting and building as the therapeutic alliance deepens; the result of boiling water a tangible reference to the shared and mutual collaboration.

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Ethics

Ethical practice has not always been assured in adventure therapy programmes. In the early 2000s, there were a number of deaths and reports of unethical treatment in American youth residential services, resulting in government action. It is still deemed legal in some states for parents to send children to treatment without the child's consent or input (or in some cases against their will) and through transportation services which forcibly remove children from their homes.[27,28] In the UK, there may be a range of professionals working therapeutically with clients in the outdoors with varying levels of outdoor-specific and therapy-specific training and qualifications. This can present a rich diversity within the field, however Harper et al recognise that different professionals are governed by different codes of ethics and operating standards, and in some cases, qualifications which do not correspond to a particular ethical framework.[28] A recent publication from Richards et al offers an attempt to understand the intersection of professionals within the field with the 'Outdoor Mental Health Invention Model', which encourages practitioners to communicate different types of practice in reference to the various 'zones'.[29] While BACP practitioners value informed consent and acting in the best interests of the client, it is important to consider how situations may change with a client while outdoors, what appropriate levels of anxiety might look like in the context of a therapeutic relationship,[30] and what we would do if a client wanted to stop participating during an outdoor experience. Counsellors and psychotherapists may therefore be advised to understand the development of ethical guidelines from allied disciplines such as experiential education, psychology and health and to recognise some of the discipline-specific models and theories which exist for ethical decision-making.[31–34] Furthermore, it is important for research and practice to promote routine outcome monitoring and to regularly check if the approach is having the desired impact on our clients' lives.[35]

In the wake of the pandemic, more and more counsellors have taken their work outside. It is important for practitioners to consider if this is a temporary adjustment to maintain contact with clients through lockdown restrictions or if this will become a more permanent service they offer. I hope this article has given some ideas on how you can extend your philosophy of working outdoors and offering therapeutic adventures.

Some issues to consider when working outdoors/using adventure therapeutically:

- Does going outside move away from the therapeutic task or provide opportunity to deepen and explore some aspects together?
- What fears and concerns might the client have about going outdoors?
- What is the client's relationship with nature/the natural environment? What role has it played in their life so far and could it become an additional therapeutic tool?
- How might it change your work/alliance to work outside/use adventure?
- Have you included details on outdoor therapy and the potential risks in your contract and during your verbal contract?
- Will it affect your policies, procedures and risk assessments?
- Will it affect the timings and costs of the service?
- Does it affect the accessibility and inclusivity of your practice?
- What conditions are required for you and your client to feel safe to explore that which the client wants to bring to the session?
- What will you do if you encounter other outdoor users/familiar people? You may wish to say something like: 'I'm in the middle of something, we'll catch up later'.[36]
- When and where does the session begin and end when there's no waiting room, no clock on the wall.
- How will you arrive at the destination? If together, do you have vehicle insurance? If separate, what is the backup plan should the client's transport not work out? How remote is the location – how long is it to the nearest facilities and emergency services?
- Are you competent and qualified to be doing the activity with the client?
- Do you have appropriate insurance cover?
- Are you carrying a first aid kit and emergency phone, and have you made your client aware of this?
- Have you considered personal hygiene/toileting arrangements?
- Have you told somebody where you are going and what time you expect to return? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heidi Shingler MA, BSc, DipC, MBACP is a lecturer and researcher in Outdoor and Adventure Therapy for the School of Adventure Studies at the University of the Highlands and Islands and is a qualified integrative and humanistic counsellor and outdoor therapist based in the Scottish Highlands. Heidi welcomes discussion on this subject. **heidi.shingler.whc@uhi.ac.uk**.

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Student and staff narratives on learning and teaching

– will the twain ever meet?

Students at college and university enter a world of learning and education. **Dr Ruth Whittle** shares her research into the impact of learning, the stress and anxiety which can emerge from this, the responsibility of tutors, and the knock-on effect on the overall student experience

Researching the students' learning journey

I lead a group of committed teachers and researchers in a project across several disciplines and colleges that we have called 'The Mindset Project', though, for student-facing purposes, its name is 'Your Learning Journey' (Ethical Review ERN_17-0988). We invite newly arriving students to take part in a survey about their experience of being new to campus, and then re-engage with them at various points on their university journey in their first year. Three of us are, or were, senior tutors, responsible for overseeing and implementing personal academic tutoring in our respective units, and thus also in close communication with our wellbeing officers, the staff whose main role is to meet – an ever-increasing number of – students in distress and with needs for reasonable adjustments or extenuating circumstances.

We also recruited a postgraduate research assistant for a few months. We draw on a wide range of experiences in how we set up, conduct and evaluate our project. Senior tutors can observe directly how some colleagues consider wellbeing officers as fierce promoters of the Equality Act of 2010,[1] in competition with the requirements of academic rigour, while others view them as caring heroes. Our research shows aspects of the students' mindset when they start university, and wellbeing officers and academics should take an interest in what drives them when they arrive on campus.

The aims of our project are:

- to better understand students' narratives about their learning journey
- to better understand what underpins teachers' overt or subconscious narratives of what the students' learning journey should look like.

> ...students are really not able to take in the amount of 'stuff' that comes at them in their first week at university

Based on this understanding, we hope to:

- develop more personalised support for undergraduate students
- enhance students' ability to maximise opportunities for learning, both academically and personally
- establish good practice, especially in induction, around what is expected of students and what they can expect of their institution.

As teachers, we want to be able to understand why so many students find it either difficult or unnecessary

	Welcome Week survey	Focus group interviews	End-of-year repeat of survey
2017/18	yes	March 2018; drilling into what students thought of the results	March
2018/19	yes	Not undertaken	March
2019/20	yes	Not undertaken	June

Figure 1. Welcome Week survey

(or both) to engage more deeply with their studies; and ultimately, we wish to find more satisfaction in our own (pedagogical) practice – despite an institutional environment which can seem to promote short-term gaming rather than deep learning with long-term gains. Our project aims to establish a shared understanding of 'where students are coming from' and whether there are differences between cohorts from different disciplines.

We first survey students at the beginning of their Welcome Week (Figure 1) by inviting them to participate via their departmental or college intranet site. We chose Qualtrics to deliver the survey and leave it open for replies for around a week. Not only is Qualtrics considered a secure surveying platform by our university, but it is also transparent for students and easy to manage for both the students and the researchers. In addition, it allows us to take students through the 'giving informed consent' process, thus complying with the ethical requirements for undertaking our research. Over time, we have evaluated our data as individual researchers as well as in conversation with each other. This is important to gain clarity on where we are each coming from, be this in terms of our discipline or our own construct of what constitutes a 'good' learning journey.

