



# BACP *Workplace*

For therapists working with employees, employers and EAPs

Issue 122 October 2024

*'It is not uncommon to meet neurodivergent clients who have been 'sent' for counselling by their employer'*

Page 8

The  
neurodivergent  
workforce:  
*why don't I  
fit in at work?*

SHORTLISTED  
2021  
MEMBERSHIP  
EXCELLENCE  
AWARDS

# Contents

## FEATURES

# 08

## The issue:

### *Why don't I fit in at work?*

The world of work was never designed with neurodivergent people in mind – but it doesn't have to be this way. **Nick Wood** argues that it's time for employers to become neurodivergent-friendly and therapists have a role to play too

# 14

## The interview:

### *My workplace*

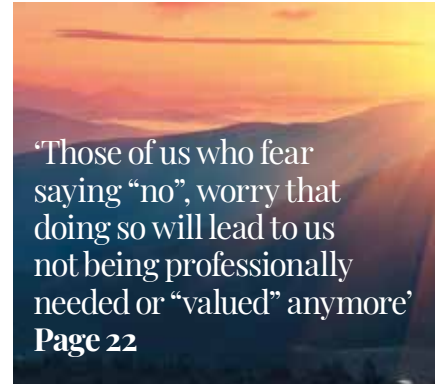
Changing the way the world speaks is the ambition of **Dr Penny Newton-Hurley**, the Director of CommPassion. Working with business to help them create psychologically safe workplaces, Penny was inspired and informed by the late Dr Marshall Rosenberg, author of *Nonviolent Communication – A Language of Life*. Penny talks to **Nicola Banning** about her love of language, life and work



# 20

## The bigger picture

Mental health at work – where are we now? **Kris Ambler**, BACP's Workforce Lead, gives an insight into projects he's involved with on behalf of BACP members, and considers what the new Labour Government could mean for us all



'Those of us who fear saying "no", worry that doing so will lead to us not being professionally needed or "valued" anymore'  
Page 22

# 22

## The power of 'no'

The art and science of saying 'no' is a topic **Nicola Neath** understands, personally and professionally. She explores why so many of us struggle to say 'no' at work, and how therapists can best support our clients (and ourselves) to use that two lettered word more easily

# 28

## Poet @ work

How we approach the infamous 'elephant in the room' can be a challenge that goes beyond the therapy room. **Nicola Banning** talks to poet, **Jean Wolfe**, about her work with women to market and communicate authentically, and how her poem, *The Elephant in the Room* has served as a powerful agent for change

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## REGULARS

3

## From the Editor

**Nicola Banning**  
Agents of change

4

News  
from BACP  
Workplace

## COLUMNS

19

## Workplace matters

**Sandi Mann**  
I want it now!

32

## Books

In *Midlife – Stories of crisis and growth from the counselling room*, author and therapist **Helen Kewell** explores the rich terrain of the midlife experience. She talks to **Nicola Banning** about her research and the role our profession can play in reclaiming the midlife as a time of vibrancy, healing and growth

34  
Q&A

How can I balance my responsibilities to both my clients and their employer?  
**Jack Jackson** responds to a workplace dilemma



## Agents of change

I've always loved how our work goes beyond the conventions of the one-to-one counselling relationship. By the very nature of what we do, workplace therapists are also in relationship with our clients' employers, organisations and EAPs – and by sharing our emotional and psychological literacy, we can be agents of change at work.

It's a common thread that runs through this issue, starting with Nick Wood's article, 'Why don't I fit in at work?' Exploring why the workforce is rarely a place where neurodivergent employees can thrive, Nick considers what needs to change for the workplace to become a more welcoming and happier space for all. Sharing his experience of working with neurodivergent clients, Nick demonstrates how he goes about creating the best conditions for the therapeutic work to take place.

Modelling small adjustments and adaptations to counselling sessions, Nick shows how just a little care and understanding can go a long way to making a space where neurodivergent people feel accepted and that they belong. Given that 20% of the UK's adult population has a neurodivergent condition,<sup>1</sup> there are surely lessons for us to take into our client work and, if we are able, to our employers too.

Elsewhere, Nicola Neath, a senior staff counsellor at the University of Leeds, writes powerfully about how often we say 'yes' when we need to say 'no'. In 'The power of "no"', Nicola is frank about her own experience of not saying 'no' at work – with the inevitable consequences. It's the shadow side to being a helper and our profession is not immune to continuing with deeply wired destructive patterns of

behaviour. Fortunately, Nicola explores how we can create new pathways too, and there is hope and possibility in what we say 'yes' to instead.

In the latest Readers' Survey, (thank you, if you responded), there was a request for some 'lighter pieces' to balance some of the 'heavier' content. Therapy can come in many ways – and sometimes it's in the form of a poem. So, when I had the good fortune to meet marketing coach and poet, Jean Wolfe, I knew I wanted to introduce her to you too. *The Elephant in the Room* is the poem Jean read to a hushed room of businesswomen, and the quality of listening that took place said much about how her poem had resonated. I hope it speaks to you, and if it feels right, that you might share it with clients.

And finally, in 'My workplace', I talk to Penny Newton-Hurley about her work helping the business world to create psychologically safe places to work. With an ambition unlike any I've heard before, Penny wants to change the way the world speaks. Aware that she's got her work cut out, her mantra for facing tough times is, 'I can, I will, I do, I am'. If like me, you'd welcome a little more fire in your belly as we enter the darker months, the interview on page 14 with Penny is essential reading.

I hope you find something in this issue to inspire and nourish you. ●

**Nicola Banning**  
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## REFERENCE

- 1 The National Autistic Society. What we do: employment. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/533tbdwv> (accessed 12 August 2024).

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## Notes from the Chair

# Farewell



‘It’s a good opportunity to review where we have been and reflect on the year’s highlights so far – and I’m pleased to say there have been quite a few!’

**Vianna Boring Renaud**

**W**hile we all know that change is the only constant, I’ve been struck by the amount of political change this year, as record numbers of people have been voting in elections across the world. I certainly watched with interest as the new Labour Government took office in July with quite a spring in its step. And now, here across ‘the pond’, I sit nervously awaiting the US presidential election to be held in November. I can feel the tension and suspect that this will only heighten as the big day approaches.

### Summer meeting

I was so pleased that the Workplace Executive Committee was able to hold its informal meeting online at the end of August. It’s important that we keep abreast of organisational changes at BACP and also catch up with one another, so we can explore the priorities of the Workplace division as it moves forward. It’s worth saying that we all volunteer our time and energy, in addition to our client work and other responsibilities as workplace specialists, and so I’m always grateful to the commitment every member of the Committee makes to support our essential work.

As my time as Chair is now drawing to a close, we explored what happens next, given that we find ourselves in the unusual position of not having anyone who has expressed

interest in taking over the reins. Perhaps it’s a sign of the times – a reflection of the overload so many of us experience, as I know there has always been a clear succession plan in place previously. Given this challenge, I’m really pleased we all discussed a new way ahead – and the Executive Committee have decided to share the Chair’s responsibilities as a group, collectively providing guidance and leadership as we make our plans.

These will be fleshed out at our annual meeting which will be held in October at BACP House. It’s always a highlight as historically it is the one time of year when we gather together in person, if we can, to plan our strategy for the following year.

### Review of the year

It’s a good opportunity to review where we have been and reflect on the year’s highlights so far – and I’m pleased to say there have been quite a few! They include hosting BACP’s Working With event, ‘Working with the changing face of mental health and cognition within the workplace setting’, which was held earlier in the year. It was a great success and in large part due to the hard work of Executive Committee members, Jack Jackson, Andrew Woods and former member, Claire McCluskey who led on the planning and preparation. I’m delighted that Nick Wood, who contributed



to the event, has taken the time to write an article based on his talk in this issue, 'Why don't I fit in at work?' on page 8.

At the annual Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference, held at the NEC in Birmingham in March, it was wonderful that Nicola Neath, a former Chair of the Workplace division, spoke on a fascinating topic – the art and science of saying 'no'. Saying 'yes' when we mean 'no' is such a common issue that crops up in the counselling room and Nicola's research in this area is grounded in her lived experience. You can read what she has to say on page 22.

Earlier this year, along with Julie Hughes and Nick Wood, (both former Executive Committee members), I contributed to a chapter in a new book – *Counselling Pathways: Developing Your Career*, edited by Rick Hughes. Aimed at counselling students and newly qualified counsellors, the book offers invaluable guidance about the choices and options for a career in the profession.

Writing this, around the time that I am stepping down as Workplace Chair, has made me realise how good it feels to be able to collaborate with

colleagues, sharing our knowledge and experience of the workplace sector (which has been gained over many decades) for the good of others who are starting out in their careers as counsellors. It's inspiring to look back on 2024 and see how much has been achieved already this year – and it isn't over yet!

### Thank you

Before I sign off, I'd like to offer a huge thank you to Kris Ambler, BACP's Workforce Lead for his dedicated support and hard work to the Workplace division. You can find out more about the projects Kris has been involved in on page 20. And finally, my thanks go to Jennifer O'Donnell, BACP's Special Interest Lead to the Workplace division. It's been a time of significant change and I've found Jennifer's support invaluable, both to me personally and to the division.

As we look ahead, I hope that the Executive Committee will continue to work closely with BACP to ensure that our members feel supported in their work, that our work is seen, valued and understood. I know I speak on behalf of the Executive Committee when I say that we are looking forward to bringing greater awareness

of our sector to all. If you have thoughts or comments on this, I hope you will share them or email Nicola Banning, *BACP Workplace* editor, at:

**workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk**

And finally, we will be looking to recruit new members to the Workplace Executive Committee in the near future, so if this appeals to you, remember to look out for an email in your inbox. Speaking personally, it was a life changer when I joined the Executive Committee some years ago and it's something I most definitely recommend. There is so much to learn about our profession, our sector and the world of work – and that's without mentioning the wonderful colleagues with whom I've formed deep friendships. I'm honoured to have worked with such an incredible group of people who are passionate about our work.

Thank you for all your support. I wish you all the very best for the autumn and the run up to 2025! ●



**Vianna Boring Renaud,**  
Chair BACP Workplace  
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# Arts and crafts give greater life satisfaction than work, survey suggests



It's well known that arts and crafts can have a positive effect on our mental health, but new research suggests that such activities could be an important tool for improving public health in general. This could be helpful, as Dr Helen Keyes, a co-author of the research from Anglia Ruskin University, explains: 'It's quite an affordable, accessible and ultimately popular thing for people to do. And that's key. You're not going to be shoving something down people's throats that they don't want to do.'

Research published in the journal, *Frontiers in Public Health*, analyses data from 7,000 people aged 16 or over who took part in the face-to-face Taking Part Survey by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport, between April 2019 and March 2020.

As part of the survey, participants were asked to rate various aspects of their wellbeing on 10-point scales, report whether they took part in arts or crafts, and provide demographic details. The team found that just over 37% of participants reported taking part in at least one art or craft activity in the past 12 months – ranging from painting to pottery and photography.

The researchers then looked at the ratings for wellbeing. The results revealed that people who engaged with creating arts and crafting had greater ratings for happiness, life satisfaction, and feeling that life was worthwhile than those who did not, even after taking into account other factors known to have an impact – including age, gender, deprivation, poor health and employment status. This showed that crafting, in and of itself, is associated with a bigger increase in wellbeing.

Among other results, the team found engaging in arts and crafts was associated with an increase in happiness on a par with ageing by 20 years

(as wellbeing goes up slightly with age), while the sense that life was worthwhile was more strongly associated with crafting than being in employment.

Dr Helen Keyes said: 'That was probably our most interesting finding, because you would certainly think you get a lot of your sense of worth from being in employment.' The results, she added, might reflect that not everybody is in a job they find fulfilling, while people often have a sense of mastery or 'flow' when undertaking arts and crafts – experiencing control, achievement and self-expression.

