It changed my life October 2020 OCTOBER 2020 SJP - DEPTH - 30 MINS

[MALE RESPONDENT]

[Other comments:]

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**Hello and welcome to the *Therapy Today* podcast. My name's Sally Brown, I'm the editor of *Therapy Today*, and I'm delighted to be joined today by Andy Salkeld. So Andy has written a book called, *Life is a Four-Letter Word: A Mental Health Survival Guide for Professionals*. He's a chartered accountant, he's a financial director for a tech start-up and he's also written very frankly about his mental health struggles. Hi Andy.**

Hi, how's it going?

**It's going well, thank you. Really good to have you hear today, and we're going to talk about really what motivated you to write the book and your own experience of having therapy. So maybe we can just start right from the beginning, before you even went to therapy. What were your preconceptions about what might be involved with therapy? Did you have any surprises when you actually got into the real thing, as it were?**

So I think like a lot of people, our preconceptions come from media. So what you see in TV shows and movies of what seeing a therapist, counsellors, psychoanalyst, psychotherapist, whatever word you want to put to it, we have these preconceptions that it's probably going to be, you walk into a room, they ask you a load or probing questions, and then they tell you it's all daddy issues. Now, in my case, it is, but it's very much a that's what you think it is, but actually, it's absolutely nothing like that. So my first experience of therapy, which was a lot longer ago was when I first had a form of CBT to deal with some anxiety that I had at the time. CBT didn't mesh well with me, and I write about in the book saying, look, I fully respect CBT and what it does, however, my problems were more deep-rooted than what CBT was able to do for me. So my first real experience of proper talking therapy came probably, three/four years ago now, when my recently diagnosed depression was flaring up pretty much an unliveable level.

I essentially walked into a room with a complete stranger and they asked me how I was, and I burst into tears and just started talking, and that is nothing like what I expected. I think I wrote about this for yourselves actually, where I talk about how I was so nervous, but one of the things that my counsellor/therapist said to me very early on was, walking into a room with a stranger and asking them for help, that isn't weakness, that's so far from weakness it's untrue. That's one of the bravest things you can ever do. That stuck with me for three/four years, however long it's been now, and I still see the same therapist/counsellor, admittedly now, it's via Zoom every week, but I still work with the same person and it's become one of the most treasured hours every week that I have.

**Well, that's really great to hear, and it's a story that we hear a lot; that there are preconceptions, as you say, from the movies. There might be a couch involved, or I think quite often people think the therapist is going to do some sort of instant analysis of everything that's wrong with you, sum it all up in a paragraph, and then solve your life and then you walk off. Or they're going to be bossy, or they're going to tell you what to do; and none of those things are true. The process of finding a therapist itself, and finding the right one as you've said, sometimes it's a bit trial and error. You might start off on something that's not right for you. So how easy was it for you to get started on the whole process and find a therapist?**

So I would say the very first stage in the process was recognising that I needed to speak to someone. Recognising that I needed help. I think that is one of the hardest parts of the journey, is actually embracing the need for help. Once I'd faced into that, and faced into the necessity, I will not lie, I just went on Google and went 'Therapist Leeds' and looked down the list and tried to find ones that didn't have CBT listed! There was two or three people that came up. I looked at their websites and their accreditations and everything, dropped them an email, a few of them responded and there was one of them that could see me later that week, and so I just went to see them and, as I say, the rest is history.

**Yes, that's interesting that you actually looked at their accreditations. Did you have a sense of knowing what you were looking for?**

Nope. I think that is a holdover from working in professional services, where you look at people's length of time served doing one thing or another, like whether they have qualification X or qualification Y, how they describe themselves and all sorts of things like that. There was a couple that stood out, there was a couple that didn't, and I would say I was lucky to find someone that worked so well with my personality to begin with.