Figure 2. Word cloud based on students' feelings at the start of their studies, September, 2017 – Department of Modern Languages (63 participants)

Our latest survey and its evaluation, in June 2020, partly functions as a disruptor in our story. While we had planned to launch it in March, the lockdown, which followed fairly hard on the heels of a four-week strike by academics in the UK, made this problematic, so we decided to launch it once students had been given a considerable amount of information on their end-of-year assessments and how their grades would be calculated, and were thus more likely to read their emails, including our survey invitation.

> ...colleagues may well be unsure themselves how their 'welcome' is coming across to students, and they seem to expect more negative feelings rather than expecting broad enthusiasm from the new intake

In each survey, we asked, 'How do you feel right now, in Welcome Week?' (In the repeat survey, this changed to, 'How do you feel towards the end of your first year here?'). We also included a questionnaire on students' belief systems around their learning, based on psychologist Carol Dweck[2] and developed by Classroom 2.0.[3] We will now first report on students' feelings and then on their belief systems. The rubric 'question area' reflects the questions in the survey, in the order they were put.

Students' feelings when they first arrive at university

This word cloud (Figure 2) shows that most students' feelings are positive and only a minority of feelings are negative. Having established these,

we wanted to determine the *strength* of feelings, and therefore gave a score to each feeling, from 0 (no emotional arousal) to 10 (very high emotional arousal), initially for the most frequently used epithets.

Insights

The key insights we gained as a team were that students are really not able to take in the amount of 'stuff' that comes at them in their first week at university. This was also confirmed in focus group interviews which we conducted at the end of that academic year.

When we compared our initial findings with those of a much larger cohort, across several disciplines (305 students), at the start of the academic year 2019/20, the results were very similar.

At a recent workshop at our university, we showed a series of graphics on students' feelings about arriving at university and asked participating staff what they thought about them. One colleague said that she was relieved to find that there were positive feelings among more ambiguous ones.

This comment made it clear that colleagues care for their students' feelings and would like to know and understand whether there is something that they need to (not) do. It also indicates that colleagues may well be unsure themselves how their 'welcome' is coming across to students, and they seem to expect more negative feelings rather than expecting broad enthusiasm from the new intake.

Several members of the audience, as well as our team, also asked themselves what value the different 'strong' feelings have in current discourses, particularly among students: is it 'de rigueur' to express nervousness or even anxiousness? What are students excited about or think they should be excited about to fit in? It is clearly not only the academic side of university life that plays a role here, as became especially clear in the focus group interviews.

Using 'nervous' as an example, here are some questions which wellbeing staff and personal tutors can ask, to encourage students to explore more fully, when they hear what they now know is a predominant, but also multifaceted, 'feeling' in students starting at university:

- What is it that you are most nervous about? (Your subject? Your social life? How are you doing academically/fitting in?)
- Is this different from what you experienced during sixth form? (If so, what has changed that makes you feel nervous? If not, what strategies helped you to nevertheless cope when you were at school?)
- I am not sure whether you realise that most students who come to see me are also nervous. How does that make you feel?

In this way, students may themselves conclude that it's either 'normal' to feel this way, and may feel encouraged to bring up any progress on this front in their next meeting; or they can be advised to seek self-help early, in a mindfulness or yoga class, or, if necessary, via mental health and counselling services. Alternatively, they may need to be reminded to go back to previous strategies that proved useful but which they may have neglected once they started university. Or they may have to adjust these strategies to university life. The idea here is that showing respect for students' feelings does not simply equate to slotting them into a system of help on which they subsequently tend to rely ever after, but to set the students on a path to 'establish the[ir] **G**oal; examine the[ir] **R**eality, consider all **O**ptions [and] confirm the **W**ill to act' (GROW).[4]

Attitudes to 'learning' and 'learning from mistakes'

Here, our findings complement what we found about students' feelings about starting university, but in ways we did not always expect.

When setting students a mindset survey, there is always the risk that they will second-guess what the lecturers want to hear: that they are at university to learn. Two findings make us believe

Question area	What students said	Questions we would like to understand better
1. Can you change as a person?	Most of our students think that they can, at least to some extent, but between one third and just under half of them are not convinced.	How might they have understood 'change as a person'?
2. Only a few people will be really good at…	a) sports: most of our students disagree with this, but there is a spread of opinions b) languages: even more of our students disagree with this, and more strongly, but still a spread of opinions c) Maths: similar to sports	Do students believe that hard work rather than 'being born with it' can make you good at something? Might there be more of a growth mindset than we give students credit for?
3. How do you like your work best? (Options: 'when it's easy' to 'when it makes me think')	- Most students agree, at least to some extent, that they like their work when it makes them think. - Most students would not like it to be too much trouble, though. - Most of them are prepared to make mistakes but prefer to avoid making them. - Between 30% and 50% of our students find that learning something new is stressful. Nevertheless, the vast majority of respondents agree, at least to some extent, that they want to learn new things.	Overall, these results tend to emphasise that students do not like taking risks. This limits the extent to which students see themselves as reaching for goals that are beyond what they thought they might want or be capable of achieving initially.
4. When work is hard…	Throughout the surveys, more students agreed that they wanted to work harder if the work is hard, but between 20% and 30% felt working hard made them seem stupid.	At first glance, the percentage of students who feel that working harder might expose them to seeming stupid seems low.

Figure 3. Survey statements and responses

that our results are resilient. First, there is remarkable consistency between the first survey result of a relatively small cohort and subsequent iterations; second, the result that is consistent, as it stands out in all the iterations, is the students' overall claim to want to learn new things and work hard, but at the same time to avoid making mistakes. Nevertheless, the figures of those who want to learn new things and are prepared to be somewhat stressed by this are consistently high. This may be surprising to some staff.

Figure 3, above, summarises some of the results of the September 2017 survey (just the Department of Modern Languages), the September 2019 survey (across several Schools) and June 2020 (across those same Schools).

Taking the findings further

Looking at these, fairly consistent, results, two areas of possible enquiry spring to mind:

1. To consider whether these results are 'good' as in 'promising', or otherwise, with regards to students' trajectories (retention, wellbeing, academic achievement).
2. To explore why the attitudes to learning these students display may be somewhat or even a great deal more positive than many staff think they experience in practice.

To this purpose, we investigated two types of documents, both of which are easily available to the reader: the university's mission statement/strategy, which was only one click away from the home page when this article was first drafted, and the 2019 UK Engagement Survey.[5,6]

In its Birmingham 2030 document, our own institution emphasises that students will study in a research-intensive environment (p7), and they are destined to be '…the next generation of leaders, innovators, problem-solvers and citizens to interact with, understand, and influence, the latest discoveries and ideas' (p7).[5]

The 2019 Student Engagement report also speaks to these observations.[6] It surveys first and second-year students, and is thus not incongruous with the participants in our own study. It, too, shows a mixed picture of engagement (Figure 4).