While increases in wellbeing associated with creating arts and crafting were very small – on average, engaging in such activities was only linked with a 2% higher rating for the feeling that life was worthwhile – the results are meaningful at a population level.

Dr Helen Keyes added: 'If you're a national health service, or you're a government, seeing a 2% increase in the overall wellbeing of your population is going to be really significant at that kind of national level.' Backing activities could offer a simpler route for governments to improve the nation's wellbeing than other factors that are known to have a big effect.

**To find out more:**  
<https://tinyurl.com/bdfs6zw6>

## Books



### *You Don't Have to Be Mad to Work Here – A Psychiatrist's Life* by Benji Waterhouse

**Publisher: Vintage Publishing**

Unlocking the doors to the psych ward, NHS psychiatrist Dr Benji Waterhouse provides a fly-on-the-padded-wall account of medicine's most mysterious and controversial speciality.

Why would anyone in their right mind choose to be a psychiatrist? Are the solutions to people's messy lives really within medical school textbooks? And, how can vulnerable patients receive the care they need when psychiatry lacks staff, hospital beds and any actual cures?

*You Don't Have to Be Mad to Work Here* explores these complicated questions from both sides of the doctor's desk.

## Discounts on counselling and psychotherapy books

BACP members can benefit from exclusive discounts on counselling and psychotherapy-related books from a range of publishers and booksellers.

We've worked with our publishing partners to create collections of discounted counselling and psychotherapy books that we hope you'll find of interest.

All members can benefit from these discounts as part of our core membership package. Simply go to the BACP link below, log in, follow the links to the respective publisher, choose your books and apply the discount code at the checkout.  
<https://tinyurl.com/3bdvduu>





## Dates for the diary

### Online

#### 48th BACP Annual General Meeting 2024

**Date: 7 November 2024**

This year's Annual General Meeting is free to attend and there are spaces left to join online. BACP invites you to get involved and help shape the future of our profession.

You can book your place by visiting BACP Events online: <https://tinyurl.com/ymbxr58j>

#### London and Online BACP Student Conference 2025

**Date: 8 February 2025**

Our Student Conference – 'Bridging the gap', will be returning in a hybrid format on Saturday 8 February 2025. This event will support our student members to gain confidence when taking the step from trainee to fully qualified practitioner.

This is a popular and successful biennial flagship BACP event that has been in existence since 2012, supporting our student members and the wider profession.

It will include discussions around current challenges impacting the profession, equipping attendees with the knowledge and confidence to approach them in the future.

There will be two keynote presentations, in addition to 16 workshops across four strands. Each strand will focus on a different theme: 'career pathways', 'practitioner experience', 'personal development' and 'out of your depth'.

There will also be taster talks which provide valuable insights into how BACP can support you on your journey and throughout your career, as well as an exhibition highlighting products and services which may be beneficial.

The aims of the conference are to:

- support student members transitioning from training to qualification and career
- support networking opportunities and peer-to-peer support
- raise awareness of the support BACP can provide student members and beyond as their membership body
- provide enriching CPD opportunities which are relevant and timely
- inspire delegates to take the next step on their journey into a career in counselling and psychotherapy.

The cost for in-person delegates is £35 for BACP members and £50 for non-members. For online attendance, the cost is £25 for BACP members and £50 for non-members.

Included in your booking are approximately six hours of CPD presentations, and an on-demand service will be available for three months after the event for you to view any content you'd like to catch-up on from the day.

You can book your place by visiting BACP Events online: <https://tinyurl.com/2xaf6fts>



## Could you write an article for BACP Workplace?

If you've been pondering over an idea for a possible article for *BACP Workplace*, please don't keep it to yourself. The editor, Nicola Banning, is keen to hear from potential writers with knowledge about the following – male mental health at work, working with EAPs, working online as a workplace counsellor and supervision in the workplace sector.

In addition, Nicola is always interested in hearing from you about other issues that you think we should be covering, especially if it's your area of expertise. For example: Have you carried out some interesting research with your clients or in your workplace? Is there a topic that *BACP Workplace* hasn't covered and which you know a lot about? Or do you know someone in the workplace sector who inspires you, who you think might make an interesting interviewee?

You are welcome to contact Nicola at: [workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk](mailto:workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk) with a brief outline of your article idea, and explaining why it could be of interest to counsellors working with employees, employers and EAPs.



### Feedback

We welcome readers' letters and comments. If you've read something in *BACP Workplace* you would like to comment on, please do get in touch: [workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk](mailto:workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk)



# Why don't I fit in *at work?*



The world of work was never designed with neurodivergent people in mind – but it doesn't have to be this way. **Nick Wood** argues that it's time for employers to become neurodivergent-friendly and therapists have a role to play too



**Nick Wood** is an accredited BACP counsellor, supervisor and trainer, and a former member of BACP Workplace Executive Committee. As one of the first counsellors to be recognised by the National Autistic Society, Nick now specialises in working with neurodivergent clients in his private practice, as well as supervising, supporting and developing neurodivergent therapists. Nick was a former manager of the staff counselling service at a large local authority and is a co-author of the Workplace Counselling Competence framework.<sup>8</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/ym68svf5>

It is estimated that 20% of the UK's adult population has a neurodivergent condition,<sup>1</sup> with implications for employers and their working environment. According to the National Autistic Society, 80% of autistic people either struggle to find or maintain work, or find themselves in work that underuses their skillset.<sup>1</sup> Anecdotally, I hear counsellors engaged in the workplace and EAP sector who are reporting increasing numbers of clients with a neurodivergent condition being referred for therapy.

It's not uncommon to meet neurodivergent clients in my practice who have been 'sent' for counselling by their employer, only for it to transpire that 'the issue' appears to lie within the referring organisation itself. It's a familiar theme for workplace practitioners grappling with both the moral and ethical concerns; that we may be part of a profession patching up clients, only to return them to a working environment that doesn't meet their needs, and which can exacerbate their presenting issues.

This year, I presented at BACP's 'Working with the changing face of mental health and cognition within the workplace setting' event, and here, I share my experience of working with neurodivergent clients and how employers can help support these employees. However, my interest goes beyond the professional, as I am also the parent of four children who all have a diagnosis of autism. As parents, my partner and I have spent hours getting to know our children, learning their individual strengths and weaknesses, understanding how their conditions subtly vary, and working out how to help them grow into self-aware and independent adults.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I attract neurodivergent clients to my practice and while I don't class myself to be an expert on individual conditions, I **am** an expert in helping my clients to find understanding and acceptance of their individual situations. I also have some insight into the barriers that neurodivergent people face, particularly in the workplace, and I'm experienced in helping clients to find ways to overcome or circumvent those barriers.

## Neurodivergent people at work

Being neurodivergent is not a problem, it's just a difference which can be a striking advantage. For example, people with dyslexia or ADHD are more likely to be creative, while autistic people often excel at tasks requiring an attention to detail. Unfortunately, it may be a disadvantage too, as differences in processing social communication or sensory processing can lead some employers to be unwilling or lacking in the correct knowledge to put the necessary support mechanisms in place.

Assumptions are made that neurodivergent people can be difficult, unreliable, or only associated with niche roles at work. The obstacle lies, not in the neurodivergent person, but in the constraints imposed on their access to employment, retention and development. Describing the working environment as 'naturally hostile to autistic people', the autistic writer and speaker, Pete Wharmby writes, 'This is not on purpose (or at least I hope not); it is simply a by-product of autistic people being so indistinct and ill-defined on people's radar to be essentially invisible.'<sup>3</sup>

## What is neurodiversity?

The term 'neurodiversity' is analogous to biodiversity, ie that human neurology varies across society and is in itself an ecosystem, in which society and workplaces do better with a balance of skills, perspectives and attributes. While between 80-90% people fit into the sub-category 'neurotypical' ie broadly similar in how they sense, emote, think and respond, the other 10-20% are neurodivergent, diverging from the majority neurological profile in one or more significant ways.<sup>2</sup>

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term, including a diverse mix from autism to dyspraxia, ADHD to giftedness, and many neurodivergent people align with two or more of these labels. However, the stereotypes linked to these labels can lock individuals into simplistic boxes as society's 'broken toys', rather than examples of essential diversity. Fortunately, we are seeing an increase in awareness about neurodiversity among employers as training and policies on neurodiversity and inclusivity are introduced.<sup>2</sup>

However, too few employers have yet to actively engage with making adaptations, and clients continue to experience discrimination and feel the need to 'fit in' at work. Often, my role is to help the client to find their own voice and sometimes, I'm asked to be their voice, in order to bring organisational issues to the employer's attention, making the 'essentially invisible'<sup>3</sup> visible.

'Asking ourselves, "Does the traditional 50-minute hour for therapy suit everyone?" is an important question.

Indeed, why should it? – as one size never fits all'

## Making adaptations to counselling

I model the kind of adaptations and acceptance that I would wish to ideally see in the workplaces of the clients who are referred to me. I work from an assumption that a client's neurodivergent condition and presentation are likely to have featured within their existing conditions, such as anxiety (possibly caused or exacerbated by trauma) and sensory issues (sensitivity to noise, smells and light). Indeed, many diagnostic tools will see these as important markers alongside the more traditional symptoms, such as differences in executive functioning or communication.

Typically, the adaptations I make in my counselling space might include removing ticking clocks and other distractions, being flexible about the lengths of sessions, offering walking therapy instead to avoid intrusive 'eye contact', and avoiding the use of jargon (or what I call 'therapy speak'). I also believe these adaptations are likely to benefit **all** clients.

Asking ourselves, 'Does the traditional 50-minute hour for therapy suit everyone?' is an important question. Indeed, why should it? – as one size never fits all. If I'm a truly person-centred counsellor who believes in the power of diversity, why would I ask clients to adapt to **my** world? Instead, I aim to ensure that clients feel included in the therapeutic space, rather than simply experiencing barriers to entry which are all too familiar for the neurodivergent population.

## Being trauma-informed

Beyond offering a welcoming physical space to clients, it helps to hold in mind some attitudinal approaches that will inform our work with neurodivergent clients, and help to establish the therapeutic relationship. In much the same way as person-centred therapists offer Roger's core conditions, it is how we communicate our approach to the client that is more significant than



any particular skill we might adopt. I encourage anyone interested in working with neurodivergent clients to spend some time creating their own attitudinal approaches, which can be communicated to clients and kept under constant review.

#### My approach includes:

- Practising a strengths-based approach which builds on the client's strengths as a foundation, rather than focusing on what others might have told them are their weaknesses
- It is not the responsibility of those with difference to 'fit in' with society but instead for society to make room for all
- Society is not perfect and there is currently a need for 'labels' in order for an individual to gain access to resources that are often only distributed to those with a label. However, I believe that labels do not define or limit a person
- Difference/s should be celebrated and not seen as a problem
- My working assumption is that most people who have been told they are different have, at some point, experienced exclusion
- Exclusion is often experienced by human beings as trauma
- Those who have so-called 'hidden differences' have likely had the added trauma of not having their trauma recognised, valued or trusted
- I am not an expert on neurodivergence and I am not an expert on my client's life
- Just because I have met one person with neurodivergence, I have only met one divergent person. Everyone's experience, presentation, mix of symptoms and story are unique
- As a therapist, I have some skills that help me to communicate and establish a trusting relationship, which can help bring symptom relief, healing and new possibilities to the client
- In my practice, I have 'good enough' personal and professional knowledge of neurodiversity to be available to neurodivergent clients
- I am willing to keep learning and I will always remain curious.

I encourage therapists working with neurodivergent clients to study trauma-informed techniques which are particularly helpful when working with autistic clients. This broadly means avoiding, where possible, placing any 'judgment-based demands' on the client.