**Yes, I think you're right, there is an element of luck, and it sounds like you did well; you found the right person. The process is obviously working for you, you stuck with it. It's not an easy question but can you sum up what makes that different from just a conversation with a supportive friend, for instance?**

I would say it's independence more than anything. So we all live relational lives; we are not islands. So no matter what happens in our lives, it happens in the context of other people. Having a therapist is someone who's not connected to any of that. They don't holdover, you don't have any other relationship with them other than they are there to help and to listen and to talk. What that means is if you have an issue with a friend, then you can speak to them, because you can't speak to that friend. Or if you have an issue with a situation that has arisen amongst friends, or at work, or anything like that suddenly; this person is impartial to it and only has your best interests at heart. That to me is the number one. Shortly followed by the number two which is they actually know this stuff compared to your friends that will approach it as a friend first and a knowledgeable resource second. These are people with experience who have dealt with countless problems of countless strengths, varieties, whatever, and can recommend other help if it's required or anything like that. I'd say the independence part is the biggest factor for me, but actually, the knowledge and background makes a huge difference, because they've seen it before.

**Absolutely, yes. So that sense of being held and of it being okay to say, whatever, the unsayable; you're not going to hurt the therapist's feelings.**

Oh yes, and I have said some unquestionable things in those sessions, but they remain there, and they remain confidential.

**Yes, okay. So you've published a book about mental health that's being discussed but do you think there's still a stigma around admitting that you need help?**

Massively. Before I even wrote the book when I first told the world that I lived with depression and anxiety and suicidal ideation, when I first said it, it was in a LinkedIn post titled, *Breaking the Stigma*, because for so long people have regret, they have fear, they have shame and all these things that limit them in what they can and will say. Not necessarily because they don't want help, but because they are afraid of judgement. They are afraid that it could be the death knell of their career. When I started speaking about this, I said, look, we hide in the shadows too much and we all do it. We're British, stiff upper lip, just keep quiet, carry on, all that sort of stuff. Actually, that can be far more damaging than just talking about it and having other people know that you're talking about it openly. I believe it's getting better; I genuinely believe the mental health conversation is better. I have spoken at countless large national and international law firms, giving my *Breaking the Stigma* presentation now, and every leadership team I've spoken to has said, we desperately care about our people.

We want them to have these conversations with us and we just need to find ways to encourage them to have these conversations and you do this gives them that confidence. I have examples that are obviously confidential so I can't talk about in detail, of people who have heard my talk or read my book and have then spoken out and their working lives have changed because of it. That's certainly something I never thought I'd be able to say having, like, ever in my life, I never thought I would be able to say that I know I've saved a life, and it is truly moving to be in that position. All I hope is that more and more people feel that they can talk and that the stigma, as we put it, is overcome.

**Okay, and I wonder about the stigma lingering, particularly in men and in a work context, shall we say, and everything that goes along with that.**

Yes, it was one of the very first comments I had in response to my initial post, and first talk, is the candour you speak with as both a man and a director/businessman about mental health and your own struggle is truly remarkable, and it shouldn't be remarkable. It should just be the norm. Here's one of the really funny facts about stigma that I have been researching and what taboo is, is that it's entirely driven by society. So the way we break the stigma, the way we remove the stigma or stop a subject being taboo is really simple; we just ignore it. We just ignore that it's taboo or that there is a stigma and then suddenly there isn't one, and if we all do that then it's gone. That is all I ask of everyone, is just treat it like it's not there. Treat it like you can speak freely, as if you're speaking to a close friend of anyone, then it will stop existing over time, naturally.

**Do you find you get a response to that? It sounds as though you do. You did some talking freely approach.**

Yes, and again, one of the things I say is that I can't tell you whether it will end your career, or whether people will stop wanting to work with you, but what I can say is since I spoke openly, since I started speaking out and gave my first presentation, more and more people across the country, across different industries and so on have wanted to speak with me, wanted to work with me. Heck! I am now appearing on podcasts and stuff like this, just because I'm willing to speak out and to talk. Sure, it may not all be to do with finance any more, and a lot of people want me to talk about talking out but I'm so much happier because I do this, than I ever was before. That's one of the real messages I like to leave people with is learn to be happy in the present, because whatever we want to believe or say, life really is too short. So make sure you enjoy it whilst you are here.