Questions these figures raise, in connection with the previous discussions, include:

1. How do I/does my institution talk about 'learning with others' and 'staff-student partnerships'? What value is placed on these aspects of the student experience? How do we counter the idea, held instinctively by so many students, that it should be their lecturer who tells them what's what and not their peers?
2. To what extent is this a question of getting students to understand that we have respect for them and their wellbeing and their learning, not just an interest in their final output, which we either mark or in which we are involved as advisors?
3. In conversations with students, how do we negotiate the difficult balance of making sure they understand the amount of work that is expected of them (say 36.5 hours per week) and the fact that

many students undertake 15 hours of paid work commitments, for whatever reason?

The position and role of wellbeing staff

When staff consider the sets of questions I laid out, no matter whether they are academic or wellbeing staff, they may feel that there is a gap between the institutional expectations and the students they see or, alternatively, they consider that there is a good match.

In the latter case, it is likely that there is a joined-up understanding about expectations in students and how academics and other services work together to support students achieving them. In the former case, wellbeing staff may well be met with some suspicion by academics: they may be seen as too lenient and accommodating to students, thus counterproductive to the standards that academics want to see set, and to which they are bound. In the worst-case scenario, this can result in a kind of stand-off, which really helps no-one. Rather, it is important that wellbeing staff develop a clear sense of what the students' programme and learning outcomes are. This should go without saying, but it is only possible if there is a culture of trust among staff. This can, for example, be established and promoted through the senior tutor and other staff who lead on parts of the programmes on which students

> it is important that wellbeing staff develop a clear sense of what the students' programme and learning outcomes are

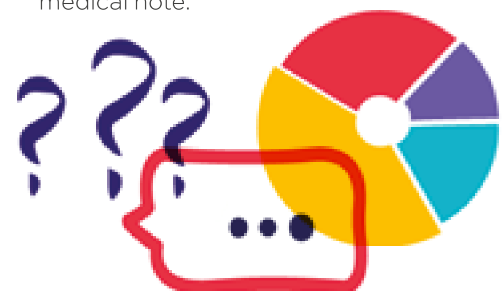
	Between 2016 and 2019	2019
Study time for taught study and independent learning	Decline of c8%	44% of students spending 11 hrs or more/week
Learning with others	Decline of 2%	54%
Staff-student partnership	Decline of 1% from 2018	42%
Interacting with staff	Decline of 1% from 2018, previously growing	37%
Course challenge	stable	90%
Critical thinking	stable	78%
Research and enquiry	Growth of 6%	67%

Figure 4. Insights from the 2019 Student Engagement report

study. It needs to be a mutual endeavour to foster understanding and best practice.

Here are some practical examples that I hope you might be able to connect to your own academic environment:

1. **A student has come to see the Wellbeing Officer because they are anxious about going abroad in a few months' time. They are on a course where a year abroad is compulsory. (If the student was on a different type of programme, it could be another element of that programme that the student wanted to avoid; the interventions below would then be adapted to that element).**
   - Ideally, there should be provision for all students who are preparing for a year abroad and have a Reasonable Adjustment Plan to have to make an appointment with the wellbeing officer *and* their Year Abroad Tutor/s to discuss how their specific needs can translate into what is available for them abroad, and what extra support they might need, for example mentoring (and the attendant funding through the Disability Students' Allowance). In this way, there is mutual clarity on which needs can be met and how, and what, in the process, should be the student's responsibility.
   - Remind the student that they signed up for a programme including a compulsory time abroad; ask what persuaded the student to choose this course initially and what has changed.
   - Ask the student to explain to them what they understand their year abroad will look like to find out whether the student has done the necessary research to make a reasoned decision.
   - Be aware of the risk assessment that all students need to undertake before they are signed off to travel (and be covered by the university's insurance). Replies or the lack of them give you and the year abroad tutor a good idea as to the self-care the student is able or willing to undertake, and thus the chance of personal and academic success abroad.
   - Again, together with the year abroad tutor, go through the programme outcomes and how the student sees themselves meeting them (or not).
   - If needed, discuss options such as leave of absence for health reasons and the need to have a medical note.



2. **A student has written to their examiner in the upcoming oral exam that their Reasonable Adjustment Plan permits them to have rest breaks. The examiner enquires with their unit's Wellbeing Officer what to do. They do not see the need for a break, and the student has not asked for breaks in class presentations before.**
   - The Wellbeing Officer should be informed of the length of the oral exam, say, 20 minutes in the final year. They should be informed on how such exams are usually conducted, for example a short presentation by the student on a pre-prepared topic, followed by questions by examiners.
   - In Modern Languages, for example, oral exams count quite a lot towards the students' degree. This is because oral skills are highly valued in this degree. In other disciplines, it will be different skills that are particularly highly valued.
   - Find out from students as well as with the help of academics about the value students place on oral skills. For example, before students go abroad, they usually consider 'becoming fluent in the language' their priority. It is therefore astonishing that they think they cannot maintain their oral performance for 20 minutes in the final year. How does the student who has made the request feel about that?
   - You do not need to be particularly anxious to lose your train of thought in an intense conversation. How do you actually ask for thinking space in the foreign language, for example 'I am sorry, I need to rethink this/I am sorry, I am just thinking of the right term to use here'? Avoidance of this situation through mandated breaks should not be the key option to take.
   - Suggest to academic staff, for example via the Senior Tutor or programme leads, that they discuss with students how oral exams work before they happen. When students are told that they have reached the end of their oral exam, most of them are surprised: time had passed so quickly, they thought it must be a lot longer. It can reassure nervous students that they might want to concentrate less on the length and more on the topic they are hopefully keen to speak about.
     – Establish the practice of (not) having a rest break in all comparable cases, so that a certain 'culture' around these exams is established. It is best practice not to leave such a decision to individual examiners but have a unit-wide approach. If this has not been established, the Senior Tutor, the Head of Education and programme leads should make a concerted effort to formulate policy in this respect so that expectations are clear, and time is not wasted by going over the same ground again and again.

3. **Undergraduate students take 120 credits across the academic year. A student comes to see the Wellbeing Officer at the end of Semester 1, just after Christmas, to ask to have 40 credits moved to the supplementary period, in August after the end of the academic year.**
   - You may want to ask the student to go through their modules with you and explain what they were about, what they liked about them, what went well, and why they are behind. While such a conversation can be somewhat time-consuming in terms of meeting time, it can be helpful in you and the student establishing whether they enjoyed/did well in any or at least some parts of the courses, and why not elsewhere.
   - Reflect back to the student your understanding of what they said. For example, 'You really seemed to have enjoyed' … 'What exactly was the work you were required to do for this?' … 'What prevented you from doing this (on time)?'
   - Is there a particular skill that the student avoids, for example essay writing/academic reading? What have they done about getting help with these so far?
   - Would it be devastating or useful for the student to know that experience shows that students who defer a significant credit load are increasingly unlikely to finish the course the more often they do that? Does the student see themselves finishing the course (emphasis on the process rather than the outcome)?