For example, in therapy, neurodivergent clients often come to realise that they have been masking at work. Masking is exhausting and means the employee is constantly trying to fit in and guess what is required of them. Sadly, the same can be

## 20%

**It is estimated that 20% of the UK's adult population has a neurodivergent condition'**



## 80%

**According to the National Autistic Society, 80% of autistic people either struggle to find or maintain work, or find themselves in work that underuses their skillset'**



said of therapy, as autistic people spend so much time concentrating on, 'What is the other person expecting me to say and do?' and, 'How do I get it right?' that early therapy sessions can be a missed opportunity unless the therapist is informed and aware.

Therefore, I take time to explain the concept of talking therapies, the benefits of working towards goals, increasing self-awareness and how this leads to self-growth, as too often, neurodivergent clients have a history of being seen as 'a problem'; for example, the child who didn't fit in at school and was sent to clinicians whose aim was to 'define' or 'fix' them. In our role as counsellors, we may actively work to be the antidote to the early repressive memories that our clients hold of what an 'expert' is. Unfortunately, workplaces often unknowingly reinforce the negative experiences of education settings and the culture.

#### The SLANT imprint

The influential author, Doug Lemov wrote a best seller called *Teach Like a Champion*, which gained influence in explaining to trainee teachers what they should look for in an ideal cohort of students.<sup>4</sup> The unwritten rules for pupils to fit into the classroom were given the acronym SLANT:

**S**it still

**L**isten

**A**sk and answer questions at the right time

**N**od to show you understand

**T**rack the teacher with your eyes to show you are paying attention.

However, the above behaviour is almost impossible for anyone who has ADHD or autism, dyslexia or any other neurodivergent condition.<sup>5</sup> As a result, young children are likely to find one of two things happening to them; either they are likely to be labelled as disruptive and face some form of social exclusion, or they will have learnt to stay in class by 'masking' or 'camouflaging', hiding their true identity by not standing out. The outcome for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is likely to have been some form of psychological wounding.<sup>5</sup>

It perhaps helps explain why so many neurodivergent employees are reluctant to tell their employer about their condition when they later enter the workforce. They can also face a double whammy as workplaces (albeit unintentionally) often base the social pattern of what is expected at work on the SLANT model used in education settings. Of course, today's employers will say that they encourage individuality and creativity, but we still hear accounts in therapy that a request for specialist software or to have a

workplace mentor, is met with the response, 'If we do that for you, we would have to do it for everybody.' Clients often report feeling vulnerable and inferior or 'lesser than' their colleagues when asking for the type of support they should feel entitled to request. In these circumstances, the role of the workplace counsellor is to:

- Help the client repair past hurts by bearing witness to their unique story
- Allow the client to improve their own self-worth and identity to a point where they can reframe their relationship with their neurodivergence
- Support the client to find their voice and ask their employer for the reasonable adjustments they are entitled to.

It will depend on our contract with the employer or EAP whether we are able to directly add to the client's voice by writing reports back to the employer, making recommendations for adjustments, subject to the client's consent. I recommend that workplace counsellors have a good working knowledge of employment law and occupational health practices, in particular, the Equalities Act 2010 which defines autism as a disability.<sup>6</sup> Employers have a responsibility under the Act to make any reasonable adjustments to remove disadvantage faced due to disability.<sup>6</sup>

What does a neurodivergent-friendly workplace look like?

It's worth reminding ourselves that employers don't try to create workplaces that don't meet the needs of neurodivergent people, but rather it can be due to a lack of understanding or confidence in these areas. In my role as a workplace counsellor, the organisation is my client and so is the employee who is referred to me for therapy. Therefore, those of us who work in the sector can play an important part in educating workplaces, and working alongside them with empathy and positive regard to help create psychologically safe places to work.

In his book, *Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Adults*, the writer Dr Luke Beardon explains how neurodivergent adults can find themselves particularly stressed at work by the people, the physical space and the systems that need to be negotiated.<sup>7</sup> I find these three areas helpful to consider, and I've outlined some ideas below for how we can help to reduce stress and anxiety.

**People:** Training for staff needs to be based on research, including the voices of those with lived experience of neurodivergent conditions. Employers with more than 20 staff are likely to have a neurodivergent employee working for them, and should be consulted on the content of the training.

80-90%

people fit into the sub-category 'neurotypical' ie broadly similar in how they sense, emote, think and respond, the other 10-20% are neurodivergent, diverging from the majority neurological profile in one or more significant ways.<sup>2</sup>



It needs to be meaningful and not seen as simply a tick-box exercise.

Managers, especially middle managers, have an important role to play and will need additional training, particularly around the skills used in trauma-informed approaches. For example, avoiding escalating instructions into demands and instead, allowing individuals time to process what is being requested of them without undue pressure. Offering a neurodivergent employee the chance to have a mentor or a trusted colleague can be hugely beneficial, and allows them to ask for clarification about instructions.

Increasingly, employers are introducing employment passports which list the reasonable adjustments to which an employee is entitled. These are incredibly helpful because the employee does not have to keep renegotiating their adjustments each time they have a change of manager. See Figure 1 for an example of an employment passport for a fictitious employee.

**Physical space:** Neurodivergent people can be hypersensitive to noise, distraction, smell and touch. Employers should ensure that all staff are consulted on changes to the physical space within the workplace, and be understanding to those who struggle with these issues, working

Figure 1: An example of a page from an Employee Passport

**Name:** A.N Other

**Job:** In-house counsellor

**Condition:** ADHD

**My strengths:**  
I am loyal. I follow the rules and I enjoy working on new projects and finding new ways of doing things.

**Things I need to work on:**  
I can be too enthusiastic and it annoys other people in the team. I need to slow down and not expect them to always have time to answer my queries straight away. I also struggle with verbal instructions. I will say 'I understand' but I often don't, or I forget what I have just been told when I get back to my desk. I have difficulty pacing my day and my self-care. I can get exhausted from the interaction with colleagues in the office.

**Agreed reasonable adjustments:**

- Meera in the team will act as my mentor. I can go to her and ask questions and not feel awkward. If Meera is too busy for me, she will ask me to put a meeting in the work calendar instead.
- My line manager will always provide me with a short email explaining important changes to processes, that way I can look back and check as I find written instructions easier to follow.
- It is agreed I will be allowed to work from home two days out of every five – subject to business need.

All adjustments to be reviewed at monthly one-to-one meetings.

**Date:** 01.01.2024

**Date of next review:** 02.02.2024

**To be shared with:**  
Me, My line manager,  
My Head of Service, HR, Meera



with employees on personal reasonable adjustments. Hot-desking is something that is particularly difficult for someone with autism who likes conformity and routine, and neurodivergent employees may find it helps them to be productive if they wear ear protectors to shut out unnecessary noise.

**Systems:** Employers of the future will need to be much less 'policy-based' and more 'people-based', in order to make use of the huge potential that exists within neurodivergent people. Many (but not all) neurodivergent employees found their anxiety levels and stress were greatly reduced by working from home during the pandemic. Therefore, employers who are rigid about staff being present in the office and lacking flexibility are likely to lose out on the improved productivity of their neurodivergent workforce. Similarly, policies that make hot-desking compulsory, without taking into account individual preferences, will likely have the same effect.

### Closing thoughts

Neurodivergence is an umbrella term so many of us who are neurotypical might identify with one or more of these traits. However, it is not considered best practice to say things like, 'We are all on the spectrum' or, 'We are all a bit autistic'. To do so is to diminish the struggle that so many neurodivergent people have faced to gain a diagnosis and acceptance of their condition. They may have met prejudice and trauma during the referral pathway, and been labelled as 'stupid', 'lazy', or 'naughty' over many years. Remember, that for anyone to get a diagnosis, the conditions will have had a significant impact on daily living.

For employers, offering flexibility and managing staff as individuals may appear to be time consuming but the rewards for **all** staff – and not just those who are neurodivergent – will be significant and benefit the employer too. Our duty as workplace counsellors and psychotherapists, when we are working in a truly inclusive manner, is not only to our clients but also to be advocates for change within the workplace and society more generally. If we do this, hopefully we may look forward to a future where we can all fit in at work. ●

*This article is based on a presentation by Nick Wood at BACP's 'Working with the changing face of mental health and cognition within the workplace setting' event in January 2024.*

*Author's credit: I am indebted to Corrina Wood at Platypus Training – A different view.*  
<https://platypustraining.org>

**'I hear counsellors engaged in the workplace and EAP sector who are reporting increasing numbers of clients with a neurodivergent condition being referred for therapy'**



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### FURTHER RESOURCES

For further information about reasonable adjustments, visit:

<https://tinyurl.com/2vu8svk8>

National Autistic Society – [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

Acas: making working life better for everyone in Britain – [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

Access to Work: get support if you have a disability or health condition – [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

ADHD Foundation – [www.adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk)

Made By Dyslexia: redefining dyslexia – [www.madebydyslexia.org](http://www.madebydyslexia.org)

PDA Society: pathological demand avoidance – [www.pdasociety.org.uk](http://www.pdasociety.org.uk)

If you have an idea for a possible article for *BACP Workplace*, the editor would like to hear from you. Please write to: [workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk](mailto:workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk)





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Changing the way the world speaks is the ambition of **Penny Newton-Hurley**, the Founder of CommPassion. Working with business to help them create psychologically safe workplaces, Penny was inspired and informed by the late Dr Marshall Rosenberg, author of *Nonviolent Communication – A Language of Life*. She talks to **Nicola Banning** about her love of language, life and work

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*Penny Newton-Hurley is the founder of CommPassion, an interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence specialist, a psychological safety facilitator and workplace mediator. Her passion for communication led her to discover the potential of NVC and her ambition is to change the way the world speaks. Over the last 30 years, Penny has worked with multinationals, local councils, universities, NHS trusts, the British Army, the RAF and UK Government departments.*  
**www.commpassion.co.uk | LinkedIn: <https://tinyurl.com/4rhhecev>**

**NB: Dr Marshall Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication – A Language of Life* has sold over six million copies and been translated into 35 languages. What impact did it have on you and your professional life?**

**PNH:** Reading Marshall's book was definitely life changing for me. It's about non-judgment, or more accurately – as we know we won't get rid of our brain's tendency to judge – noticing our judgments, and translating them into facts and unmet needs. It's about realising that we are all human beings with the same human needs, and that the reason we clash is not because of those needs but because of the way we choose to meet them. It's about compassion and empathy – towards others but also towards ourselves. It's about human connection.

Remarkably, back in 2007, Marshall Rosenberg came to my local town of Stroud to speak at a conference. Although he was mainly talking about conversations with family, partners and children, I immediately thought, 'This is exactly what business needs.' I think I made an unconscious pact with myself there and then, that by hook or by crook, in some way, I would bring it into workplaces far and wide. I began to realise that in an argument, it's not about right or wrong but unmet needs, and it was like a fog lifting. I suddenly felt I was looking at the world in a different way.

Understanding nonviolent communication (NVC) taught me how to speak in a more professional manner, and that, in turn, gave me confidence to speak up and speak out more. Thankfully, it has

# My workplace

totally taken over my entire working life, and as a result, I have also moved into conflict resolution, mediation and psychological safety. It has become my world, which is why I want to change the way the world speaks.

**NB: Where did your interest in communication come from?**

**PNH:** I think it started in early childhood, when my dad taught me Morse Code. He was a signaller in the Royal Navy during the war, and we used to speak to each other using dahs and dits; 'dah dit dah dah, dit, dit dit dit' (meaning yes!). I loved the idea that we could communicate in a different way and still understand each other perfectly well.

**NB: How did that love of communication shape your studies and early career?**

**PNH:** I was keen on French at school so Modern Languages was the obvious choice of degree for me, and I studied French and Spanish with Politics, Economics and Linguistics. I also learnt Portuguese and German for a time.