**Yes, wise words Andy. You said that you've experienced suicidal ideation yourself. We know that suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 40 in this country, so what do you think are the biggest threats to men's mental health?**

I think a lot of them are driven by society, expectation and so on. I know from myself, and I cover it in great depth in chapter seven in my book where I talk about having seven failures. I talk about my failure as someone working in business, I talk about my failure as a husband, I talk about my failure as a son and as a brother, as a parent, as a friend, and then finally, as a failure as a human being. Not because I had failed in any of these things. Not because there was any actual failure, but because I believed in the eyes of society that I was a failure in these seven categories. I think that is what hurts a lot. There's been great work by places like Andy's Man Club and so on, that are actually encouraging men to talk out more and to feel more comfortable in these conversations. I think that is where quite a lot of it comes from. These conversations don't typically happen and therefore, there's always that position of trepidation and uncertainty and fear that stops them happening in the first place.

**Absolutely. Particularly in relation to the working environment, I think. Your book is *Mental Health for Professionals* [sic], although you have said that it extends to everybody, not just professionals, but we do know that the working environment has changed dramatically this year and brought extra pressures with it. I just wondered what was coming through for you when you do your talks to various organisations that you do all the time? What kind of pressures are people under now?**

So the biggest one I talk about is how pre-COVID, there was a huge presenteeism culture that existed within most businesses. By this I mean - and I lived this - where you wanted to be first in the door and last out of the door at work, and you would find work just to be at work. For me, that seeped into, you don't relax well, you don't turn off well, you don't go home, you don't rest. What's happened now, this year, is we've moved from presenteeism into what I believe is called 'always on'. What this means is because you're living in the same environment that you're also working in, people find it hard to draw borders and boundaries between where they work and where they rest. What happens is it kind of blurs, so you think, oh well, I'm not working that well, so I'll just keep working an hour or so later into the evening because I took a long lunch break, I watched *Neighbours* - I don't even know if *Neighbours* is still a TV show - but you know what I mean?

These sorts of things where they're like, oh well, I won't stop working at five, I'll work till six because I dossed around a bit, and then, oh well, I didn't do anything during that, so I'll stay online till seven. Then you don't rest and therefore, you get up the next day and you do even less work because you're tired. This always on culture of responding, having things on your phone, having work emails pop up and remind you of work when you're resting and everything like that is what's really impacting people at present. So one of the things I would recommend people read is, I did an interview and couple of sessions with Adam Asks, or Adam Recruitment Agency based in Manchester and London, where we talk about the pandemic; how it's affected people, how it's affected work and what's happening beyond it. I go in depth in a lot of these things as how we can actually… I didn't say at the time, but it's very much what the government is saying now in, we can build back better.

We can take the things that worked well for our mental health from before, and we can take the things that have worked well for our mental health now, and we don't have to choose one or the other. We can have both. We can put ourselves first, for once. We can look after us. All we have to do is want it and keep it.

**Yes, and believe that we deserve it, we're entitled to it, and it is possible to be efficient, productive, useful, creative and at the same time, not be exhausted, not be stressed, and still have a quality of life. I always find it interesting that one of the first responses to potential burnout in people is to work harder. When they feel like they're losing their grip slightly, it's like, okay, I need to put it more work then, I'll do some work at the weekend then. Which obviously, just makes the whole situation…**

Yes, I believe this comes down to guilt, and I think that guilt is driven by our want of acceptance, as in, we as a people, we as a society, we work as groups of people and we want to be accepted in part of that group. What happens is we feel we're not working hard enough, and therefore, we won't be accepted for our work so the immediate response is, oh my God, I'm not going to be accepted by this, by the people that I care about and want the attention of and the affection of, anything like that. So I need to work harder to make up and catch up with everything that I missed. Whereas actually, what we need to do is we need to seek the acceptance from people for just being us, for just being who we are, not what we do. If people just like you and want to be with you for you being yourself, surely that's a much easier relationship and a much easier working environment, regardless?

