

My psychotherapy career: Residential work with young people

With Gary Yexley

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast where we explore the different therapeutic settings our members working, and how they came into their career. I'm Jenna Rachid, the Digital Engagement Officer at UKCP. Our host Helen Willingham is the Head of Content and Engagement at UKCP, overseeing all our communications to members and the public, as well as our policy and research work. In this episode, Helen speaks to UKCP psychotherapeutic counsellor Gary Yexley. Gary is the Chief Executive of the Institute of Integrated Systemic Therapy, also known as Childhood First, a charity and training and accrediting organisation of UKCP. Childhood First specialises in the 24/7 therapeutic residential treatment of severely traumatised children and young people. Gary has worked in the field of residential therapeutic childcare for the past 25 years, obtaining the position of Chief Executive after working his way through the organisation from a variety of frontline and leadership roles. In this episode, Helen talks to Gary about his career, and what inspired him to pursue psychotherapeutic counselling in this setting.

Helen:

So, thank you for joining me today, Gary. It's really great to be speaking to you. And I want to start with my first question, which is what drew you to working in residential therapeutic communities with children and young people in a psychotherapeutic counselling role?

Gary:

Well, I suppose when I first started working in residential therapeutic communities, it wasn't in a psychotherapy counselling role. And I suspect we'll kind of talk a bit more about that later. I began my career back in the late 1980s, in the youth service, and also spent some time in residential special schools. And I discovered that, you know, children and young people living in residential settings could benefit hugely from those kind of environments. And when I discovered therapeutic residential communities, or therapeutic communities as they have been traditionally referred to, I was amazed by how these settings could look after some of the most needy children that we have. And that they could provide something very unique for these children and young people that other settings couldn't provide. And that's what really drew me to working and spending my career within those settings.

Helen:

Thanks, Gary. And I realise we jumped straight into that question, but could you give a bit of an overview of what we mean by a therapeutic community?

Gary:

Yes, of course. Well, a therapeutic community is a specialised environment where children and actually adults can spend time. And in the case of children obviously live for sometimes quite long periods of time in an environment where all of their needs, their day-to-day care needs, their education needs, their health needs, and of course

– in the case of therapeutic communities – their kind of treatment needs or their clinical needs with psychotherapists, psychologists and other specialist clinicians. And these are environments, as I say, where children and young people can get all of their treatment, and all of their care under one roof. So, they're very specialist environments. And they've got a long history of providing some of the most specialist care for children and young people. And that's essentially what therapeutic communities provide.

Helen:

And why is working in a residential setting with children and young people important to you?

Gary:

It's important for me because, you know, what I've seen over my career is that it can provide a really safe environment for children and young people that have possibly had, you know, a very difficult start in life and have some complex needs and sometimes associated, emotional, psychological, behavioural pressures and difficulties. And therefore, it benefits them by providing this 24-hour, seven days a week, 52-week a year care. And allows them the time to build the relationships that are needed with the specialist, residential therapeutic care staff and teachers and family workers and therapists, in order to give them the best possible chance of recovering in some ways. And having a different model of relating to adults and the world.

Helen:

Yeah, I can really see that model that you're talking about, with all those different roles that you've mentioned there. How do they all work together? And how does psychotherapy fit in with that do you think?

Gary:

Yeah, that's a really good question. And in therapeutic communities, and especially in the organisation that I lead, it's really crucial that our model of working, which we call integrated systemic therapy, really encapsulates all of those roles working together in very close relationship to one another. So, for example, the residential therapeutic worker, the key worker, the family worker, the child's therapist, the teacher, the support staff, but also in a therapeutic community, all of the other support staff, you know, the maintenance staff, and the admin staff. Everybody is together and can join up around and give the child and young person the real attention to detail that they require, in order for them to be fully understood. And the clinical element of psychotherapy comes in, certainly in our organisation, because we're looking not only at the behavioural and the relational triggers that children and young people have found difficult, but also the conscious and the unconscious aspects of development. And by having all of these roles working in that same methodology gives us, and therefore gives the children and young people the best chance to get the help and care and treatment that they need.

Helen:

And in terms of your career, you've moved up whilst working in these residential therapeutic communities. Can you tell us how you started with this and how you embarked on this career path?

Gary:

Yes, well, you know, it's been a real journey. And I started, as I said, working in the youth service and special schools and then residential care homes for children. And then I discovered therapeutic community residential care. And that really opened up something in me about the kind of help that the children and young people could receive in these kinds of environments. And for me, personally, it ignited a real curiosity in me. And I began by undertaking, you know, training that was an offer within those homes and then went to the Tavistock clinic to do an MA in Psychoanalytic Observational Studies.

