



# Young and disruptive

countering the deficit view

Robert Birkbeck introduces three ideas for working with young people whose behaviour is aggressive and disruptive



Young people are often portrayed in the media as 'hoodies' and seen as the 'ASBO generation'. From initially being regarded as a 'young person', the transition process to the word 'youth' is important, as the latter is closely linked to certain elements of the press and hence, in the minds of the wider public, with senseless violent crime and street terror<sup>1</sup>.

Popular television series such as *Shameless* and *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (which ironically utilises the skills of a resident counsellor) have influenced this deficit view of young people and contributed to awareness of the term 'chav'. Predominately in the North East, 'chav' is taken to mean young people associated with antisocial behaviour, welfare dependency, crime, underage sex and drinking<sup>2</sup>.

Young people who access counselling services are often exposed, or have been exposed, to similar discrimination in their everyday life<sup>3</sup>, which in turn conditions their experience of their world. It is important to consider how society 'experiences' young people with 'disruptive behaviours' through the concept of socialisation – meaning, in the majority of examples, that people act in a way that represents societal values and cultural norms. The following quote from a time long before social media and the modern world, describing the power of society, still has relevance today: 'The structures of society become the structure of our own consciousness. Society does not stop at the surface of our skins. Society penetrates us as much as it envelops us.'<sup>4</sup>

The risk is that if young people are seen as 'disruptive' and told they are 'disruptive', they will act in a manner that fits the label, which suggests that, if counsellors work in a society where young people are viewed in a negative light, this tide of negativity may flow into our work. However, basing ourselves in the person-centred approach can provide resilience to this tide and go some way to countering its influence.

### Person-centred and more

Person-centred practice is based upon the three core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard (UPR) and congruence:

**Empathy** is the process of allowing the client to experience being heard or understood, in order to improve their capacity to explore and accept previously conditioned 'other' aspects of self<sup>5</sup>.

**UPR** is the overall attitude of the counsellor in valuing the humanity of the person, and is not deflected by any particular client behaviours<sup>5</sup>. This valuing approach endures when working with disruptive young people, thus valuing the person rather than judging their actions.

**Congruence** is often referred to as the 'realness' of the counsellor. Being real can recognise the young person within a set of disruptive behaviours whilst at the same time drawing a line, particularly if the client is involved in unlawful activity and the criminal justice system. Mearns and Thorne describe congruence as 'the state of being of the counsellor when their outward responses to the client consistently match the inner feelings and sensations that they have in relation to the client'<sup>5</sup>.

From personal experience, I have found that when I work with the three core conditions, they are enhanced by viewing them as a whole, with each dimension connected to the two others, as supported by the following quotations:

'Empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard become integrated until they are as they should be – inseparable.'<sup>5</sup>

'The interrelationship of the conditions of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard is so high that they are inseparable in theory.'<sup>6</sup>

However, I have also found that the following interventions can be used alongside the person-centred core approach (where applicable, the initial source is noted), and these are what I wish to share as we think about work with disruptive youngsters.

### 'Stop and Think' social problem-solving therapy

This model<sup>7</sup> consists of seven steps in alliance with six key questions that are used on every occasion without variation (steps four and five both result from question four). The repetitive nature of the questions allows the client to 'over learn' the process, thereby increasing the chance that it will become part of their everyday routine when appropriate. This element is key, as young people with traits or diagnosed with aggressive disorders generate fewer options and are often more confident in the use of aggression to solve problems<sup>8</sup>. When using the steps, some practitioners may prefer to change the term 'problems' to 'challenges', depending on their orientation.

#### The seven steps

**1 Orientation** Cueing in to bad feelings as a trigger for the problem-solving process and encouraging the belief that problems can be solved.

**2 Problem definition** Before a problem can be solved, it must be accurately defined without relying on inferences or suppositions.

**3 Goal setting** Setting goals as a basis for action planning.

**4 Generation of alternatives** Creative identification of possible ways that goals might be achieved.

**5 Decision making** Examination of the advantages and disadvantages of each potential solution to assist choice of action.

