



# Odd one out?

**Fiona Winning** reflects on the experience of lone counsellors working in organisations

**Fiona Winning** has worked for voluntary and statutory organisations, counselling on a wide range of client issues. She is a BACP accredited counsellor and gained her MSc in counselling at the University of Strathclyde in 2008. [fiona\\_winning@fiscali.co.uk](mailto:fiona_winning@fiscali.co.uk)

Counsellors may find themselves working in organisations where they are the only therapist, or in little or no contact with any other counsellor who works there, and perhaps feeling a bit like the odd one out without really understanding the reason for this. I have worked as such a counsellor in a number of organisations where, although I enjoyed the autonomy of lone working, I missed the experience of working and learning with counselling colleagues and was often puzzled by what seemed to be a lack of value for,

or understanding of, counselling or its ethical practices within these organisations. I certainly thought I was seen as the odd one out. I also felt vulnerable, because I relied on these organisations to secure the funding that would keep me in employment. These experiences prompted me to research and try to understand the experiences of other lone counsellors working in organisations<sup>1</sup>.

I found little research on lone counselling in organisations. Hewitt and Wheeler<sup>2</sup>, however, demonstrated both the complexity of the lone

Counsellors in non-counselling organisations inevitably face many challenges as they deal with the pressure to provide an ethical and effective service that is valued by the organisation while, at the same time, finding it necessary to justify counselling values and ethical practices to that organisation. Although not specifically addressing the situation of lone counsellors, the stress experienced by counsellors in organisations has been widely documented<sup>6-10</sup>. Baumeister and Leary<sup>11</sup> have observed how essential a sense of 'belongingness' is, and that a decrease in this can lead to anxiety, depression, loneliness and other health problems.

### Investigating the experience

My small-scale study<sup>1</sup> was undertaken with nine diploma-qualified lone counsellors (eight female, one male) who had worked, or were currently working, in organisations. They came from throughout the UK and from various cultural backgrounds. Four of them were interviewed in person and five by telephone. The interviews were audiotaped, then transcribed and subjected to a Glaserian grounded theory analysis<sup>12,13</sup>. The participants were invited to tell me what it had been like for them working as a lone counsellor in an organisation, how it felt to experience their circumstances, what might have been helpful and what, if anything, had made their situation worse. I also asked if they had ever experienced feelings of isolation at work and whether they thought that they had had any freedoms as a lone counsellor that they might not otherwise have had.

### The challenges faced

The workplace challenges that the lone counsellors described fell into the four categories: environmental isolation, social isolation, professional isolation and organisational structures<sup>12</sup>. Describing their working environment, some spoke of feeling unsafe because they had been consigned to work in isolated rooms or empty buildings, as if they were not quite part of the organisation and where they felt lonely and anxious. They were concerned about the effect of this on their counselling practice. All the participants experienced social and professional isolation. They said it was difficult to form relationships with colleagues whose jobs were so different from counselling and whose values and beliefs seemed so contrary to their own. Ethical dilemmas often arose, not least around the issue of confidentiality. This appeared to be because other members of staff, perhaps more used to sharing information, could not understand the counsellors' refusal to disclose client information. This led to distrust and resentment of the counsellors and compounded their sense of being misunderstood, unsupported

counsellor's role in higher education and the significant influence of the employing organisation. This study revealed conflict in the interface between the two, largely due to differences in values and ethics. Other studies<sup>3-5</sup>, while not specifically investigating the experience of lone counsellors, have shown a range of differences between the underlying values, philosophies and policies of counselling and the organisation. Orland<sup>3</sup> describes this as being two distinct worlds that are not easily reconciled.

STOCKPHOTO/THINKSTOCK

and isolated. Consequently, the lone counsellors found that they had no colleagues with whom they could share frustrations, concerns and mutual support, and so they felt very lonely.

Issues relating to organisational structures also concerned them. They all complained that they had insufficient, or no, managerial or administrative support, although they were often expected to establish new counselling services, despite none of them having previous experience of doing so. Several noted that they were not respected as fellow professionals, more so if they were volunteer counsellors. Some of them had difficulty obtaining organisational support to maintain their professional development through relevant training, and almost half of them felt that they did not receive as much counselling supervision as they required.

### Coping strategies

The lone counsellors that I interviewed coped with the challenges of working in an organisation in three main ways: by making the best of things, by proactively striving to improve their situation (ie seeking recognition and respect for counselling and to strengthen their support network and find solutions to specific problems) and, ultimately, by leaving the organisation. For instance, they tried to make the best of their environment by rendering counselling rooms more comfortable or attractive (eg by rearranging furniture and bringing in plants or candles). Most especially, they all relied heavily on the support of counselling supervisors to help them to manage stress and feelings of aloneness, and each of them valued the autonomy that they had to manage their diaries and workload. They strived to raise the profile and respect for counselling within the organisation and their communities and put a lot of effort into forming or maintaining links with former students and counselling associations, by attending training and conferences and by joining or setting up peer support groups.

Participating in the research was seen as a means of making positive contact with me, another counsellor who had experienced lone counselling, and even as a possible gateway to further opportunities to make contact with groups of counsellors.

This urge for acceptance within the organisation, and to reach out to people in the counselling world, may be understood as the need to belong that is fundamental to the human condition<sup>11</sup>. To satisfy this need, and generate positive emotions, a minimum number of significant, positive interpersonal relationships must be maintained. Otherwise, being exposed to rejection and unable to form such relationships may result in physical, behavioural and psychological health problems<sup>11</sup>.