And that again, added to my curiosity in all things psychotherapeutic and all the different models that encompasses. And then within my own organisation, I was able to apply that knowledge within the work that I was doing. So, that was a huge benefit to me, in my own development, but also in my work.

Helen:

You've given us a kind of an overview, but a key point in your career was deciding between taking on a director role of a residential community or embarking on psychotherapy training. Can you reflect on this time and tell us about it?

Gary:

Yes, that was a really interesting point in my career. I had finished my first MA and I was just about to undertake the clinical placement after that in order to become, you know, a child psychotherapist, and take up a training post in the NHS. And at that very point an opportunity came my way within the therapeutic community that I was working in at the time, to lead that therapeutic community. And it was a really difficult decision, if I'm honest. And I wrestled with it for a number of days and weeks as to which path I should take. And in the end, I chose to take up the directorship of the therapeutic community, mainly because I think when I sat down and thought about myself, I felt that by doing that, and continuing my psychotherapy training through the organisation that I now lead, that I could probably impact more children and young people. That I might be able to kind of influence policy and practice around psychotherapeutic work with children and young people, especially children and young people that are looked after, children in the care system. And I suppose when it came down to it, I had to imagine myself either sitting in a consultation room with children and young people, or working and undertaking my clinical training in a therapeutic community setting. And in the end, I chose the latter. And that's where I chose to train and that's where I've ended up now.

Helen:

That brings me to my next point, which is that you now hold the position of Chief Executive of the Institute of Integrated Systemic Therapy, known as Childhood First, and it's a UKCP organisational member. How have you found leading an organisation and charity and what advice would you give to others looking to lead or manage an organisation, charity or private practice, for example?

Gary:

Well, that's a really interesting question. I suppose I would begin by saying, it's been very challenging, and it's been very rewarding at the same time. I suppose what I have been able to kind of achieve, I suppose, in my current organisation, and now as a CEO, is that it is possible to integrate both leading an organisation, a psychotherapeutic organisation in our case, whilst also being a clinician. That doesn't mean it's easy and there's lots of challenges that go with leading an organisation and being able to train. I then went on to train and did an MBA in leadership and management in health care, so that I also had the skills to lead an organisation, as well as my training as a psychotherapeutic counsellor in a psychotherapeutic organisation. So, what advice would I give? I think I would say it's possible to do both. It's very hard work, of course. And I think, to find the model of psychotherapy, counselling or psychotherapeutic training that suits you, this suited me, and I'm very glad that I took that direction.

Helen:

And why did you become a psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Gary:

Oh, well, I mean, I suppose there are many answers to that question. Some are, I suppose, a mixture between personal and professional.

I've explained some of the professional kind of aspects of why I got into the work with children and young people. And of course, as we all have in our lives, we have our own journey, and our own lives, and our own families, and our own backgrounds, and our own strengths, and our own things that we need to work on. And I suppose what I found in psychotherapy was a way of integrating these aspects of myself and my life, and to learn more about who I am and to try and ultimately be the best possible psychotherapeutic counsellor I could be, the best Chief Executive I could be, and also the best person I could be. So, I think that's probably why I became a psychotherapeutic counsellor and began training.

Helen:

Great, a bit of a different question for you. Do you have a psychotherapy hero? And if so, who are they?

Gary:

Gosh, that's a really difficult question. In a way, I think I would answer that by saying I have so many psychotherapy heroes. Some of those are people that, you know, we all might recognise from psychotherapy history, from all of our teaching and our learning. Freud, Melanie Klein, Winnicott, Bion, all of those kind of really important key influences. But I think on a more personal level I have so many psychotherapists that I've worked with over my career that I always refer to and look back on a personal and a professional level, have helped me enormously to develop my own understanding and my own practice. And some of those people, if I said the names no one would recognise, but they have been very key to me and my development and I'm sure if they were listening to this, they'd hopefully know who they are. And they've certainly been some real heroes for me.

Helen:

That's great. Thanks, Gary. And that's something that has come up throughout this podcast is the importance of peers as well. So, it's good to hear that and that having your psychotherapy heroes close to you. It's great. A question that we ask everybody on this podcast is what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Gary:

Yeah, a UKCP member means a lot to me. On a personal level, I think it means something about the achievement and recognition of all of the work over the years. To be able to be included in a group of psychotherapeutic counsellors and psychotherapists that are held in very high regard. I think the other thing I would say is the support, certainly as a child psychotherapeutic counsellor, the support of the child college in the UKCP gives to me, but also gives to our organisation as the Institute of Integrative Systemic Therapy, as an organisational member. And I think thirdly, I'd probably just say the collaboration and the work around, you know, working towards better and improved standards and work, and representation of children and young people through the work of child psychotherapeutic counsellors and child psychotherapists. So, a really important organisation for the betterment of all of that really crucial work.