After studying, I used my French on the cross-channel ferries for a season (bilingual passenger announcements!), and then secured a job in international marketing with Kenwood, the domestic appliance manufacturer. It led to wonderful opportunities and I travelled to all corners of the world, training salespeople on the Kenwood Chef range, often in French or Spanish. The engineering department also had me proofreading all the instruction manuals in something like 15 different languages! I went on to other marketing for a couple of large financial organisations.

**NB: How did you make the shift from marketing to communicating about language?**

**PNH:** It took a while but large organisational marketing was ceasing to appeal to me. I felt I was creating communication in order to sell something to someone who might not really want or need it. The turning point came when a former colleague told me that the large publishing company where she worked was looking for someone to do their internal communications for a nine-month contract. There was no Google back in 1998, so I took a book out of the library and read up about internal communication. I decided it used all the skills of marketing, but with a focus on helping management and employees to communicate better with each other. A nine-month contract turned into seven years and I have continued as a communication consultant ever since for a range of organisations.

**NB: What training did you take in NVC?**

**PNH:** I participated in training retreats before deciding to join a nine-day intensive international training in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was to be Marshall Rosenberg's last training before his retirement and it was an incredible experience.

*'I think I made an unconscious pact with myself there and then, that by hook or by crook, in some way, I would bring it into workplaces far and wide'*

The training retreats are so immersive, with all participants continuously practising the non-judgmental skills and principles of NVC, which are truly transformational. I remember coming home from the nine days feeling like an astronaut returning to earth!

With NVC there's more to learn every day. I absorb myself in everything 'communication' that comes my way – articles, books, films, events, discussions. I made it my goal, back in those early stages, to become as knowledgeable as I could in communication.

I was also fortunate to have clients who were open to experimentation, and so as soon as I felt confident in my communication and empathy skills, I taught it to employees in workshops, team sessions and webinars. I also taught it in our local primary school for a month – the children were amazing and took it up so easily.

**NB: What can you tell me about your business, CommPassion?**

**PNH:** Having been a self-employed consultant, I decided to become a limited company in 2011 and came up with the name, CommPassion, as in a passion for communication. Although I was starting to teach compassionate communication skills, I felt that the name could perhaps be seen as too 'touchy feely', or not really clear in what it was offering, and might prevent me from gaining new clients; so for a few years, I changed the trading name to The Communication Troubleshooter. Then with the pandemic in 2020, interest soared and I reverted back to CommPassion and haven't looked back since. From a passion for communication, we are now a business which is focused on creating compassionate cultures within the workplace, and for people in their everyday lives, through the way they communicate.

**NB: What help do you offer to business?**

**PNH:** We offer to help businesses and workplaces build high-performing teams by creating a compassionate and psychologically safe culture and environment in which to work. We do this through assessing psychological safety levels in an organisation, and working with teams, from board level through the organisation, to facilitate open conversations that will reveal

what team members need in order to feel their authentic voice is heard. We also train managers and employees in The Human Language compassionate communication skills.

These two services equip teams and individuals with the skills to approach difficult situations, and have the tough conversations that can make a difference. Sometimes people naturally fall into conflict and need some help, so we also offer conflict resolution to diagnose the best path to help individuals resolve their issues and rebuild relationships, and often this will be through mediation.

**NB: What kinds of organisations do you work with?**

**PNH:** We mainly work with large, private organisations – clients have included Thomson Scientific (now Thomson Reuters), Cambridge University Press and BSI Standards. We also carry out regular work for a 'Clear Air' consultancy, CMP Solutions. This involves training, mediating and facilitating for public sector organisations which include NHS trusts, the British Army, RAF and Royal Navy, the Ministry of Defence, Network Rail, universities and government departments.

It is widely known how underresourced these public organisations are, and going through so much change and updating of processes, so it is refreshing, fulfilling and an honour to be able to be invited to train their employees, and contribute towards helping them improve their working environments. I must mention Elsevier here, home of The Lancet and part of RELX group (formerly Reed Elsevier), which has been a trusted and loyal client, open to all our new ideas and approaches, over the last 20-plus years!

**NB: If there's ever a typical day, what does it look like?**

**PNH:** Every day is different but it often starts at 6am with either outdoor bootcamp or a very early session with employees in Australia, China or India. It could be a meeting to discuss training for a team, or to talk about a mediation, or to run a webinar on psychological safety or mindful communication for anything from 10 to 700 people. These sessions can go on all day until the other half of the world in the west coast of the US are awake and working.

In between, there is some quiet time to write a proposal, social media posts and prepare slides for training or speaking, or maybe record a zoom to promote a live LinkedIn. I'm currently carving out one day a week for editing a book on The Human Language with my editor, and fine-tuning our online courses that are about to go live.

**NB: Your passion for your work is reflected in the name of your company – what is it that excites you about it?**

**PNH:** It's the fact that we work in an arena that affects every single human being on the planet

**'Our leaders have the opportunity to role model a different way of communicating to society and especially to influence our younger people'**

– everyone has thoughts, feelings and human needs – and everyone has a deep need for communication and empathy. So, everything we do feels relevant – and I have always wanted to feel that the way I spend my time might make a difference to someone's life, either today or in the longer term.

I'm also excited at how far we can go – I truly want to create a movement, uniting all the other people together who are also practising these skills, to bring this compassionate communication to every organisation and household in the world.

I love what I have learnt about how the brain works – though I am not scientific, the little I know really makes sense and helps me understand the 'why' behind our learnt ways of communicating. And I find that it engages other people to learn about it too.

**NB: You believe in the power and potential of NVC right across society. What are your hopes for where you might take it and who else you might help?**

**PNH:** There are no boundaries with this. We are bringing NVC into private and public sector organisations. We are also soon to be bringing it to individuals with our online courses, to make a difference to their home and work relationships, families and everyday lives. Our next mission is to take it into education – we'd like to see it as an integral topic within the school curriculum, along with maths and science, starting at primary school. That is how we begin to teach our new generations the power of compassionate communication and, in time, it can become our natural language.

So often the language we hear spoken between Ministers and MPs is combative instead of collaborative, and yet they are prominent figures to all of us, so I'd love to take NVC into the heart of Government. Our leaders have the opportunity to role model a different way of communicating to society and especially to influence our younger people.

**NB: What is the most important message that leaders need to understand?**

**PNH:** That the language and words we use make a difference. Empathy and compassionate communication are not just 'nice to have' skills, but vital for us for the future. The World Economic Forum designated them among the top 10 skills that humans need to survive and thrive in this fourth industrial revolution of technology and artificial intelligence. They are essential for high levels of performance and wellbeing – two main things that keep an organisation balanced.

**NB: What are the blocks to organisations creating psychologically safe workplaces?**

**PNH:** Not placing enough priority on psychological safety and interpersonal communication skills.



These should be top of the agenda for management training.

We naturally operate out of fear because of our fight or flight survival response, and this is what causes us to react to people and situations. We might put others down to make ourselves look better, or keep quiet about a mistake so that we don't look incompetent, or bypass someone's idea because ours appears better, or neglect to have an important conversation because we don't know how to or fear the consequences. Much of the time, it is an unconscious, automatic reaction.

However, being aware of these tendencies and taking the opportunity to self-reflect and learn how to respond rather than react, to develop humility, show our vulnerability and express our fallibility, is a major step forward to creating psychological safety, for ourselves and others – and all of this is key for leaders.

**NB: How optimistic are you that the culture of work is changing?**

**PNH:** The pandemic has made all the difference. The focus on wellbeing since the pandemic has brought change and I am very optimistic that this will continue. I do feel that the next generation, with its desire for workplaces that care about people and the environment, will bring yet more of this kind of change.

**NB: Readers of *BACP Workplace* work with employees and employers providing psychological support including counselling, coaching, training – are there resources that you could signpost them to?**

**PNH:** We are just launching a series of online courses called *The Human Language*. It teaches a four-step method (the MECAnism) for being able to process our thoughts and feelings, to discover the core needs underneath that drive us, and how to take the appropriate action towards meeting those needs. There are three courses – the first is for inner understanding, self-empathy and self-development, the second for empathising with others, and the third for holding empathic and effective conversations. The courses

**‘Empathy and compassionate communication are not just “nice to have” skills, but vital for us for the future’**

**Tell us about your workplace**

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this interview or would like to talk to the editor about your workplace, we would like to hear from you. Please email Nicola Banning: [workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk](mailto:workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk)

are applicable to everyday situations, whether at work, home or in family life. We also have a free course on the basics which teaches the fundamentals. With the book being published very soon, it's an exciting time.

**NB: How do you recover after an intense piece of work and take care of yourself?**

**PNH:** I usually do some inner processing where I self-reflect on how I am feeling and what I am needing, and that leads me to the self-empathy I need. I like to meditate and also to take a walk in the fields to clear my mind.

**NB: What are you most proud of?**

**PNH:** The work ethic that my parents bestowed on me. I have always striven to give of my best. Also many years ago a life coach told me to focus on how I can best serve the person/people I am working for/with rather than trying to earn money – it felt so much better. And I am proud of my lovely family who I am blessed to be surrounded by.

**NB: If you hadn't started your own business and written a book, do you ever wonder what you might have done instead?**

**PNH:** There was a point in my early-20s when I had a decision to make between two jobs, both of which could have taken me in completely different directions. If I had taken the other job, it would have led me to becoming a commercial airline pilot.

**NB: How do you spend your time when you're not working?**

**PNH:** I absolutely love being in the air. Every month or two, I hire a small plane from my flying club with a friend and we share the flying, usually to another airfield for lunch and back again. I also love outdoor bootcamp which I do with friends three times a week, whatever the weather – I always say this keeps me doing what I do as it allows me to physically process the feelings. I am also a volunteer Samaritan – once a week, I do a shift on the phones, and once a month, I visit a high security prison to listen to the 'listeners' who provide the service for their fellow prisoners. It is very rewarding work.

**NB: What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

**PNH:** My dad always told me, 'You can do anything you want to if you really want to do it'. That has driven me throughout my life. Also, many years ago, I heard Paul Soloman give a talk, and he said that, 'What you focus on, grows'. He suggested the mantra, 'I can, I will, I do, I am', which activates your mind to believe you can do anything. I have used that at all sorts of times in my life when I was faced with difficulty, and it always gets me through. ●

## Workplace matters

# *I want it now!*

**Sandi Mann**



**T**here is an expectant atmosphere of great change across the UK, following the election of a new Government for the first time in 14 years. The world, however, has changed since the last time there was a shift in Government. Expectations have shifted dramatically. We are now in a Deliveroo, Uber Eats, culture where we expect things to happen quickly. Fourteen years ago, we were a nation that thought nothing of waiting a week to watch the next episode of our favourite show; now we expect to binge watch the series over a weekend. The civil service is not renowned for its speedy reactions and lightning-fast responses, so the new Government may well struggle to meet the Deliveroo-formed expectations of its voters.

This Deliveroo culture ('we will compensate you if your order is late!') is seeping into all aspects of life – even therapy. Increasingly, clients are now expecting the Uber Eats of counselling too – where therapy is speedy in every sense. They expect sessions to be available when they want them (now!), and are bewildered by waiting lists or delays, especially in the private sector where they are paying for it. When they get access to therapy, they expect fast results – sometimes expecting to launch straight into therapy without so much as a, 'How do you do?', and they expect Amazon Prime-type near-instant results with minimal effort.

Like the new Government, it probably pays to help manage expectations. I've had clients with very complex histories of mental health issues express shock when I've advised that we are looking at minimum six months treatment. I've known clients to choose instead to go to a 'healer' who promised them results within a couple of weeks. I don't blame clients for wanting the speedy boarding route – I would be tempted too. The problem is that with almost every

aspect of hospitality luring us in with the promise of 'pay more to get it now', it is perhaps natural to expect that in therapy too – but that expectation only sets everyone up for misery. Speedy boarding might be worth paying for on a jaunt to Tenerife (though it doesn't, of course, get you to your destination any faster), but no matter how much extra you pay, speedy therapy is never really going to be a thing.