> …do make time to ask questions of academics and use opportunities to meet them, formally or informally

   - Enquire how the student organises their work. Neither academics nor wellbeing staff necessarily know what students use, for example an electronic diary where deadlines self-delete when they are passed, so the student loses track of how much they missed!
   - Ask the student to make a timetable of their typical week, with all their lessons and study time included, as well as other commitments. Then invite them to come back to you to talk this through. You'll soon find out whether the timetable indicates that the student has a realistic chance of getting enough work

done/demands far too much of themselves/has an unrealistic expectation as to how little work is needed. The discussion that you lead on their timetable gives students an opportunity to reflect and revise their approach to their workload.
- Check what is missing on the timetable apart from, possibly, study hours: does the student make time to cook, eat and socialise, carry out a hobby, do some sport? Does the student factor in going to see their tutors? Do they do this, particularly before deadlines? If not, why not?
- Check what paid work commitments the student may have? Do these prevent them from doing enough academic work/from sleeping sufficiently? Does the student need to do as many hours to cope financially? What might be alternatives?

The suggested measures show that there is expertise on both the academic and the wellbeing side, and the conversation between both needs to be a two-way affair. Students' perceptions and their experience need to be drilled into in a non-judgemental way so that students themselves are equipped to become judges of their performance rather than blaming the system, the marker or the type of assessment etc. As wellbeing staff, do make time to ask questions of academics and use opportunities to meet them, formally or informally. They may really appreciate it and learn in the process!

Readers may be surprised that COVID has not been mentioned in this article. When we started our research, it was not around. We have continued our Welcome Week surveys during the pandemic and are looking for differences in cohorts. However, they have been quite elusive so far. As and when we find them, we will write again.

Conclusion

Institution-led interventions aimed at better outcomes for students have so far been data driven, for example by an institution's attainment gap.[9] These clearly have their place. However, we have shown that qualitative evaluations, such as of students' feelings as they enter university and then progress, can deliver useful insights for the conversations personal tutors and wellbeing staff, including counsellors, can have with students, beyond categorising them by socioeconomic group or pathologising them,[8] and towards a more individualised approach. In a next step, we plan to link students' initial attitudes to learning and making mistakes to both feelings and academic results. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Ruth Whittle is Associate Professor in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Birmingham. Her current research on the student mindset follows on from her earlier studies into language students as reflective learners, published with Sandra Salin (Newcastle University) in *Preparing Modern Languages Students for 'Difference'. Going beyond Graduate Skills*. New York, London, Bern: Peter Lang; 2017.
r.whittle@bham.ac.uk

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Accidentally displaced

Working with Ukrainian students in educational settings

What is the impact on our international students whose homelands become centres of international conflict? Jane Darougar reflects on her experience at University of the Arts, London

there's no place on earth that's safe
there's no earth anymore
there's nothing
how can we begin with the words:
'Nothing exists'?
(From) *I Dream of Explosions*,
by Oksana Lutsyshyna[1]

With a background in further education (FE) and sixth form colleges, I have worked with many refugees and asylum seekers from the newly arrived, enrolled on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes, to those well settled, furthering their education or retraining. I have recently moved to higher education (HE), where there are many more international students, and I am encountering an influx of clients who have left their homelands for educational reasons and are now experiencing the devastation of war from a distance, often direct and in real-time via social media. I suspect it will be a familiar experience for HE counsellors who have worked for years with international students as conflict has broken out abroad. For me, it seems a challenge that differs significantly from those who have left their homes,

Staff and student banners from the vigil for peace at UAL

fleeing violence and unrest. I wanted to understand what the differences are and what considerations would be helpful to bear in mind.

To be apart from loved ones at a time of disaster inevitably brings up complex feelings, anxiety about the safety of others contrasting with relief at one's own safety – an uncomfortable feeling to acknowledge alongside the guilt of not directly sharing the suffering. Our Ukrainian students, witnessing genocidal atrocities and the destruction of their cities, are grieving losses of extraordinary complexity. They are losing their homes; safe spaces to return to; communities that will never be reassembled in a recognisable configuration; their identities, on many levels, through bereavement and the security of the status of international students. Uncertainty about the future compounds the feelings of helplessness as the fighting spreads and news of new brutalities breaks. The relentlessness of this was brought home by a student confiding that they had not slept for weeks as they keep their phone close beside them, anxious that family may call with final goodbyes if their accommodation is being shelled. They speak to relatives when their phones are switched on and calls can get through, only to hear gunfire and shelling in the background to their conversation. I suspect that the powerlessness will be unbearable for some, who will make the difficult and dangerous decision to return and join the resistance.

> This feels reminiscent of the Welsh word, *Hiraeth*, defined as a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost place

The act of seeking help may be made difficult if questions of a hierarchy of suffering emerge. Students may confide that they feel guilty for seeking support, as they have not been personally exposed to the danger. It may be helpful to reflect on that fact that many refugees flee before witnessing actual violence. Papadopoulos breaks down different aspects of adjustment central to the refugee experience: fear of loved ones coming to harm; losing homes and familiar places; unknown futures including being reunited with loved ones, and uncertainty about the possibility of return.[2] Those who find themselves in an asylum-seeking position without having had to physically flee may well share many of the difficulties and challenges of their compatriots.

Alongside the terror of friends and family facing violence, sexual violence and death, the obliteration of residential areas has highlighted to me the extraordinary importance of the concept of home. Maya Angelou wrote '...the ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned'.[3] Papadopoulos writes of the substratum of identity that exists within the layers of home, community, history, language, familiar sounds and smells. A rupture from these leading to a nostalgic disorientation, as individuals become aware that they will never return.[4] This feels reminiscent of the Welsh word, *Hiraeth*, defined as a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost place. A deeply evocative word borrowed by many organisations and projects set up to support refugees. Papadopoulos talks about the containing function of home, a place that continues to provide containment long after we have left, in its capacity to take us back in if sanctuary and familiarity are needed. When intimate spaces are no longer viable homes, we lose our stability and continuity, Papadopoulos argues; we lose not only the tangible, but something that is essential about ourselves.[4]

Displacement and homelessness

Dislocated from home, our Ukrainian students find themselves with an uncertain future, struggling to

focus on learning and not knowing whether they will be able to complete their courses. The prospect of seeking asylum is daunting. Currently, the narrative is sympathetic and positive, but the spectre of permanent displacement is a haunting one. Students may speak of their concern about how secure they will be and how welcome they will feel once the money has run out. Scanlon and Adlam write about displacement and homelessness, not just in the physical absence of a building, but the state of being psychosocially unhoused.[5] This liminal space is occupied by those who belong neither in nor out of the group. A fear of dependency on the charity and goodwill of others is highlighted in their description of the Diogenes Paradigm, asking the terrible question: 'What does it feel like to be a problem?'.[5] Scanlon & Adlam also write of the deep ambivalence of what they describe as hostile dependency: becoming a recipient of charity is an excruciating adjustment. Having belonged to a privileged group of international students, adjusting from affluence to poverty, losing their financial security and status may seem minor in the context of the other losses, but the impact of one's situation becoming so precarious is devastating. They ask what it might be like '…to be unseated from one's own sense of self… by the dismemberment of having been psychosocially un-housed'.[5] Hopes and dreams for the future have been disrupted as the trajectory of the students' lives will inevitably take a different course.