The counsellors I interviewed experienced many symptoms of stress and anxiety that may have been a consequence of their need to belong being thwarted within the organisations for which they worked. One of those counsellors, who had tried in vain to resolve the extreme challenges, loneliness, isolation and lack of care and support in their workplace, eventually found the stress intolerable and left the organisation for the sake of their health. Many described working in an organisation as a long and lonely battle to feel accepted, valued and respected. This led me to conclude that the main condition that accounted for their experiences was this feature of lone battling in the absence of a likeminded community.

### How might lone counsellors improve their roles?

Drawing on the findings from my research, I have devised '10 Top Tips' that lone counsellors in organisations might find helpful:

#### 1 Check practice supervision arrangements at the interview stage

- *Ensure that you will receive the appropriate level of practice supervision.*
- *Find out who is expected to meet the cost – some employers have overlooked this when planning and budgeting for the service.*

#### 2 Ask for an induction process at the earliest opportunity

- *Do not assume this will be forthcoming as that may not be the case.*
- *Use the opportunity to learn about how the organisation functions, to be introduced to other members of staff, and begin a dialogue with colleagues about your own role.*

#### 3 Ensure top-level support for the counselling service

- *The value of establishing and maintaining good working relationships with managers cannot be underestimated. Unless your manager is from a counselling background, they will probably find the world of counselling as baffling as you might find the dynamics of the organisation.*
- *Aim to build a mutually supportive relationship with your manager so that you are perceived as the solution to problems rather than the cause of them.*

#### 4 Build in regular awareness sessions for managers

- *Plan regular and structured meetings to keep your manager up to date regarding how the*

counselling service is functioning within the organisation – both the successes and difficulties. Be prepared to suggest and discuss possible solutions to any difficulties.

- Make your manager aware of current issues in the world of counselling.

### 5 Anticipate reactions to confidentiality

- Find out how issues of confidentiality are perceived and managed within the organisation. Is confidentiality between the client and counsellor, or the client and the organisation? What information may, or must, be shared with administrators, managers, other colleagues, referring agencies etc? (Do they know the answers to these questions?)

### 6 Seek out training related to managerial and administration skills

- Learn as much as you can about ways of effectively organising and managing your time, records, files, appointments etc. In addition, learn about monitoring and evaluating a counselling service.

### 7 Use practice supervision effectively

- Discuss with your supervisor how you might bring workplace-related issues into supervision, in addition to client material, as these may impact on your counselling practice.

### 8 Take up opportunities for continuous professional development

- As well as being an ethical requirement, any opportunities to enhance your counselling knowledge and skills and to engage with other counsellors at training events, conferences etc will help you to maintain links with the counselling community.

### 9 Join or establish peer support groups

- Frequent and ongoing contact with other counsellors will help to reduce feelings of isolation. Consider setting up a peer support group if there is not a suitable one available for you to join in your area.
- Counsellors in isolated rural areas might consider social networking.

### 10 Recognise signs of stress and take early steps to deal with it

- Find out about the signs and symptoms of stress and ways of combating it so that you can recognise when you are becoming unhealthily stressed and are able to tackle this before it becomes too disabling.

## The future

My research revealed that lone counsellors working in organisations face many difficulties created by the tensions between the world of counselling and that of the employing organisation, and that these are, as Orlans<sup>3</sup> described, not easily reconciled. It also supports Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis<sup>11</sup>. My research highlights the need for counsellors to receive basic training in organisational dynamics, and the development, management and administration of a counselling service, to enable them to work more confidently and effectively within that environment. There is scope for much more research into the experience of lone counsellors in organisations, including how organisations view their lone counsellors. I look forward to the time when, building on the application of the accumulated learning from further investigations and findings, the lone counsellors of the future may be seen to belong in organisations and are no longer perceived to be, nor feel, the odd ones out. ■

## References

- 1 Winning FJ. Counselling in organisations: what is the experience of the lone counsellor? *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. 2010; 10(4):249-257.
- 2 Hewitt E, Wheeler S. Counselling in higher education: the experience of lone counsellors. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*. 2004; 32(4):533-545.
- 3 Orlans V. Counselling services in organisations. *Personnel Review*. 1986; 15(5):19-23.
- 4 Towler J. Managing the counselling process in organisations. In: Carroll M, Walton M. (eds) *Handbook of counselling in organisations*. London: Sage Publications; 2003.
- 5 Walton M. Organisation culture and its impact on counselling. In: Carroll M, Walton M. (eds) *Handbook of counselling in organisations*. London: Sage Publications; 2003.
- 6 Brady JL, Healy FC, Norcross JC, Guy JD. Stress in counsellors: an integrative research review. In: Dryden W. (ed) *Stresses of counselling in action*. London: Sage Publications; 1995.
- 7 Carroll C. Building bridges: a study of employee counsellors in the private sector. In: Carroll M, Walton M. (eds) *Handbook of counselling in organisations*. London: Sage Publications; 2003.
- 8 Cushway D, Tyler P. Stress and coping in clinical psychologists. *Stress Medicine*. 1994; 10:35-42.
- 9 Greenwood A. Stress and the EAP counsellor. In: Carroll M, Walton M. (eds) *Handbook of counselling in organisations*. London: Sage Publications; 2003.
- 10 Lockley P. *Counselling heroin and other drug users*. London: Free Association Books; 1995.
- 11 Baumeister RF, Leary MR. The need to belong – desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*. 1995; 117(3):497-529.
- 12 Glaser BG. *Emergence vs forcing: basics of grounded theory analysis*. California, USA: Sociology Press; 1992.
- 13 Glaser BG. *Doing grounded theory: issues and discussions*. California, USA: Sociology Press; 1998.