I say never but actually, sometimes it can work. There are protocols for speedy EMDR or phobia treatment, for example, with intensive sessions squeezed into a week rather than spread across months. It's a bit like Oxbridge University terms being 'short and fat' (eight weeks long), rather than the 'long and lean' standard university term of 10 to 12 weeks. Except, like the speedy boarding offer, students don't get their degree any quicker – you can't 'Amazon Prime' a quality university degree.

***'This Deliveroo culture ("we will compensate you if your order is late!") is seeping into all aspects of life – even therapy'***

And that is usually the case for therapy and counselling too; there are no short-cuts. Even the 'short, fat' model of therapy requires intensive effort and time. And in a culture of immediate gratification where our needs can be 'whooshed' by supermarkets within 60 minutes (without much more effort than the flex of a credit card), it is getting harder and harder to convince clients of the slower, more considered pace that therapy and counselling needs.

So, like the incoming Government, we would all be well-advised to manage expectations of our client groups with the following myth-busters:

### **Therapy-on-demand cannot be 'whooshed' like groceries**

Good counsellors and therapists are busy, and can rarely see everyone immediately. In fact, speedy availability should be regarded with suspicion – sometimes the old adage that good things come to those who wait is true. This can be disappointing because clients have often taken a long time to get to the point of calling a therapist – so not being able to 'strike while the iron is hot' can be a let-down.

### **There is no speedy boarding option for therapy**

Therapy and counselling take time. Sustained change rarely happens overnight. It takes time to develop a relationship with the therapist, to allow a story or history to unfold, to identify goals and to start analysis of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. But all that is still therapy – all part of the therapeutic journey.

### **Therapy involves more effort and time than signing up for a Prime subscription**

Many people come to therapy expecting to be the passive recipients of treatment in 50 minutes, then they can go home and forget about it until the next session. But therapy usually involves accessing difficult material, engaging with it, working through things, collaboration, thinking and even homework. It is not easy.

Managing expectation at the start of any meaningful journey of change is essential for the best outcomes. Perhaps someone should tell the new Government that too. ●

**Dr Sandi Mann** is a Senior Psychology Lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. She is an accredited CBT therapist and an accredited EMDR practitioner. [www.mindtrainingclinic.com](http://www.mindtrainingclinic.com)

# The bigger picture

Mental health at work – where are we now? **Kris Ambler**, BACP's Workforce Lead, gives an insight into projects he's involved with on behalf of BACP members, and considers what the new Labour Government could mean for us all



**W**herever you look, the negative mental health impact of the cost-of-living crisis is widely acknowledged by policy makers to be adding to the financial hardship legacy of the pandemic. While there is a growing evidence base about the severity of the impact, BACP started the year with a plan to better understand how the crisis was affecting our members, their services and the people who use them.

## Cost-of-living crisis

In February, and following on from a six-month campaign underpinned by a series of expert panels to help shape and inform our policy response, the Policy team launched its report, *Understanding the Cost-of-Living: valuing our mental health*.<sup>1</sup> It built on our recent Public Perceptions Survey,<sup>2</sup> in which three quarters of respondents (76%) reported that their mental health is being worsened by the cost-of-living crisis, increasing from 53% in 2022.

Overall, the report made 13 key recommendations and two of these focused on the workplace, with calls for greater Government investment in workplace mental health and for financial incentives, including tax breaks, to support small and medium sized businesses to access workplace counselling. These are causes that BACP has effectively championed previously, for instance, in 2020 we joined a coalition to help convince the former Government to extend the scope of non-taxable counselling services when provided to an employee as part of an employer's welfare counselling service.<sup>3</sup>

## Global challenges

At the annual Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference held in March, members of the Workplace division's Executive Committee joined a panel of experts to talk about the impact of global challenges on employees. My presentation addressed how the cost-of-living crisis, climate change, war and political division at home and internationally, all impact on employee wellbeing. As a panel, we then took questions from a large and engaged audience.

It was clear that HR professionals have a deep awareness of the impact these challenges have on employees, for example, we heard of the very real fears some employees have about the potential escalation of war in the Middle East. There were concerns about how frontline staff, who do not engage with counselling services, can still be supported at work. It's hard to cover everything in just an hour but we did our best to show how skilled workplace practitioners can support not just the individual but the organisation too.

## BACP's manifesto

There was a surprise in July, as former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced

a general election some four months earlier than had been expected. BACP responded with its manifesto<sup>4</sup> for all the political parties across the four nations of the UK. The manifesto called on the next Government to adopt a wider range of policies to promote mental wellbeing, remove barriers to accessing counselling and psychotherapy, and support the qualified yet underused workforce of counsellors, psychotherapists and therapeutic coaches to make a greater contribution to reversing the mental health crisis.

A central pillar within our manifesto is to tackle the growing costs of poor mental health to the economy, with one in five workers having taken time off due to poor mental health caused by pressure or stress in the past year, risking the UK becoming a 'burnt-out nation'.<sup>5</sup>

This is no exaggeration. The economic and social costs of mental ill health in England reached £300 billion in 2022, with the largest burden falling to businesses (a total cost of £101 billion) due to lost productivity and the costs of both sickness absence and presenteeism.<sup>6</sup> BACP made the case that workplace



counselling can help halve sickness absence in organisations, supporting people to return to work sooner, increasing productivity and resilience, and reducing the likelihood of long-term sick leave.<sup>7</sup>

Our policy asks appeared an impressive 50 times in a total of 18 party manifestos across the four nations of the UK. Therefore, looking ahead, we are hopeful that we can continue to influence the new Labour Government in Westminster. Since the election, we have built on our work to engage key political stakeholders and have echoed a number of our policy asks within our consultation responses to Rachel Reeves MP, ahead of the Chancellor's Autumn Budget – which will set the priorities for the first year of the new Government.

We will now prioritise engaging with senior cabinet ministers, the new select committee Chairs and aim to secure support from new allies across the backbenches, especially those who have supported our campaigns in the past. We also had a strong presence at party conferences in September, which took us to the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats conferences in Liverpool, Birmingham and Brighton respectively.

### Talking with employers

Recently, I've been working closely with John Sidebotham, Programme Manager for Mental Health and Wellbeing at Network Rail, and I've found our conversations deeply enlightening and thought-provoking. It's concerning to learn that suicide by rail has almost doubled in recent years, that many people die because of trespassing on railway lines, and that the rail network is used for child trafficking and exploitation. Alongside this, the increased verbal and physical aggression towards rail staff and passengers – at stations and aboard trains – has made the sector fertile ground for trauma. Staff at all levels are routinely, and on a daily basis, exposed to traumatic incidents.

In his role, John is at the forefront of Network Rail's response, working to provide a broad range of health benefits and support for staff, as it's clear that the organisation faces increasing pressures. I was joined by Sue Christy, a workplace trauma specialist and one of the Workplace division's Executive Committee members to discuss these issues with its staff in August. The session was lively and revealed how much more needs to be done to meet the pressures that staff are facing. We know that trauma-informed workplace counsellors play a critical role in supporting vulnerable staff in this sector and, with John's support, we're continuing to raise awareness of the impact of trauma on frontline staff.

### A changing landscape

Elsewhere, it was a pleasure to be invited by the Open University to develop some materials in support of a new counselling degree, aimed at bringing qualified and practising counsellors

up to level B on the SCoPEd framework. Working with Dr David Morrison, a BACP member and Associate Lecturer in the School of Psychology and Counselling, I recorded a podcast focusing on the current and future employment trends for qualified therapists.

We explored the landscape of EAP counselling services, how to build a portfolio career, and the impact of digital technologies and AI-assisted therapies on the profession. I hope it helps counselling students to develop their understanding of the employment routes and opportunities available to them, rather than stepping into the market post-qualification, feeling overwhelmed.

**'BACP made the case that workplace counselling can help halve sickness absence in organisations, supporting people to return to work sooner, increasing productivity and resilience, and reducing the likelihood of long-term sick leave'<sup>7</sup>**

BACP has also been invited to join a project funded by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), which aims to provide the HSE with the evidence base on which to make policy decisions, and guidance on the practical actions that employers can take to help prevent and mitigate work-related stress. It's an important opportunity for BACP to represent the counselling profession, alongside occupational health and organisational psychologists, and further evidence of the strides we've made in securing parity of esteem for workplace counselling.

At this stage of the Occupational Stress Consultation and Research<sup>8</sup> (OSCAR) project, we're working with colleagues in BACP's Research team to help develop the evidence base for the prevention and reduction of occupational stress. We're hopeful that, by building the evidence base for the effectiveness of workplace counselling, psychotherapy and therapeutic

coaching, we can better inform and influence key stakeholders, including commissioners and politicians.

### Final thoughts

With Labour's cautious approach, citing a £122 billion black hole in public finances, it's clear that there's no magic money tree for mental health spending. Perhaps a more strategic rebalancing is likely, but whether this will include the tax incentives we, and more recently the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), have called for remains to be seen.<sup>9</sup> However, what is clear is that our members can and will continue to play a key role in helping employees navigate their way through these challenging and complex times, and hopefully, we may be heading into calmer waters too. ●

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# The power *of 'no'*

What might be possible if only we said 'no'? The art and science of saying 'no' is a topic that intrigues **Nicola Neath**. She explores why so many of us struggle to say 'no' at work and how therapists can best support our clients (and ourselves) to use that two-lettered word more easily



**Nicola Neath** is an integrative psychotherapist, trainer and workplace counselling specialist. As Co-Chair of the Council for Work and Health Mental Health Group, she is regularly invited to speak about workplace counselling. She is co-author of *To Be Met* as a Person at Work: the effect of early attachment experiences on work relationships.

Last year, I noticed that I had become more fatigued and it was hard to find enough energy to look for another person to carry out a task that I (on reflection) should have been saying 'no' to. Instead, I kept on saying 'yes', albeit in an increasingly defeated tone. I found ways to fit people and projects into ever tighter spaces, and I felt compelled to say 'yes' to whatever it was that I was being asked. Internally, I'd hear my voice saying, 'Because I can help, I **should** help'. I justified this by telling myself that, 'The care-seeker probably wouldn't find help anywhere else'. I noticed that there were some people who were good at asking me for help or care, and how often I lacked the energy to resist their requests.

And then, having worked like this for a long time, I stopped and came face to face with my exhaustion, my workload and my work/life balance. I had to confront what I might be avoiding by carrying on being frenetically and frantically busy. Experiencing burnout, I discovered that maybe, unconsciously, I was avoiding being me, avoiding living my own life. Instead, I had somehow become my own tyrannical boss.



## A human cost

Whether you have experienced burnout in your own working life as a practitioner or you've heard your workplace clients recount similar experiences, I imagine that what I've just described might sound familiar. According to a recent study by Deloitte, poor mental health is costing UK employers £51 billion a year, and 63% of respondents are experiencing at least one characteristic of burnout.<sup>1</sup>

In all the organisations I work with, and at the University of Leeds, where I work as a senior staff counsellor with my manager, Dr Sally Rose, we were seeing increasing numbers of clients presenting with burnout, feeling overwhelmed by their wide job remit, and reporting attending meetings but not being able to ever do any of the work generated by those meetings, unless after work or at the weekend. Clients spoke of the increasing demand that they be present and productive at work, while job vacancies remained vacant, leaving additional work for depleted and overstretched teams. Some frontline roles found themselves dealing with yet more crisis and complex needs, and a pressure to keep trying to do more with less. We saw clients straining under the load of their work and life burdens, feeling unable to say 'no', or not daring to say 'no'. We also heard of managers who say, 'It's fine to say "no"' and then when staff did so, they experienced disapproval or even open hostility.