**6 Action** Using one or more of the viable options in a logically arranged means-end action plan.

**7 Evaluation** After the action plan has been implemented, the outcomes are evaluated.

#### The six questions<sup>7</sup>

- 1 What are my bad feelings?
- 2 What's my problem?
- 3 What do I want?
- 4 What are my options?
- 5 What is my plan?
- 6 How did I do?

“ This is a good entry-level intervention to help them ‘landscape’ their behaviour whilst also introducing the concept of metaphor as a method of communication ”

### 'Stop and Think' case study

The following case study is derived from personal work experience. 'Alex' (not his real name), aged 16, was on his last warning at school due to a verbal outburst in class after being challenged by a teacher. Alex noted that if he hadn't left the classroom at that point, he would have hit the teacher – which is perhaps particularly significant in this case, as Alex was a member of the local boxing club. When questioned as to his awareness of what was going on in his mind leading up to the outburst, Alex said: 'It just happened,' and that he didn't know when it would happen next. This 'it just happens' explanation often reflects a volatile mixture of thoughts and emotions in the minds of disruptive young people that can enable them to deny their responsibilities in such a situation, often by blaming others – in this case the teacher.

In applying the 'Stop and Think' process to Alex's situation, he was asked the question: 'Is your problem with teachers or the pressure they put you under?' – which helped Alex to realise he didn't like being told what to do. Next, he was asked: 'Is it likely in the future you will be put under similar pressure by someone else?' Alex noted this could happen when he got a job, and he agreed it was likely he would find himself in similar situations throughout his life and that it might therefore be a good idea to plan a better way of coping. It is important to use the word 'plan' as it opens up the potential to the young person that they can proactively take control of the situation. The six-step question model engages the client in confronting his current cognitive, emotional and behavioural status and working out how to change it.

### Traffic light metaphor

The traffic light metaphor is best described as a 'learning' metaphor, engaging the client to make sense of their situation and explore the dilemmas they face<sup>3</sup>. The use of metaphor in counselling allows the client to communicate their life story: 'It is fascinating how metaphors often describe the quality and intensity of sensations more fully than single words or phrases.'<sup>5</sup>

In using the traffic light metaphor in counselling, it is important for the counsellor to adapt the model to fit their client and explain that the three areas can embrace everyday human feelings for most people – whilst pointing out that there may be some unwelcome consequences if the areas are not used appropriately.

**Red** This zone is where the client feels most distress and can often present as violent or disruptive behaviour. It is sometimes helpful for clients to gauge how much distress they will be in and what impact being in a social environment has on their capacity to calm down.

**Amber** This zone is regarded as a 50/50 area where the client has the capacity to move between the green and red zones. It can sometimes be helpful to work with the client to explore what makes them move to the other areas – in order to identify any potential triggers that require coping strategies to be in place.

**Green** It is likely the client will regard this zone as mostly trouble free and it can be useful to gauge the contrasts. It can be helpful to work with the client to describe a situation where they moved between all three zones, perhaps putting together a timeline of the event<sup>9</sup>.

### Traffic light case study

The simple idea of a traffic light will be familiar to most clients. This is a good entry-level intervention to help them 'landscape' their behaviour whilst also introducing the concept of metaphor as a method of communication. This can set the scene for young people to use their own metaphor, based on their own interests. 'Molly' (not her real name) was a 17-year-old young woman who had been involved in an alcohol-fuelled, violent assault and had been in non-mainstream alternative education for some time.

Despite her reputation, Molly was well liked by most students and teachers unless they were the victims of one of her violent outbursts. In order to work towards addressing the aforementioned violent incident in subsequent counselling sessions, we used an altogether more low-key school-based example in the opening stages of our relationship to establish an initial basis for working together and from which we could develop to the more stretching areas:

**Green** – Molly noted that her disruptive behaviour would often start by messing around with her friends in class.

**Amber** – The teacher would often further challenge Molly's behaviour when even the threat of a sanction had not been effective – in fact had rather provided the catalyst for more disruptive behaviour. Molly would counter the threat of a sanction with her own threats of further disruption – in effect fighting fire with fire, thus serving to further escalate the situation. It is important to acknowledge that the teacher here was doing her job in challenging Molly's behaviour, but for the traffic light technique to work, it is important to understand how Molly was interpreting the challenge within a 'fire with fire' framework, as opposed to the teacher just doing their job.