Helen:

And then reflecting back now, is there anything you wish you knew before you started your psychotherapeutic training?

Gary

Gosh, that feels like a whole other podcast. I think, interestingly and now I think I appreciate is the huge rewards that undertaking psychotherapeutic training can give you on a professional level, but also on a personal level. And also, I suppose, if someone had told me what the challenges were, then that would have been good. But then I also reflect that maybe if I'd have been told all the challenges, maybe I might not have had the faith to kind of, you know, embark on them, because they are kind of considerable some of the challenges.

Within Childhood First or the Institute, we're able to provide training for trainees who are also our employees. We have a model of training where people can, in a sense, be employed, and can train at the same time. And that's obviously a very challenging situation to be in, to be working in a therapeutic community with children and young people, whilst also undertaking training. But at the same time, it's a huge enabler. And I would like to think it breaks down some of the barriers for people that are considering, you know, entering psychotherapy or psychotherapeutic counselling as a career. So, I'm glad that as an organisational member, we can provide a model of that training that can give people those opportunities.

Helen:

And how did you manage the logistics of that? So, the training and the working side, you know, some people might be balancing training versus the cost or another role. How did you work that and get the balance right?

Gary:

Yeah, well, as I say, I mean, in the traditional psychotherapy training, you know, the costs can be considerable, certainly for kind of personal therapy or, you know, attending groups, or travel, or training itself. And I was very fortunate in undertaking my clinical training through our organisation that in working for the organisation, it made that side of things an awful lot easier. On the other side, of course, it is very hard work, it's very hard work, working in those settings with the task that we have to perform with the children and young people. And it's obviously very hard work, you know, finding time to go to seminars, and write essays, and go to therapy, and undertake infant observation, and all those other things that the trainees and the staff in our organisation have to do in their own time. So, in that sense, the challenges are very similar to anyone undertaking psychotherapy training. But there are some aspects like the cost, but also, I think, being part of a therapeutic community environment themselves. There's a huge amount of support with other colleagues and other trainees that are going through the same thing. So, I'm very proud of our model of training in the Institute because it gives access to psychotherapy training, where traditionally that might not be open to some people.

Helen:

And what advice would you give to someone considering training as a psychotherapeutic counsellor, or as a psychotherapist?

Gary:

Ah, what advice would I give? I think I would say be patient. I think that would be my first piece of advice. You know, psychotherapy, obviously takes many, many forms. But, you know, to develop as a psychotherapeutic counsellor or psychotherapist takes time. It's a process. You know, I know that it's a bit of a cliché, but it is a process. It's not an event, and it will take time. So, I think my advice would be, be patient, be patient with yourself, and try to be patient with those around you as well. I think my other piece of advice would be to find – and you refer to it earlier, Helen, when you talked about psychotherapy heroes – I think if you can find someone who you can trust and open up to and allow yourself to be known in a clinical supervisory setting, then that I think is very important. I think we all learn from those relationships. And I think lastly, I'd probably just say, you know, look around and spend time finding the right model for you. What do you think will work for you in terms of the model of psychotherapeutic counselling or child psychotherapy that would suit you best? And kind of go for it.

Helen

Yeah, absolutely. And that's what UKCP is all about. And promoting psychotherapy and the impact that it can have, both on people who are seeking therapy, but also those who train as well.

Gary:

Absolutely.

Helen:

And how is training changed you do you think?

Gary

Well, I think it's changed me in every way actually, in every conceivable way. And I think I said earlier on, you know, I referred to the personal and the professional. And I think it's changed me as a person. I think it's changed the way I view the world. I hope it's made me more empathetic and compassionate. I think it's hard to kind of encapsulate it in a nutshell, but probably in every way, my relationships, my professional and my personal relationships, I think it's life changing, and life affirming. I think it's changed me in every conceivable way.

Helen:

That's amazing. Thank you, Gary. And really great to hear about therapeutic communities and also your role as a director as well, in the kind of organisational sense, as well as the psychotherapeutic. It's just really great to speak to you today. So, thank you very much.

Gary:

Thank you very much, Helen. I've really enjoyed speaking to you too.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapeutic counsellor, Gary Yexley speaking to Helen Willingham, our Head of Content and Engagement. If you're interested in exploring training, then you can visit our psychotherapy training page, where you can find information on psychotherapy as a career, as well as the different training pathways available to you. Just go to www.psychotherapy.org.uk/psychotherapy-training. All episodes of My Psychotherapy Career are available on our website. psychotherapy.org.uk. You can also subscribe to our channel UKCP on your favourite streaming platform. Do you have any feedback you'd like to share with us on this episode or any from our series? Get in touch with us at communications@ukcp.org.uk. Join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.