As an organisational response, we designed a workshop for staff to help those people feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities and obligations, at work and at home, which left them feeling unable to simply say, 'no'. However, at the same time that we were rolling out the training to staff, in a parallel world, I too was feeling overwhelmed and struggling to say 'no' at work.

This article draws together both the theory and my lived experience which helped inform the workshop and the talk that I gave at the Health and Wellbeing at Work Conference earlier this year at the NEC, Birmingham. I hope it will be helpful to practitioners working with their clients to support them to say 'no' at work and that it can also be usefully applied in their own lives, personally and professionally.

## Why don't we say 'no'?

To answer this question, I think we need to go back to the beginning. I'm co-author of *To Be Met as a Person at Work* – a book that explores the effect of early attachment experiences on our work relationships. Those of us who fear saying 'no', worry that doing so will lead to us not being professionally needed or 'valued' anymore.

# 51bn

**According to a recent study by Deloitte, poor mental health is costing UK employers £51 billion a year<sup>1</sup>**



# 63%

**of respondents are experiencing at least one characteristic of burnout<sup>1</sup>**



Therefore, our resistance or inability to say 'no' could be directly linked to our need to seek approval from others.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this will be different for everyone and depend upon the individual conditions in our early significant attachments. In my case, I understand that when a person seeks my care or support, or when I identify a need in another person, my attachment system is aroused and conscious, and unconscious patterns and processes fire into action. My overactive or defensive caregiving system may inhibit my confidence or competence to say 'no', and my fear system may bring to the fore failed social interactions or previous occasions when I said 'no', which might not support me to say 'no' this time. I know this because I've spent years researching this and yet, I continued to struggle to say 'no' as the demands on me stacked up.

## It's back to attachment

As therapists, we might ask our clients how their early attachment experiences may affect the way they seek care or give care to others. We may explore whether, as children, they responded to ambivalent, frightened or absent parents. Were there family rules around compliance, for example, always saying 'yes', or avoiding conflict by not saying 'no'? Other clients may come from a culture of 'put up' and 'shut up'. We might ask if the client experienced overburdened parents, and if so, it might be hard for the client to say 'no' because there hasn't been any modelling of how to say 'no' – or knowing what it feels like to be overburdened. Neurodivergence may also be a factor to be aware of, and therapists may need to consider whether the client has neurological, cognitive, or biological states that affect how rules or behaviour are learnt and enacted.

## Saying 'no' in a culture of 'yes'

Beyond the culture of our workplaces, we live in a world of instant responses and this could play a part in why we are so predisposed to say 'yes'. Social media, WhatsApp, Facetime and Instant Messenger lure us with instant gratification, and our patience to wait for anything seems to have been eroded with the ability to access so much 'on demand'.

The rise of zero-hours contracts can create pressure on workers to be present and visible to those who are offering the work, whether they want it or not. Is this just another form of people pleasing in order to keep the working coming in? And there are gender implications too, as social narratives refer to women as being 'multitaskers' and men as 'problem-solvers'. To what extent does being a

professional caregiver play out in our workload as we feel the burden of wanting to help others?

Arguably, the weight of expectation facing us at work is a new kind of epidemic. *Adaptation: enough already* is a new play written by the playwright, Samantha Graham of Vegas Nerve Productions, which explores exactly this. According to Graham, women account for around 80% of autoimmune disease sufferers, and her play shines a spotlight on how the business world's excessive expectations of women are causing disproportionate, epidemic levels of ill health.<sup>3</sup>

So, I'm aware that whenever I speak on the topic of saying 'no', it's as relevant to me as it is to the people I'm speaking to. However much I might wish that knowing the theory means that I've become an expert on living a boundaried, uncomplicated life, that's simply not the case. I can still recall how my supervisor sagely invited me to look at my own predicament and ask myself the question, 'When you are overwhelmed, what can you do less of?' I found this simply insightful. Therefore, I suggest that we need to reframe saying 'no', not as a failure, a lack of strength or as a passive act, and instead reframe it as a choice where we are actively saying 'yes' to something else.

Asking different questions

In my research, I started to ask myself, 'What do I/we get from not saying 'no'?' We know that just taking a moment to consider whether we want to say 'no' gives us agency, and checking in with our health, our values and our priorities, we might be able to really see what exactly is being asked of us and ask ourselves, 'Is it my role?', 'Do I have capacity to say "yes"?' or, 'Could this be a learning opportunity for someone else?'

Learning to say 'no' to something and 'yes' to something else, presents opportunities, such as doing something restorative in the time it would have taken. I needed to unhook my neurological tick and the fear

'I started to ask myself, "What do I/we get from not saying 'no'?"'

I have of letting others down but I'm not the only one. I've wondered how our society has managed to sleepwalk into a way of working and living which is so unsustainable.

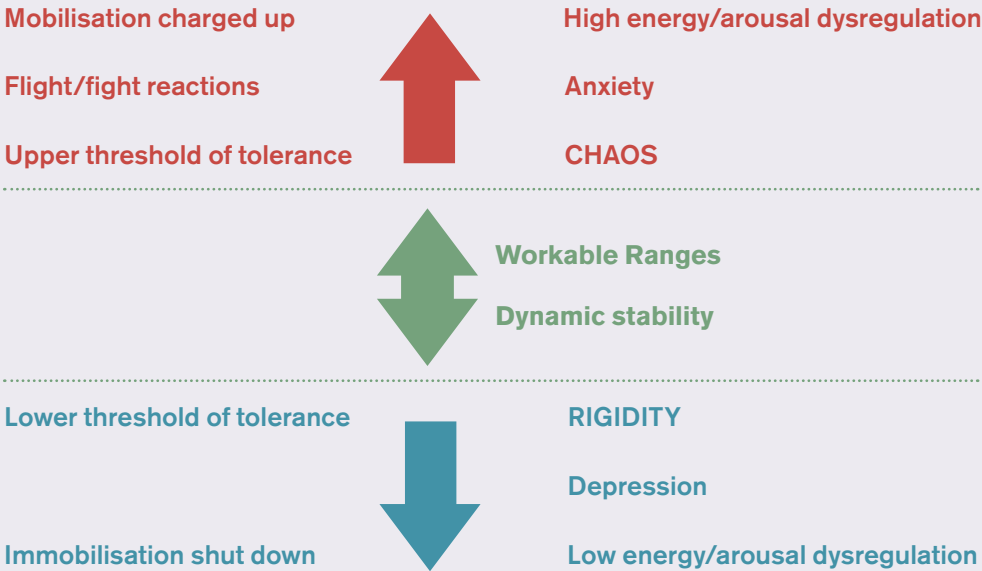
By this, I mean the slow displacement of corporate or service administration which goes on in our lives – just think about how much work you have to do to get insurance, open a bank account or purchase your goods from a supermarket. We do the research, add in all the numbers, the statistics and we even scan our own goods. Somehow, we have been saying 'yes' to extra admin for years!

Helping clients to say 'no'

To be able to say 'no' with competence, we need a good understanding of our psychological development and our ability to self-regulate. With clients, I explore how social conditioning is at play and I encourage them to notice what saying 'no' arouses for them. Our role as counsellors and psychotherapists is to provide a safe enough space where our clients can practise saying 'no', feeling the words in their bodies and developing some new muscle memory.

Working with clients, I frequently use the Workable Ranges Model (WRM),<sup>4</sup> devised by Dr Sally Rose, to draw out embodied knowing, and help map the client's experience and conditions of being regulated or unregulated. The green zone is when we are regulated – where we feel competent, resourced and sufficiently energised. It is where we are most likely to make an informed 'yes' or 'no'. In

Figure 1: The Workable Ranges Model



the green zone, our social attachment systems are supporting our wellbeing and our sense of satisfaction in the tasks.

Outside of this regulated state, we can experience dysregulation up to a hyper-aroused state in the red zone – where we can feel strained, agitated, frantic and frightened, where our self-defence is unsupportive and inner talk is critical. This is a place where a 'yes' is likely to be rushed or a 'no' can be compromised.

The hypo-aroused state is the blue zone, where it is more likely to be typified by retreat or exhaustion, freeze and low mood, and this is also a place where an exhausted 'yes' or a compromised 'no' can exist.

I use this model to encourage clients to consider the best state they might need to be in to say 'no'. It gives them a framework to assess their state and preparedness for saying 'yes' or 'no'. This model also helps explore what conditions we might need to address in order to move from a dysregulated to a regulated state.

This is not unusual work with our clients, is it? We know it can be normal to struggle with

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self-confidence, boundaries and seeking good care or support. And we know it can be dangerous when we overcommit, leading to burnout, if we are relying on external validating affirmation from others which might not ever come our way. This is so often at the core of what we do as workplace therapists with our organisational clients.

### Questions for reflection

A safe environment can help us to be curious and experimental, and provide the best conditions for learning how to say a healthy 'no' or an appropriate 'yes'. You may find these questions helpful to explore with clients or for your own personal development:

- Did you have caregivers, mentors or influencers who were good at saying 'no' or setting limits?
- What were your early experiences of your caregivers setting boundaries or saying 'no'?
- Do you find yourself saying 'yes' because you just don't have the energy to say 'no'?
- Could not saying 'no' be a sign of danger, ill health, despair or care-seeking?
- Could the client use the Workable Ranges Model<sup>4</sup> to map the times they say 'yes' hastily when they might otherwise say 'no'? Can they analyse the conditions they are under at these times? And use that knowledge as insight to try it differently another time?
- How can the client tune into these signs and signals, and learn to do something different?
- Can you, as the therapist, provide a place for the client to practise the competence of saying 'no' to you?
- How might you explore this work in supervision? Might you be aware of any parallel experience or barriers to saying 'no' in your clinical work?

If you are looking for further reading, *Psychology Today* has an excellent blog on the power of saying 'no' and the key message is that, 'Saying "no" can create more mental health stability by helping with self-care, and





build your self-esteem and confidence by setting boundaries.<sup>15</sup> Saying 'no' means you are actively saying 'yes' to something else, and this is a handy mantra to call on when you need it.

### Doing things differently

Of course, as practitioners, we know that change and competence come through practice, research, experimentation, exploration and discovery. Putting in the time to rehearse saying 'no', testing it out and getting support, are all incredibly helpful. It's a learnt skill, and we need to build up muscle memory and new neurological pathways to develop our competence.

In our work at the University of Leeds to support staff with their boundaries, we compiled some of our favourite ways of saying 'no' below. The Go Natural English website is an excellent source: <https://tinyurl.com/5n7r7fx2>.

### Ways to say 'no'

- 'Thank you for asking me to X, Y or Z. Under different circumstances, I would like to be able to help you, however...'
- 'I'm sorry, I know this will be disappointing...'
- 'On this occasion, the answer is "no"'
- 'No, I can't do that'
- 'No, that's not possible because...'
- 'I think this is too important to say "yes" to without thinking this through...'
- 'I can see you really want to me to say "yes" and I hate disappointing you, it doesn't mean I don't care about you or this project...'
- 'My bandwidth is low, so I won't be able to make it work this time'.

### Closing thoughts

Saying 'no' is not a negative act. Saying 'no' changes our world and can, in fact, change the world. If you think about it, all great acts of compassion start with an individual act. In order to take action, we need to get to know what might be stopping us, immobilising us, or even frightening us.

When we say 'no', society changes. We've said 'no' to slavery, to putting children up chimneys, driving without a seat belt, smoking in certain places, and started to say 'no' to things that cause environmental damage. You will be able to think of many more, but saying 'no' begins with compassion.