**Absolutely, and I guess that acceptance essentially starts with ourselves accepting ourselves for all the warts and all, which is hopefully where the therapy comes in. I wondered about that process for you because you say it's ongoing, which is just fantastic to hear. Not everyone's** **able to do that, to have therapy their whole life, obviously, but tell me about the role it plays for you?**

So I've been through the rollercoaster, I've had the ups and downs, I know that. What working with my therapist has allowed for me is to have a level of stability in an otherwise unstable environment. There have been various things that have gone on throughout my life but it's that one time each week when you can say, here's what's been happening, and I just need to vent. You can't always do that; you can't always find the time. We live busy lives, we genuinely do. We never stop thinking, we never stop the conversation of, I should probably do this. I say 'should' is a swear word, but that is what we say to ourselves, we should be doing this, we should be doing that. Whereas actually, protecting one hour a week, not even an hour, I think it's 45 minutes, 50 minutes, protecting that one slot where you can just be like, here's all the rubbish that's happened, and it's just a brain dump. There are times when that session isn't much, and this is one of the preconceptions I would like to quell in people, is that you don't need to have something wrong with you to speak to a therapist.

**I agree!**

You can actually go into that room and say, I've had a really good week, this has happened, and they will still respond exactly the same, how do you feel? Does it make you feel better? What are you recognising? It's just as valuable when you're having a good time as when you're having a bad time.

**Yes, and I hear that from clients a lot, people have got it much worse than me, my problems aren't that serious, that apology for coming. It's not the event itself, it's the impact on you. Well, it's not even necessarily events, sometimes it's just a place to make sense of thoughts, feelings, experiences. It's about working out who you are, or who you want to be, or how you want your life to be, where you [over speaking 00:25:51]. It's the bigger questions and it's, as you say, that space every week in which to do it. Well, it's so great to hear that. It remains an ongoing, very important part of your life Andy, and long may that be, and I hope that your book will encourage people who feel there is still a stigma to just be brave and talk about it without fear of judgement.**

So just on the book quickly, one of the things that listeners might find interesting, particularly when it comes to the thoughts of the 'should' and the acceptance and everything is the book actually contains my inner narrative, my inner monologue. Those conversations we have with ourselves where we say, oh, you could have done that better, why did you send that email? Why didn't you wave goodbye? Why did you blow them a kiss? All those sorts of things where you question yourself. Well, what I decided in trying to be as honest as I could about it was I was going to show those feelings and those thoughts as well to bring the most honest interpretation of what life can be like when you live with depression or when you live with anxiety and suicidal ideation and all of that. But also, to hopefully, and I say this in a very hopeful manner, that actually we're not all that different, we all have the same thoughts, we all think, oh why did you eat all that, you're just going to get fat? Or anything like that, because one of the biggest things anyone out there can struggle with is feeling alone in it, and we're not alone. No one's alone in it.

So that's just one of the narrative points, and yes, it does make it the worst retelling of *Fight Club* ever; Finance Club. I also used it because it makes it funny, it makes it interesting, because if I just told you a really sad story for 300-odd pages, you wouldn't read it, but it's actually really well received and there's been some really nice reviews that have come out. One of my favourite ones was very much where it said, it certainly wasn't a pleasure to read, it certainly wasn't easy to read, but I desperately implore every person out there to read it, because it is so vitally important that we all understand the central messages to this. That's pretty much how I describe it anyway is, I am never going to accept any praise I receive about it, because to me, it's just telling a story nowadays. I've lived these experiences; to me, it's no different than talking about going on holiday last year, or what I did with some friends at the weekend. It's just part of my life and what I hope is that everyone can realise that yes, times can be bad, times can be upsetting, but it's part of life and we're not alone in it.

**We're not alone, yes, absolutely, and we can do that through stories, we can connect through stories, how wonderful. Thank you so much, Andy, for sharing that with us today, and also, for sharing your own personal story in the hope of helping so many.**

[Music plays]

**Thank you for listening to the BACP *Therapy Today* podcast. We hope that you enjoyed it. Remember, if you've got any ideas or suggestions on what we might include in future editions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Thanks again!**

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