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Talking Therapies: Can we all benefit from psychotherapy training?

With Andy Ryan

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Throughout our life we are ever evolving, and psychotherapeutic training offers an opportunity to reflect on where we are. So, should more of us take advantage of this opportunity to hone these important life skills?

Andy:

This was an investment in me. It absolutely is about a career and developing that, but for me, this was really seen in my heart as an investment for me. I just felt that in all honesty, and I remember saying this to a supervisor once, that even if I walked away without the certificate, I would have walked away from that four years and said, 'thank you very much. That has been amazing. And I've learned so much about myself, and so much of this will transfer into my life.'

Suzy:

That was UKCP member Andy Ryan. Andy specialises in addiction and has worked in the field for over 15 years after experiencing dependency himself. He is now Head of Recovery and Addiction Services at Changing Lives, a specialised support charity assisting vulnerable people. In 2019 Andy worked alongside UKCP to deliver their national conference on addiction. Should more of us take advantage of psychotherapy training? UKCP member Andy Ryan thinks so. After facing homelessness and addiction, psychotherapy training offered Andy the opportunity to start communicating with the world. In this episode, we uncover how psychotherapeutic skills can change the way we view ourselves, the world, and how we can connect with others for the better.

Sarah:

What brought you into psychotherapy training? What prompted you to embark on that journey, which I know for you has been a huge transformation in your life?

Andy:

The first word that always springs to mind is curiosity. Whenever I think about getting engaged with the training, what brought me there, what was that energy, there was a curiosity. Historically, if I kind of go back before I started training, I come from a place where I needed a lot of support, I was involved with drug and alcohol treatment services, I was sofa surfing, I didn't have a job, not an education, and things were spiraling out of control, really. And without going into too greater detail there were multiple entries into hospital, involvement with the criminal justice system. There were things happening and it was following that trend, that unfortunate trend that we see and know too well of things spiraling out of control until something really, really drastic happens.

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I was getting many, many warnings about my health from doctors and GPs, and what seemed impossible to stop really. So, through a very difficult time in my life, there was this period, where I was in receipt of some treatment, and it just felt like a pause button. And during that time, I was kind of trying to figure out what to do next. A lot of the drive-in treatment and support is about what's your next steps, will you get into employment, will you get into education, and rightly so, just thinking about the future. But I was so unsure, I really didn't know what to do and I went and access some counselling and that just triggered something in me. One of the core things that I stand by today is that for years, I thought that I had huge problem with drugs and alcohol. And it was one of those first moments really where I thought this isn't about drugs and alcohol, this is about me as a person and I wanted to know more, I really wanted to know more. And counselling had ticked the box, there were a few counselling courses, but I then began to read about psychotherapy training, and just a gravitational pull with my curiosity to thinking 'I like some of the stuff I've read. I don't understand it all. And I want to know more. And I want to know more about what happens for me, how I am in the world, how I meet the world and how the world makes me.' So, I was really curious. And that brought me into this psychotherapy training.

Sarah:

I love the fact there that you said there was something about psychotherapy specifically that drew you in. Can you explain a little bit more about that?

Andy:

Yeah, for anyone listening to this as well, I feel like I need to kind of apologise in advance because this is not a kind of slides on one thing or another. But I was kind of doing some counselling training and it seems very methodical, it seems very sensible. But there was something about the personal, the connection, and things I began to read around psychotherapy, particularly when I think modalities, like relational psychotherapy and Gestalt therapy.

There was this whole narrative around the connection and the space between, and the depth of the support in psychotherapy, and the depth of understanding and psychotherapy that really reached inside of who we are and why we are as people. And that was what I took from some of the textbooks that I was picking up and reading. And some of the people I'd spoke to that were already on training, I spoke to a couple of colleagues, and they were just massive advocates of this process of psychotherapy training, and really getting to know and learn about that sense of self. And I had a real drive for that, and I didn't feel like although I was on these training courses with counselling, I really didn't feel that. And then when I got a therapist, that was at the time a Gestalt therapist, things really started to come together for me about the depth. There was something about the depth of psychotherapy, its knowledge, its know-how, and the experiential side to this that I was really pulled towards.