When I learnt to say 'no', it led me to taking a wonderful pottery course. It took me away from the tyranny of tasks and instead to experience being me, feeling free and creative. When you say 'no', where might it lead you? When your clients say 'no', where might it lead them? Good luck. ●

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### FURTHER RESOURCES

Healthline. The no BS guide to protecting your emotional space. <https://tinyurl.com/e3rrpe4r>

British GQ ([gq-magazine.co.uk](https://gq-magazine.co.uk)). How to get better at saying no. <https://tinyurl.com/3rn6a4n3>

Julia Kristina. How to say no without feeling guilty. <https://tinyurl.com/unby4wzc>

A pen and a purpose. Learn how to say no without feeling guilty. <https://tinyurl.com/3a6ss3pv>

Valorie Burton. The art of saying no. <https://tinyurl.com/yc7x69t6>

Nguyen K. The art of saying no. TEDxLSU <https://tinyurl.com/2jkc8rfj>

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# Poet @work

How we approach the infamous 'elephant in the room' can be a challenge that goes beyond the therapy room. **Nicola Banning** talks to poet, **Jean Wolfe**, about her work with women to market and communicate authentically, and how her poem, *The Elephant in the Room* has served as a powerful agent for change



**Jean Wolfe** helps business owners express what their business is all about to the right customers. She is a poet and co-author of *Distinctive Voice: the fearless guide to a wholehearted blog worth noticing*, which is an e-book on Amazon. In her spare time, she enjoys acting improvisation and being with her family.  
[www.sparkintomarketing.co.uk](http://www.sparkintomarketing.co.uk)

**NB: Why did you write *The Elephant in the Room*?**

**JW:** The initial spark of the idea came to me when I was working with a group of businesswomen. We were catching up with the activities and actions that had previously been identified to see what progress had been made. I noticed how often some individuals deftly turned the conversation away from the lack of action or progress made because of other competing demands. After a while, I became more direct and commented to the group that, 'We have an elephant in the room that you are not talking about.' They agreed and we laughed about it.

I was curious about whether things might feel different if they had a relationship with the things they weren't doing. So, rather than being a low priority, they could be on a par with all the other parts of their life they valued: teenage children, partner, clients, parents etc. This was an intriguing idea to them all.

The poem emerged naturally for me the next day. The 'I' of the poem has a real relationship with the elephant. When I wrote the poem, I felt I wasn't making anything up – I was the bystander taking notes while the poem wrote itself.



**NB: Why was it important that the elephant needed help?**

**JW:** Well, all the elephant's attempts at being seen and heard do not create a result. Despite being amusing, annoying and messy, there had not been a genuine request which showed a more vulnerable side. Being more genuine, less defended and asking for help is often what creates a change in real life. So, I made the elephant emotional as well, with the two big tears falling into the coffee.

Up to this point, the narrator has seen the elephant's activities as a problem 'out there'. This is the climax of the poem where she/he/they discover that it is an issue 'in here', and is effectively an inside job that needs to be done.

**NB: What inspires you to write your poetry?**

**JW:** An idea will catch my attention. It is hard to pin this down completely but it will probably involve some way of looking at the world through a different lens. A way of getting out of a rut into a wider acceptance or awareness. If it can involve humour, so much the better!

Obviously, I have to be available to the idea. To let it in and give it space so it can develop. Sometimes, this happens during a period of internal focus, and sometimes, when getting out of my normal world. But if I am too busy or distracted, the idea won't even see the light of day.

**NB: In what ways are our working lives fertile ground for writing poetry?**

**JW:** Poems are typically associated with beautiful views (thank you, Wordsworth), romantic love and heartbreak. But most of the hours in the day are actually spent at work. Not just in skyscrapers and mega business deals, which is often the subject in films, but in smaller, quieter moments.

The world of work is such an important aspect of our lives, both in time and energy. Bosses aren't perfect, success can take longer than we hope and everything changes all the time. This can lead to setbacks and failures that are quite normal but may be unexpected or lead to a feeling of imposter syndrome.

Work is often about status creating power, and I wanted to address this. The suggestion is that the elephant who has acted dumb but been emotionally free is, in fact, academically more advanced than the narrator of the poem. The elephant can be seen with childlike joy simply as an elephant or as a subpersonality of the narrator – or vice versa.

We all have moments of doubt which can loom larger than success. I want to validate those moments – to show they are normal and also to offer a way through. My poems are often about

*'My poems are often about work, whether self-employed or in a company, and the everyday problems that are not usually addressed in this more imaginative way'*

work, whether self-employed or in a company, and the everyday problems that are not usually addressed in this more imaginative way.

If we are feeling down, it can be difficult to address the to-do list with enthusiasm or do the scary thing. I'd like my poems to provide a transition into feeling more hopeful.

**NB: There is an 'ah ha' moment in your poem which is often what happens in therapy. In what ways do you think poetry can be therapeutic?**

**JW:** When we read, watch or listen, we tend to mirror the emotion. If the poem opens with a problem that the reader connects with emotionally, they may also connect with a moment of resolution. I feel that is more likely to happen when there is no shame or pushing – just a gentle suggestion. Any increased understanding will have therapeutic value. But it may be expressed in a wry smile, a quiet awareness or a more dramatic change that could be called a breakthrough.

**NB: Do you have any hopes for how your poems might be received by readers?**

**JW:** My first hope is for the opening of the poem to intrigue the reader or listener, and let it help them into a more relaxed state of mind. Then, if the poem connects with the reader's own experience, I hope there might be the potential for a change in attitude and maybe in behaviour too.

One of the clients I mentioned earlier, definitely did feel encouraged by the poem to go ahead and tackle what she hadn't wanted to face. As someone who didn't want to let anyone else down, she had not realised she was letting herself down. The elephant made it more real for her.

However, I like the idea that I am not telling people what to do nor giving them work. They can take it or leave it. I remember some research which found that an overheard conversation had more power to help children stop smoking than a direct appeal with praise or blame. That appeals to me, and leaves the agency and autonomy in the hands of the listener.

The mood is more playful and imaginative but is not directed personally. I hope my poems will be enjoyed, first of all, and then become a relaxed voice to invite change, if change is desirable. ●

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# The elephant *in the room*

*It is hard to squeeze into my chair  
because the elephant is slumped  
all over it.*

*It is impossible to type with accuracy  
because there are elephant footprints  
all over the keyboard,  
tusks stick out of the filing cabinet  
so the drawers won't close  
and there's no room for me to watch TV  
because there is an elephant stretched  
out with one stubby foot on the remote  
constantly switching channels.*

*The elephant is noisy too... I am often woken  
in the morning by doors banging, and  
crockery breaking in the kitchen  
he sings tunelessly in the shower and leaves  
soap all over the walls and the taps  
and the towels a soggy mess on the floor*

*In the car he gives me directions  
To the beach, or a funfair or woodland  
For a picnic because it would be so lovely  
To have some time off. And he knows I deserve it.*

*Once when I was meeting some  
really important clients  
he squeezed under my chair and kept taking  
the pen out of my hand with his trunk  
and thought it was funny.  
Luckily they didn't see him  
and I got the work but it was a close call.*

*So he is not just in the room but everywhere  
and my life is not my own.*

*One day as we were sitting in the coffee shop  
and he was laughing at the jokes  
in a comic  
two huge tears rolled down his face and  
landed loudly in my coffee.*

*'I can't go on like this' he said.*

*My head shot up from my phone*

*'This is too much for one elephant.  
I am exhausted, I wish you would just listen to me  
and properly look into my eyes.'*

*'It is so easy. Just do the  
Big scary thing you need to do.  
Or even the smallest part of it*

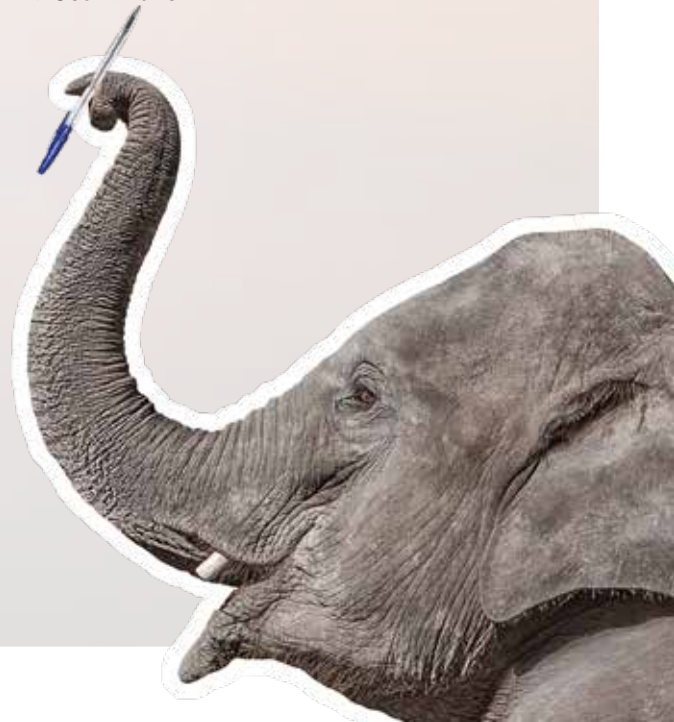
*Then I can have a rest.*

*I'll still be here but you won't see me so much  
Your life will be much better...  
and I can get back to writing my PhD.'*

*So I did. And it was better.*

*He is quite demanding with  
me now if he reappears.  
But we are the best of friends.  
I am so glad he came into the room.*

© Jean Wolfe



**Title:** *Midlife – Stories of crisis and growth from the counselling room*

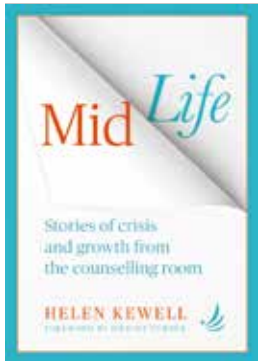
**Author:** Helen Kewell

**Published by:** PCCS Books

*Helen Kewell is a humanistic counsellor and supervisor with a private practice in Sussex, specialising in life transitions and ageing. She is also an educator and a management consultant specialising in people and organisational change. Her previous book, *Living Well and Dying Well*, is also published by PCCS Books.*



# Books



In *Midlife – Stories of crisis and growth from the counselling room*, author and therapist **Helen Kewell** explores the rich terrain of the midlife experience. She talks to **Nicola Banning** about her research, and the role our profession can play in reclaiming the midlife as a time of vibrancy, healing and growth

**NB: Congratulations on your second book *Midlife – Stories of crisis and growth from the counselling room*. What inspired you to write it and who is it for?**

**HK:** Thank you. My specialism within my counselling practice is in working with older adults – much of my work and my writing until this point has focused on the final life transitions into older age and death. I noticed that clients I worked with in their midlife were grappling with similar topics: loss, searching for meaning, feeling that their relevancy was waning and becoming lost in their sense of self. At the same time that this shift was happening, I noticed my own midlife transition was beginning to disorientate me.

As the media picked up pace in raising awareness of menopause, two questions kept coming to me: Why is this time of life, in women and men, mostly portrayed as a time of crisis and deficit? and, secondly, Why aren't we talking about this as a profession? I wanted to show the richness and diversity of the midlife transition that I saw in my client work, and to shine a light on how counselling and other helping professions can support and amplify this, and the idea of the book was born!

**NB: How important was it to bring yourself so fully to the story you tell of being a therapist, in midlife and what this means for the counselling relationship?**

**HK:** Therapists are not immune to life transitions – our life stories are playing out alongside those of our clients. It is so important to face into our own life events and transitions, and to understand their impact on our work. Midlife and later life often see these transitions multiplying and intensifying. I also believe, even if it is not something we explicitly talk about with our clients, that by modelling and experiencing the power of reflective practice, counselling and our own personal growth, we can better feel into the experiences of the clients we work with, and ultimately be of more service to them.