> I acknowledge that these world events impact on a wide number of people, including Russian students, fearing for their loved ones sent to fight and agonising over their return to a country where they may be conscripted to fight in a war that many oppose vigorously

Adversity

In considering how best to support our students, Papadopoulos' assertion that the '…first casualty of trauma is complexity'[2] is an important cornerstone to our thinking. He argues that assumptions about refugee trauma, as if there is an automatic stimulus response, is unhelpful and likely to compound the difficulties of the asylum seeker/refugee.[2] Exposure to adversity does not affect everyone in the same way. Some will indeed require trauma intervention for complex mental health difficulties, such as PTSD. Babette Rothschild's guidance on managing intrusive thoughts is an example of a useful resource.[6] Others, however, will respond with ordinary human suffering. Papadopoulos reminds us that these are normal reactions to abnormal circumstances. Simple wellbeing advice might seem trite in these circumstances, but we should not underestimate the importance of good self-care. For example, clients may struggle to eat, knowing that loved ones and fellow nationals have little or no food and are risking their lives to obtain food. Focusing on these struggles and the immense feelings triggered by giving themselves permission to eat a simple meal feels like an important and significant part of our work.

Papadopoulos suggests a range of possibilities that should be held in mind when exploring the impact of exposure to the event with the client and planning interventions. He introduces an 'adversity grid' as a framework for collaborative exploration. In the grid, he separates the different aspects of human life that might be impacted: individual; family; community

and society/culture. He then gives different categories in terms of severity of impact: psychiatric disorder (for example, PTSD); distress and psychological reactions (for example, anxiety and depression that do not meet the threshold for a psychiatric diagnosis) and finally, ordinary human suffering. He invites us to look at each and assess if the impact in each area has been positive or negative, recognising that for some, experiences of adversity are catalysts for growth and resilience. He then introduces the concept of 'adversity activated development', which refers to the new strengths and sense of purpose that can motivate people into areas of development. Papadopoulos' guidance that we should not assume that the impact is always negative allows for a multi-dimensional exploration. In doing this, he proposes that the client is not treated like a victim of circumstance; they are active participants in the process, where strengths are acknowledged and individually tailored, and targeted strategies to address difficulties can be considered.[2]

Familiarity and a sense of groundedness in a place alongside those with whom we share a common history is impossible to replace. Papadopoulos suggests that connection with the community will mitigate against the impact. 'Enabling the families and communities to re-remember their dismembered stories could restore the self-healing of families and communities, thus transforming them from homeless communities to 'storied communities', with all the resultant self-therapeutic dynamism'.[4] Building back social capital is invaluable, alongside our institutions providing clarity over basic needs, access to accommodation, tuition fees and sources of financial support. Universities holding vigils for remembrance and occasions for bringing students together could be important sources of collective self-support.

> They ask what it might be like '…to be unseated from one's own sense of self… by the dismemberment of having been psychosocially un-housed'

I have referred just to Ukrainian students in this piece, quite deliberately. I acknowledge that these world events impact on a wide number of people, including Russian students, fearing for their loved ones sent to fight, and agonising over their return to a country where they may be conscripted to fight in a war that many oppose vigorously. We are supporting our Russian students in their time of crisis too, acknowledging the risks taken by those who have chosen to speak out against the actions of their Government. It is also important that we remember and stand by those others among us whose homes have also been devastated by war: the Syrians, Palestinians, Afghans and many more. For these, the comparative lack of outcry for the suffering that they have experienced, and continue to experience, has been a painful reminder of the differential in the value of human life. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Darougar is a counsellor at University of the Arts, London. Jane is also a group facilitator and supervisor and a freelance trainer with the Charlie Waller Trust.
j.darougar@arts.ac.uk

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NEWS FROM BACP

Ukraine war: tips on how to look after your mental health during worrying world events

Harrowing images and distressing updates from Ukraine have filled the media. Even if you're thousands of miles away from the conflict and not directly impacted, it may still affect how you're feeling at the moment.

Our member Lara Waycot said: 'Through conversations with clients, friends and even with myself, it's clear that the recent events are incredibly anxiety provoking. Even if we do not feel directly impacted, there is trepidation of what could be coming.'

Another of our members Vasia Toxavidi adds: 'It's normal that anxiety and fear will start to be on the rise for many people as uncertainty about security and safety are in the front of their minds again.'

She warns that people may start 'catastrophising' – which is when they start to imagine the worst possible results of something.

Some of our members have shared some tips on what you can do to help your mental health and wellbeing during this time:

Manage your news intake

Our member Abby Rawlinson says: 'It's important to manage our news intake during worrying times. It's natural to want to stay informed, but too much news can be overwhelming. Find a couple of trusted sources that you can rely on and set a time limit for how much you consume.

Of course, it's a privilege to be able to switch off from the reality of what's happening in Ukraine right now – but it's also OK to take media breaks for the sake of your mental health. Both things can be true.'

Lara adds that it's worth being mindful of the effect the news is having on you as you watch, listen or read it.

'Notice what's going on for you in your body and move on to something else if it gets too much.'

Remember, your emotions are valid

'It can be tempting to push difficult feelings aside, but this tends to make them come back stronger,' says Abby.

'Let yourself feel whatever you're feeling. You may feel angry, anxious, sad, confused, or even numb – all of these emotions are valid. You're having a normal response to an abnormal situation.'

> Let yourself feel whatever you're feeling. You may feel angry, anxious, sad, confused, or even numb – all of these emotions are valid

Have a 'worry time'

Lara says that some people find creating a 'worry time' helpful.

She adds: 'Set aside a time in your day when you will be able to sit with these feelings. Maybe you will set a timer and use a journal to really explore them. Through the day when the worries come up, you can note them down and acknowledge that you will consider that during your worry time.'

Practise gratitude

Vasia says: 'Being grateful for what we have keeps us centred and grounded and distracts the mind from the negativity. It also reminds us about how worthy our life is when we start losing hope and motivation because of what is happening out there in the world.'

Lara echoes her advice and adds: 'When we are hypervigilant, we can see danger all around us. By practising gratitude, we start to train our brain to look out for these things too. Try ending each day by writing down three things you are grateful for.'