**Red** – When asked to exit the class, Molly would refuse and would only leave of her own accord when she had had enough of arguing with the teacher. I suggested to Molly that she perceived a threat from the teacher in asking her to leave, and that she was trying to take as much control as possible to limit this threat by refusing to leave. In effect, Molly was refusing to allow the teacher to punish her, it being preferable to Molly to punish herself by leaving when she wanted to so that she could control what degree of punishment she was prepared to subject herself to. We are trying to help Molly understand the distorting force of *her own interpretation* here and how it is impacting upon her subsequent behaviour.

“ This 'it just happens' explanation often reflects a volatile mixture of thoughts and emotions in the minds of disruptive young people ”



### 'Monster' metaphor

The use of monsters originates in the work of Taransaud<sup>1</sup>, whose work has been a welcome source of support. He describes the tension between the 'omnipotent self' and the 'wounded self'. The omnipotent self is the 'monster self', unconsciously signed over to the monster and often taking the form of the antisocial adolescent. The wounded self is perceived to be shameful and weak, and survival happens at the stage where the monster gathers prominence.

Like the mythical monster, the antisocial adolescent is demonised by society and branded with hurtful labels. With such societal conditioning, it is likely the young person will act in a manner that is consistent with those hurtful labels, thus limiting opportunities for the wounded self to take centre stage.

### 'Monster' metaphor case study

This intervention must be approached with sensitivity, since naming the 'monster self' of a young person carries a degree of risk, given the image of young people in mainstream media. However, it is important to recognise the monster self in order to allow it to negotiate with the 'wounded self'. The 'omnipotent self' can be described as a mask that can be removed to show the more genuine 'wounded self'.

'David' (not his real name) was 16 years old and had spent some time in custody. But he was doing well in his current environment and had taken the opportunity to get involved in the educational and recreational activities available. David interacted well in counselling and with other students and staff but we noted that he would often make up stories. In many ways the 'self' he presented in custody was different to the 'self' he presented when committing his offence. Through discussion, David developed an awareness that when committing his offence, people just saw the 'monster' (omnipotent self), and that now, while he was away from the influences of the environment where this 'monster' took prominence, he was able to present the more genuine 'wounded self'. It was then that we agreed that David should do as much as possible to preserve his genuine self while in custody and continue to allow it to take prominence over the 'monster' self. We also agreed this approach would be even more useful after his release into the community where he hoped to enter education and employment.

My view was that making up his stories enabled David to deflect attention from the influence of the 'omnipotent self' over the genuine 'wounded self', and I allowed him to present his stories unchallenged in counselling sessions as they were providing him with a useful purpose. As our relationship progressed over time, David presented fewer 'stories' as his genuine self took centre stage.

### Summary

It is important that counsellors continue to allow clients to take ownership of their reasons for counselling, because we are just a guest in the client's world. It is the client that truly 'lives and breathes' in their world: 'It is not counsellors who change clients – counsellors help clients to find their agency and initiate their own changing process.'<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that in the most unexplored and sensitive parts of the client self there is indeed untapped potential for change, as it is 'only when our internal worlds are disturbed that we genuinely learn anything'<sup>10</sup>.

When young people find themselves in an environment where their disruptive behaviours take centre stage, it is likely that their more genuine self will be forced further away from public exposure, making it less accessible to the young person. Yet despite the challenges, young people are still able to do well in difficult situations.

The balance to be struck is one of maintaining the *capacity* of the genuine self while *introducing rehabilitative themes* such as counselling, guided thinking such as the tools above have demonstrated, and recreational activities to engage their disruptive behaviours. Disruptive behaviours are wrestling for a place to take hold within the young person, while they themselves are wrestling with their own adolescence. I suggest the counselling provided can run parallel to this tension and the period of transition, and engage both sides of the coin – and further, that there is untapped potential for counselling to be effective with young people with disruptive behaviours. ●

**Robert Birkbeck** (MBACP) has an MA in person-centred counselling and is currently working towards BACP accreditation. He has 10 years of experience working with young people in youth work, homeless settings, custodial environments, and in residential homes, and currently works with North East Counselling Services ([www.necounselling.org.uk](http://www.necounselling.org.uk)). He is keen to explore the effectiveness of counselling with disruptive young people.

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