And, practically, there are elements of my menopausal experience that could and do materially impact my work. I can't be alone in this, and it felt ethically right to share that and discuss it openly in the book.

**NB: I was struck by the way in which you write about your work with clients – for example, the quality of your attention, the pauses and moments of quiet when something healing is happening, and your congruence with clients when you get something wrong. Do you have any advice for therapists who are budding writers about how to inform clients and gain consent?**

**HK:** Since I was young, writing has always been an outlet for me to express myself, resolve dilemmas and remember powerful experiences. As I began my training as a counsellor, back in 2014, I found writing case studies, making notes for case presentations and expressing my process within my journals, to be the



engine that accelerated not only my learning but my personal journey of 'self'. I have a strong 'lived memory' (I can often remember where I was or even what I was eating or what song was playing when I had a thought or a feeling), and this extends to my client work. Clearly, all of the vignettes in my writing are weaved from multiple experiences and have some details added or deleted in order that they don't betray any confidentiality, but the essence of each story, the tiny moments represented, all have an element of being 'true' to the topic or the experience.

When I begin working with someone in counselling, part of my contracting process is to explain that I often write about my work, for personal development and/or for publication, and I seek consent to represent elements of our work together, in a completely anonymised way of course. This part of my life, writing, is so important to me, and I always want the people I work with, as clients, to not only have the choice to consent but always to know this up front.

**NB: You highlight that 62% of BACP's members are likely to be in midlife and menopausal, and yet there is a limited narrative in the profession and society more widely about 'the rich landscape of midlife'. Given that the work of therapy is so often about change and growth, why has our profession been slow to contribute to this narrative?**

**HK:** Honestly, I think as a profession we follow what is topical, as much as we cover the fundamentals such as working with children, working with disability and so on. I notice that when particular research is produced, or social policy or legislation evolves, we follow suit. And this is, of course, the right thing to do.

Midlife and ageing are not seen by society as times of opportunity and growth, or relevancy, and I think as a profession, we are not immune to being influenced or mirroring social narrative, even if we think we are! Ageism is perhaps the last frontier for inclusion and yet it comes to us all, if we are lucky. So I think it is highly relevant but gets inadvertently missed, or even avoided. Who wants to talk about getting older and dying? I think we

all should, of course, as this existential awareness underpins most of our experience in life and our relationships.

There is now a fast growing movement on menopause, and I suspect male midlife will follow, as well as a highly sophisticated positive ageing movement which is turning the stereotype of later life on its head. We, as a profession, should run to catch up, and my hope is that my new book helps us do that.

**NB: You write that the midlife transition is a deeply embodied experience, due to its connectedness to ageing and biology. Do you have any advice for the therapist who is reaching midlife and experiencing menopausal systems, for negotiating this with clients?**

**HK:** Ageing physically and mentally presents us with shifting, practical challenges but I believe we can negotiate these in the same way we do any other anomalies that we experience as professionals – in an authentic, human and considerate way. There is, of course, a delicate balance to strike between disclosure and being practical, and comfortable, and this balance rather depends on the symptom and situation.

As an example, one of my symptoms was my short-term memory for words and occasionally losing my train of thought. I dealt with this in the moment, with little explanation and with realness: 'I am so sorry, the name of your father has escaped me, please remind me?' If this persisted, I would, and have, explained that I am experiencing menopausal symptoms, and indeed talk to each client, if needed, about how this was for them in the room.

Another therapist I talked to experienced crippling headaches, meaning she occasionally had to cancel sessions. She handles this in the same way she might any illness or sickness, and according to her contract, by notifying the client as early as possible and offering other alternatives. When these became more chronic, she opted to tell her regular clients of the problem and discussed it with each, verbally contracting with each over what would feel appropriate in the event that a headache presented.

**NB: While welcoming the voices of those in the public eye who have increased political and public awareness of menopause and midlife, you call for a more open conversation about midlife across all intersections of gender association, race and social groups. What role does our profession have to play in this?**

**HK:** What I have always loved about being part of the counselling profession is that we can, and we do, impact social change from within our counselling rooms. We can offer a different way of relating from 'the usual' for those we work with, and we don't bring bias or judgment into our work – choosing to see and empower the unique person in the room with us, rather than what society wants us to see.

As I began researching this book, I was acutely aware that I was part of the problem – the share of voice of menopause and midlife is predominantly white, western, cis and heterosexual – but I had clear and certain advice from the voices of underrepresented groups, and I can sum it up very simply as: 'Once you see it, you have to do something about it.' So, we need to first find, then listen, then amplify all experiences and always challenge the mainstream, which after all can only stay mainstream until enough of us challenge or counter it.

**NB: I love that your final chapter is called 'A midlife manifesto'; I took this to be an invitation to readers. Can you explain what are you hoping that readers will take from reading your book?**

**HK:** We still have a limited narrative about midlife and menopause despite the fact that today, most of us in our mid-50s can expect another 30 to 40 years of life. Yes, the menopause exacts a heavy toll on many women; yes, men also find their accustomed physical strength and social status challenged by their changing hormones. Some of the people I work with and spoke to have had crippling challenges, but it isn't only a time of deficit and vulnerability. There is so much we can become, do and experience in this time, and I would argue, we do this from a place of wisdom and strength, of knowing ourselves and the world better.

I want this possibility to be planted within anyone who reads my book, for themselves and for those they work with. My aim is to encourage psychotherapists, and other psychological, healthcare and HR practitioners, to live with and work with the vibrancy of the midlife transition; to rescue it from stigma, stereotype and victimhood, and acknowledge its primacy, both as a healing process and growth experience – a threshold into something new. ●

Do you have a query or issue about your work that you'd like some help with? Please email the editor: **workplace**  
**editor@bacp.co.uk**

# Q&A

## How can I balance my responsibilities to both my client and their employer?

**“** *My client is in his mid-30s, gay and until recently had been in a long-term relationship. Only his ex-partner knew he was gay and he has not 'come out' to anyone else. Struggling with the loss of the relationship, he is still living with his ex-partner who has now become abusive. He confided in his manager who made discriminatory comments, and his manager has since 'outed him' to colleagues and he's now being bullied at work. At our last session, my client told me he had a history of alcoholism and while he hadn't drunk for over five years, he's started secretly drinking at work. He knows he is taking risks because he operates machinery in his role but he feels unable to be at work without having a drink. He says it helps him to laugh things off and ridicule himself to prevent others doing this to him first. How should I respond?”*

One of the most common ethical dilemmas we face is when there is a potential conflict in holding clear boundaries and dual roles – especially when disclosures are multi-layered, as in this case. There is a lot to unpack in what your client is presenting with, so let us start by exploring some aspects of your clients' disclosures.



**Jack Jackson** is a BACP accredited counsellor with over 27 years' experience working with organisations. He has worked as a service lead in occupational health for the NHS and currently works as the Wellbeing Manager at Bangor University in North Wales. Jack identifies as trans masculine and offers therapeutic support to the Queer community.

### Creating safety

Your client has shared feeling unsafe at work, the loss of a relationship, as well as recent and potentially, historical discrimination. Therefore, the need to ensure your client has a sense of psychological safety and establishing a strong therapeutic alliance will be key to your work together. This will help you to support him as you reflect on whether you will be required to share disclosures with his employer.

If you have six sessions, you will need to be clear about the boundaries, limits to confidentiality, and demonstrate a sound knowledge of workplace policies around dignity at work, bullying and discrimination, as well as from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Clear contracting will ensure that you give your client the information from the outset as to what you may need to share with his employer, and it will help you to ensure that the psychological safety you have established isn't compromised.

Demonstrating knowledge and awareness of discrimination, including micro aggressions and macro aggressions, will help you to validate your client's experiences around his sexual orientation. Your client has told you that he was only openly out as being 'gay' with his ex-partner – which could indicate a history of bullying and not feeling



accepted. By ridiculing himself at work, this suggests that he may have developed strategies for avoiding rejection and potential threat by invalidating himself. Is this something you can explore with him?

Your capacity to provide the core conditions around acceptance, empathy and unconditional positive regard will help to create a safe space for your client's authentic self, and may give him the confidence to voice his feelings and fears. You may want to explore whether shame is at the core of his presentation. He may feel internalised shame around being gay, as well as for being bullied, singled out and possibly underperforming at work.

However, remember that in just six sessions, you need to identify the focus of your work together, especially around risk. This will ensure that your client remains central to your work together, even if, you are required to disclose information to his employer.

### Assessing risk to the client

It's clear that your client's disclosures give you cause for concern and you will need to assess the risk to your client. As a gay man in his mid-30s, who has experienced the loss of a relationship with a lack of a support network, while facing difficulties at work and living in an abusive relationship at home, I suggest you ask questions about any previous episodes of self-harm, suicidal ideation and take a full mental health history.

Co-create a safety plan with your client and provide resources for when things are particularly difficult. It's worth exploring the helpful strategies he's used in the past when he has stopped drinking, to remind him of what he already knows and to provide a sense of hope.

Having information about support networks, both in and outside of the workplace, eg LGBTQi+ staff group, a trade union, workplace ally, external support groups and alcohol support agencies, will

help you both, given the limited number of sessions you have together.

Perhaps, you might explore if he has considered a referral to occupational health or doing an HSE stress risk assessment and wellness action plan with another manager. Do you know if there are options for him to take on other duties that carry less risk? Or, whether he has considered taking time off work while he processes the loss of his relationship and accesses support?

So, let's turn now to consider what actions you may be required to take from the employer's perspective.

### Alcohol at work

Your client has told you that he is drinking alcohol at work and you can't ignore this information. Indeed, you may need to act on it and do a different kind of risk assessment. It's ethically challenging when you are holding the client at the centre of your work together, yet you also have a responsibility to his employer. Therefore, it's vital to use your supervision to recognise tensions and reflect on boundary issues coming into play.

### 'Being collaborative will help your client to feel that he has some control about what information is being shared with his employer'

Your client has told you he is aware he is putting himself and others at risk – this indicates that he is concerned, and that he is balancing this with the need to protect himself against the bullying. Being honest about the risks he is taking and asking clear questions will enable you to have a better understanding of what action you may need to take. Being collaborative will help your client to feel that he has some control about what information is being shared with his employer.

For example, you could explore the following – How much is he drinking?. Is he operating machinery?, Does he drive home from work after drinking?, and, Is he being supported by his GP?

If you haven't already, it's worth visiting the Workplace Counselling Competence framework which

recognises and supports the roles of workplace counsellors, and enhances professional standards. I'd draw your attention to Section 1, which sets out the need for practitioners to manage confidentiality when working in the organisational context. A core competence is to demonstrate: 'An ability to ensure that both the client and the organisation are clear about how confidentiality will be managed, and specifically the conditions under which it will and will not be maintained, eg: if there is a risk of harm to self and others, when there are legal exceptions or in agreement with others, eg OH and GPs.'

Holding the client at the centre of the relationship, while meeting your contractual responsibility with the employer, can be a challenging and delicate balance.

### Additional training

It's essential that we maintain our ongoing learning, knowledge and CPD – and you might explore how you can develop your knowledge when working with LGBTQi+ clients, intersectionality, equality legislation, as well as micro and macro aggressions. Taking time to reflect on your internalised beliefs and heteronormative social constructs, as well as understanding trauma and social conditioning, will help you to understand how we all can internalise beliefs and have an unconscious bias at times.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge with the client his vulnerability and the level of trust he is placing in you. Understanding how the balance of power within the workplace has a direct impact on the power balance within the therapy room is important in the work – as is recognising how effective short-term interventions can be, even when complex presentations and dual roles, as you've described, are at play. ●

### For further information:

The Workplace Counselling Competence framework recognises and supports the roles of workplace counsellors, and enhances professional standards. You can access the framework at: <https://tinyurl.com/4a5xvc2u>





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