Watch out for your inner critic

Abby says: 'Watch out for your inner critic – it tends to get louder when we feel overwhelmed or powerless. You might feel ashamed that you don't know enough about why the conflict is happening, or you might feel guilty for worrying about how the conflict could affect you personally. While these are understandable responses, try not to be too hard on yourself – self-criticism can fuel anxiety and fear. Try to notice your thoughts and feelings and respond to them with kindness and compassion.'

Do something fun and positive

Vasia recommends doing something fun to distract or educate ourselves, such as watching a film or documentary, or dancing, or listening to our favourite music. She adds: 'No matter what's happening out there, it's important to keep the good energy flowing within ourselves.'

And Lara adds: 'Using our time to do something helpful for others can help us channel our energy into something productive that feels good. Whether it's raising money or helping a neighbour.'

Meditate

Vasia recommends meditating or simple breathing exercises.

'It takes us out of our mind and connects us to our centre and our body. If we don't know how to do it, there are a number of apps and websites that can help us do that.'

www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/2022/25-february-tips-on-how-to-look-after-your-mental-health-during-worrying-world-events

Working with **trauma**

in a university and college wellbeing service

Susan Dale demonstrates the powerful use of imagery in therapy by using a 'tree of life' exercise with a client of hers, Jade, impacted by past trauma

Introduction to the wellbeing service

The wellbeing service at University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Inverness, like many other universities and colleges across the UK, is seeing a steep increase in referrals for students with complex mental health needs, including many affected by complex and developmental trauma. On top of this, here in the Highlands, the NHS mental health services are stretched beyond capacity, with lengthy waiting lists and limited crisis intervention. We are also, as I write, emerging from a pandemic and see war breaking out in Ukraine, which is particularly traumatic for our students coming from outside of the UK.

We operate a hybrid, stepped model of wellbeing support here at UHI Inverness, with the team comprising a wellbeing officer, three experienced counsellors, plus trainee counsellors. This core team has the support of associate counsellors, when needed. Our team also offers regular Scottish Mental Health First Aid training to staff, enabling them to cope with students who are in crisis.

We assess all new referrals using CORE-34 and through an initial wellbeing assessment, and try to tailor support to the needs of the student. The options available include wellbeing workshops and CBT support, face-to-face counselling and one-at-a-time (OaaT) online counselling, which can be provided via secure video link or can be text-based, synchronous and asynchronous. We also offer blocks of online counselling sessions for students with more complex needs. Out of hours 24/7 support is provided through Spectrum Life and Togetherall.

> Rather than starting with 'the problem' or 'what is going wrong', it uses a tree metaphor to explore where we stand. Participants in the exercise are invited to draw a tree as they reflect on their life. I have adapted it to help people connect with their values, strengths and tap into resilience that helps to support them as they explore stories of how trauma has affected their lives

UHI is a diverse and flexible tertiary partnership, which provides learning for any person, at any level, for any reason. Since joining the team, I have been inspired by the care that staff at the Inverness campus (which offers everything from senior phase courses for school pupils through to all post-secondary school learning up to PhD level) take to ensure students with diverse mental health needs are supported through their studies. Alongside our team, we work closely with the additional learning support team, and also with other wellbeing teams across the UHI counselling network.

How we are approaching work with those affected by trauma

Often, students come to us who have survived life events that they have experienced as traumatising. Sometimes, these go back to childhood and then they are overlaid with later events, including a high level of gender-based violence.

There are many descriptions of trauma. One that really resonates with me comes from Scottish chemist George Wilson, who writes in 1847 about his experience of undergoing amputation without anaesthesia:

'Of the agony it occasioned I will say nothing. Suffering so great as I underwent cannot be expressed in words, and fortunately cannot be recalled. The particular pangs are now forgotten, but the blank whirlwind of emotion, the horror of great darkness, and the sense of desertion by God and man, bordering close upon despair, which swept through my mind and overwhelms my heart, I can never forget, however gladly I would do so'.[1]

Like George Wilson, many of the people I work with are very reluctant or unable to find words to talk about the traumatic events, or even unable to separate out the events that have happened to them; but the effect, the horror, the whirlwind of emotion and the feeling of being alone with it, never leaves them, impacting on their studies and every aspect of their lives. It is this that they bring to the counselling room.

Trauma, as Van der Kolk explains, '…relives the past in the present', it is about the intrusions of physical and mental distress linked to past events that play out within a person's current life.[2] Anna Salter refers to trauma leaving 'footprints in the mind'.[3] Research[4] has shown that trauma actually changes the physiology of the brain, leading to:

> '…a recalibration of the brain's alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant'.

As people living with trauma, we become more hypervigilant, looking for threat, our thinking is often less clear, our bodies are poised for fight or flight, with increased blood pressure and heart rate ready for flight or fight. We are more likely to have panic attacks, dissociate and find it difficult to rest or sleep. We can also be triggered into flashbacks and the overwhelming emotion from the trauma.

When you put all of this into the perspective of a learning environment such as a university or college, a trauma-informed approach is needed in respect of all that we do.

Our service understands our task is not to replicate the NHS mental health provision, but to provide students with the mental health support needed for them to complete their studies. However, with NHS waiting lists sometimes exceeding two years, we are finding more and more students need supporting (on and off) for the entirety of their courses.

Our wellbeing officer has produced CBT and psychoeducational wellbeing workshops on all manner of topics, from anxiety, focus and motivation through to a new workshop on post-pandemic stress, along with yoga, therapets and other wellbeing activities. She is currently working on a workshop specifically about trauma.

I work online, so along with doing initial assessments for new referrals, I also see a lot of students for blocks of sessions, often relating directly to trauma. I always work collaboratively rather than as an 'expert' to be consulted. I do not comply with the theory that there is only one way to work with trauma, but I do try to always base what I do on what the person in front of me needs and what I know about trauma in respect of research, neurology and psychology.

Some students need tools to help them to engage and feel safe in the 'here and now', others need help with particular intrusive thoughts or flashbacks, some need help with remaining 'present' as they find themselves 'numbing out'… 'I just feel as if I am an avatar in a game. I can see myself interacting with others, but I'm not there' (student). Some want me to witness the story of what has happened to them, others need liaison with police, rape and sexual assault crisis, social services, or GP and mental health teams. Some want help with developing compassion for parts of themselves they hate: '…anorexia takes over sometimes. I'm told it should be eradicated, but it's part of me. I can't survive without it' (student).

> "They are hard to draw… the mess. The abuse. The absolute blackness of that. But I notice as I draw that around some of the roots there are balls of strong root – all tangled together they form strong knots that keep the tree anchored in the ground"

I've completed quite a lot of different trainings in respect of trauma, including narrative therapy, internal family systems, narrative exposure therapy and EMDR.

One approach that I often use at the college is the 'tree of life exercise'. This has been developed by narrative therapists such as Denborough and Ncube[5,6] to facilitate conversations with individuals and groups to find ways of telling stories that make them stronger.

Rather than starting with 'the problem' or 'what is going wrong', it uses a tree metaphor to explore where we stand. Participants in the exercise are invited to draw a tree as they reflect on their life. I have adapted it to help people connect with their values and

strengths and to tap into resilience that helps to support them as they explore stories of how trauma has affected their lives.

I usually tailor the exercise to the individual, and within the college I use it online. We are then able to screen share images and it becomes a collaborative process. To show readers how this works, I asked Jade (pseudonym), who is collaborating with me on a writing project,[7] whether she would be happy to contribute to this article. Although she is not a student from UHI, the process and her story are very relevant and are representational of many stories I hear regularly in Inverness.

Jade was a mature student when I met her and had been diagnosed with PTSD some years previously. She described her life as '*…stuck in terror from the past… I just cannot escape what happened – there was just so much of it that was wrong… and it causes every moment (even happy moments) to be turned into toxic waste*'.

She told me that through previous counselling she had found some strategies to cope with the effects of PTSD, but had never felt able to talk about the details of what had happened to her growing up. She told me that her father was controlling and angry '*…putting us down at every opportunity*', her Mum 'switched off emotionally' and that she was repeatedly sexually abused.

Following our initial meeting, Jade emailed me: *'I just thought that this was how families worked.*

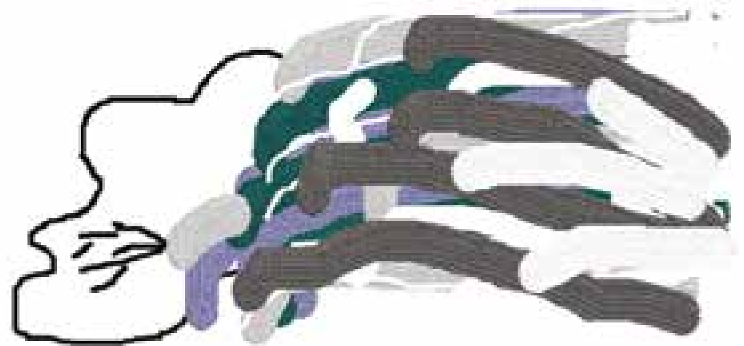
'*At the time, I hated what was happening, and feeling so scared, but put this down to me being weak rather than abuse. When I learned it was indeed abuse… then my world fell completely apart. I felt overwhelmed, consumed by flashbacks and living nightmares. Talking about it is out of the question… Making it visible would be like falling in the sea with rocks in my pocket, yet not talking about it means the pressure builds inside and threatens to take my life. It's like being stuck on a rock with the flood waters closing in on every side. I am becoming less and less, and my only existence is that shown so clearly in* The Scream *(Edvard Munch).*

'I am talking to you, not because I want to, but because if I don't talk to someone, I will cease to be, I will drown.'

Jade attended sessions online via secure video conferencing and emailed updated writing and pictures. She was '*…terrified that you'll ask me for the details of what happened… I just can't talk about it…*' She felt that she would be '*totally overwhelmed and drowned*' by the telling. She had already tried going to see an EMDR therapist on referral from her psychiatrist, but had not felt able to participate and dropped out.

Noticing from my initial conversation with Jade that she found creative things helpful, and that she was using metaphor to describe how she was feeling, I explained about the tree of life exercise and asked her to have a think about whether this would feel a safe way of proceeding. This could give her a safe place to return to if she was feeling overwhelmed. The following week, she returned, energised; she seemed very different from the frightened person of the week before. Reflecting on this with her, she confirmed: *'I feel as if this is something I can do… I'm accessing the session via my laptop, which has got a painting app on it… I've also got some paper and my favourite pencils, so that we can start… It could even be fun'* [laughter].

Draw a tree – It's important that the drawing includes roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves, fruits and seeds



Above: *Ground*

The ground: what we choose to do

Jade: *'As I said to you… I see myself as on an island… a Scottish windswept island, with rock, bog and sheep. Each year, it gets a bit harder for the tree as it is lashed by the wind and weather and the sea level rises.'*

The first image Jade draws and shares is a map showing a small outline of an island with massive waves and wind bending the tiny tree, almost to the ground.

I ask her to take her focus away from the wind and sea and to zoom in for a moment on the patch of ground immediately beneath her tree – where the roots are. She tells me:

'There is a little indent in the land here, with soil – the surface of the land at the base of the tree has grass and I can see some pinks growing.

'The pinks are my children – one of my favourite things is just spending time out in the park with them, watching them laugh, play together – even fight sometimes. They are so alive and so vibrant.

'There is also room at the base of my tree for the gym – you might not see it, but it's there, and as I work out, nothing matters – I am free, I think only of the task at hand. These are the places that I thrive in. Surrounding it is just rocks/bogs and the wasteland that I find myself living in most of my life.

The roots: what or who has taught you the most in life?

'If I'm honest, I struggle with the idea of roots, because as I think of my beginnings and the past… that's when the shaking starts. I know though that there is something that anchors me to this patch of ground and never gives up its hold on me. However, [although] I think about suicide (and I think about it a lot), there is always something that keeps me here. I look at the trunk of my tree and think… just letting it go, letting it rest on the ground would be so easy… giving up… but there is stubbornness and guilt that keep me anchored. I've had a go on my iPad to try to draw the roots.

'They are hard to draw… the mess. The abuse. The absolute blackness of that. But I notice as I draw, that around some of the roots, there are balls of strong root – all tangled together, they form strong knots that keep the tree anchored in the ground. They are not roots into my family or where I was born, but roots into stubbornness – from my Gram and the love of my sister; also the teacher at school who noticed things were not right for me, who taught me to 'never give up on your dreams'. I'm not sure I can always see my dreams, but on the occasions I can glimpse them, they are of me standing and 'present' at one of my children's graduations. Often, I attend things and I find that although it looks as if I'm present… I'm not… just a shadow of me is there and visible.

'I think I might come back to the roots… I know that I need to strengthen their hold on the tree, but I think I'll go onto the next stage if that's OK?'

The trunk: what we care about and our skills

'Although my trunk is bent right over against the waves and weather – I picture it as one of those old, gnarled Scots pine trees, bent over by Scottish winters, but not uprooted. As I talk about it, and when I drew it, I can smell the fragrance of its bark that has not been washed out by the weather. If you were to take a cross-section of this trunk, you would see that each ring is a year I have survived – some years, I've thrived better than others.'

Below: *The roots*

The branches: our horizons

'Sometimes, I dream – I can see myself achieving something with my life, rather than just surviving; other times, I cannot see the horizon at all. Some of my branches are so battered they almost reach to the ground, some have been torn off and lie scattered at the foot of the tree – no hope of ever grafting them back on.

'Surviving is actually one of the branches that runs through everything. However much the branch is hacked or battered, it remains. Sometimes, that feels good enough.

'The other main branch is compassion/love. I'd feel like I'd failed if what happened to me made me bitter and unable to love. As long as I can feel compassion and love for other people, I realise that the abuse cannot win. It cannot take away this core essence. I guess guilt is the other side of love. When I want to end it all, it is the love for others, and their love for me, that keeps me here. Guilt is not a bad feeling, it is just the other side of love.

'If I look back to the roots, that stubbornness I inherited from my amazing Gram seems to run through my blood, turning into endurance through the trunk and then into the branch of survival. Gram also loved – life had been so tough for her.'

> As I talk about it, and when I drew it, I can smell the fragrance of its' bark that has not been washed out by the weather. If you were to take a cross-section of this trunk, you would see that each ring is a year I have survived – some years I've thrived better than others

Leaves and fruits: those who are significant to us and have given to us

'My Gram is definitely one of the leaves on my tree; my children and partner are a fruit. Other leaves are my work colleagues, my friend from the school run (who picks up my kids on workdays). Music – music is inspirational, it is like colour in a world of grey.

'Some leaves have fallen off my tree. I don't need them. I don't even like the idea of a compost heap for them. All those b******s lying there maturing, secreting themselves into others. I want to burn them – burn them in a big fire and watch the smoke blow off into the horizon. I'm not even going to name them. They are not worthy of naming.'

Flowers and seeds: gifts we can give

'I think the legacy I'd like to leave for others – for my kids to know they are loved, and they have the capacity to love. That it's OK to be stubborn. That however much life tears you apart, you can survive; and that laughter (even in grim situations) is OK. And that it is OK to ask for help. No-one is able to be absolutely independent, so asking for help is definitely OK.'

Right: *Tree of life*

So, what did this piece of work mean for Jade? We email a few weeks after our sessions on the tree of life exercises. She writes:

*'**Hi Sue***
I've been thinking a lot about the tree. I've done a lot more drawings – particularly around the roots, and the black that tried to destroy them. The trauma of what happened has always felt so overwhelming, and I have not felt able, ever, to voice or even understand the sequence of events. I have never wanted to go there. Some of what occurred of course happened at a time in my life when I was too young to have any words. I always thought that the abuse had completely obliterated any kind of rooting in love and that I had no foundations, which was why Jade who presented at meetings and was confident, was a fake.

'I realise now though that although the blackness tried its hardest to destroy everything that is good, the knots in the root systems stopped it poisoning the tree. I am OK, and not now so afraid of the dark. The dark is there, but it will not completely overwhelm me.

'Each individual event (there must have been hundreds) that happened has been trapped somewhere in my body, my mind, and my very soul; that is the blackness; it has eaten away at my self-esteem, my health, and has made me think I am worth nothing. It has had me coping through drinking and self-harming.

'Strangely, despite feeling different and free, I have still been having flashbacks, but I am not so scared of them now. I hold the image of my tree, and the leaves, and the strength within it, and they recede. It's as if, finally, these images appear and then somehow get put into the fire and I don't have that particular image flashing back again. I guess there's still many to work through, but things are better. I haven't self-harmed, or even thought of it. I'm debating whether to get some kind of tattoo over the scars – remember, we talked about that once, about transforming and honouring the marks as evidence of the fierce battle that I experienced to just stay alive and keep smiling in my job.' ■

ENDNOTE

If, as college counsellors, we can enable people like Jade to feel 'different and free', then that must be a good thing. Jade is a pseudonym. She has given full permission for the publication of her material which is reproduced in this article, with grateful thanks.

Images are © Jade.

Readers wanting more information about narrative therapy or the tree of life exercise can find it at **www.dulwichcentre.au**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Dale is Mental Health and Counselling Officer at UHI Inverness. She is accredited with BACP and studied for an MSC Counselling and an EdD at Bristol University. She is the author of several books about counselling, and her new book, *Counselling clients affected by complex and developmental trauma*, is due for publication in 2023.

For further information about UHI Inverness Wellbeing Service or to contact the author, email **counsellor.ic@uhi.ac.uk**

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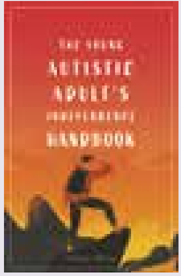
Book Reviews

The Young Autistic Adult's Independence Handbook

Haley Moss
Jessica Kingsley Publishers

ISBN 978-0-8577-9227 £14.99



Moving away from home for the first time and living independently can be daunting for any young person, and it can be especially overwhelming for young, autistic adults.

This practical book helps to ease transitions such as leaving home, going to university, graduating and starting a new job, by offering straightforward advice on key issues, such as managing finances, job applications and the interview process, the co-morbidity of autism and mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and OCD, and the importance of good self-care, exercise and accessing healthcare and psychotherapy and counselling.

It covers all aspects of living, from navigating food as a young, autistic adult, in terms of cooking for oneself and eating socially at restaurants, and tips for easing food-related anxiety, and making friends and dating. It explores washing clothes, personal hygiene, dentist appointments, driving, legal rights and obligations, and coping with big life changes.

The book uses personal stories and interviews with experts, as well as guidance from other young people to help boost confidence. This survival guide is brimming with neurodivergent-friendly tips and advice.

The strengths of this book are that it is clear, simple and concise, and it is a survival guide in a nutshell! It is written from a neurodivergent perspective, and the author brings lots of her own experience, as someone on the spectrum, who has navigated these hurdles first-hand. She also writes with humour, warmth and positivity. A weakness is that some of the information is geographically specific to the US, as the author lives in America. However, it is easily transferable to Europe and the UK.

The best aspect of the book is that the chapters are clearly structured and categorised by topic, such as finances, healthy habits, socialising etc, and so individual chapters can be dipped into, or it can be read as a standalone title.

I really liked this book. It is clearly written and incredibly practical, optimistic and encouraging. I feel it would be useful for practitioners, especially those in FE/HE working with young people, and I would recommend it to colleagues.

Jackie Roberts
University of the Arts London
Psychotherapist and counsellor

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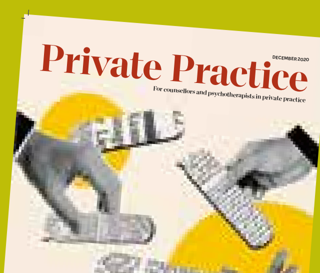
Private Practice

This journal is dedicated to counsellors and psychotherapists working independently, in private practice, or for EAPs or agencies, in paid or voluntary positions.



Thresholds

This is the quarterly journal of BACP Spirituality, and is relevant to counsellors and psychotherapists involved or interested in spirituality, belief and pastoral care.

BACP Workplace

This journal is provided by BACP Workplace and is read widely by those concerned with the emotional and psychological health of people in organisations.

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