Sarah:

People come into psychotherapy training at many different stages in their life. And typically, people have had a career before they enter training. But this sounds like you had a huge epiphany at quite a relatively young age. How old were you roughly when you got into this?

Andy:

I was 28 when I started. It was a blank slate really, for me. I thought, you know, I had experience before of jobs and work, but it was this thing about 'well, who am I, what's my place?' There was this sense that there is a career in this for me, I'm really intrigued, and I want to be able to have this as a career, I want to be able to go out and help and support people. But also, it was about the self-awareness and the improvement and the learning. Like you mentioned there, Sarah, about the epiphany, I think this was almost like this moment of epiphany where there was this change in my relationship with substances, you know, I was moving out of a space where I felt like I needed them to be able to just be in the world.

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There was an absolute kind of shift in my understanding of what was happening for me during this process, although limited, if I'm honest, in my understanding of what that was. But also, a recognition of unless something changes, it feels like an inevitability that I probably will go back to substances at some point because it's the way I self-regulate, it's the way I alter what's happening for me or help me be in the world or just desensitise and dissociate. So, there was this epiphany that required as well a shift. Like some kind of mechanism to help that energy go further and I absolutely found that in psychotherapy.

Sarah:

And it's so helpful to hear you say that, because I think many people might be put off. They may think, 'I have to have had X number of years of life experience and be in my middle years,' or whatever. But there are so many people who, for good or bad reason, Andy, like you who have had a lifetime of experience by the time they're in their early 20s. And you were very much one of those people and I just wondered to what extent your past experience in life has helped you? Did it help you with that training and help you with your subsequent career?

Andy:

Absolutely, yeah. To the degree we'd say some of the learning, by just the experiential side of it, was transferable really, was understanding and knowing how difficult places can be to experience and knowing that place and knowing those places of desperation. I've gone from sitting in hospitals wanting everything to end, I've connected with groups of people on my journey that were in similar places to me and heard the most horrific and harrowing stories. But also, you know, fortunate to sit with people that have lost a loved one, but never made sense of it, but they're in the same rehab as me. When I first went into drug and alcohol treatment, I thought you had to be so dysfunctional or so bad to get treatment. There was this whole narrative in my head about who needs help. And it was a real eye opener for me that we were a group of people that for whatever reason in our lives had reached out and built and forged a dependency with substances to help us be in the world or not be in the world to some degree with dissociation and desensitisation. So, there's all this learning, I think, from meeting people from my personal experience, and then I arrived at psychotherapy training with this experience, and it feels like I was offered a lens or a filter or something just to have a look at this through this. Try and make sense of meaning through this, which again, from a wellbeing perspective, really helped me be in the world and then helped me meet people in that place as well.

Sarah:

Tell us about the practicalities of the training, what that was like, what that actually involved. I think many people listening to this would have no idea what that's like, I mean for a start it's quite a number of years, isn't it? How many years were you training for?

Andy:

Yeah, like you mentioned there, Sarah, I think I had my projections, my bias. And also, one of the things that I had to overcome was my internalised narrative around education. I'd grown up on a council estate, where if I'm really honest, I don't think there were great aspirations for people to develop academically. I didn't hear any of my friends talking about university or anything like that. So, I have this whole internalised experience that I'd been offered growing up around what education actually represented. So, to step across, that was an amazing challenge for me to get into this arena. I trained for the four years at the Scarborough Counselling and Psychotherapy Training Institute, and we did our training once a month over the weekends for three days. Before I started, I didn't have a sense of how this would work. So, it was that unknown moment of trying to kind of get a sense of how this would work and the commitment to writing the essays. And latterly, you know, as you get into that process, starting to think about actually practising as well, and the supervision that comes with that.

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So, there was a lot to consider, but actually, having had conversations prior to starting an even during, there's plenty of support. It's quite easy to make sense of meaning of it and find that thread of how this all works, really, and get the balance right, because, you know, obviously, I had concerns about ensuring that I could afford to pay for the training as well, which was always garnished with me with the fact that this was an investment in me. It absolutely is about a career and developing that, but for me, this was really seen in my heart as an investment for me. I just felt that in all honesty, and I remember saying this to a supervisor once, that even if I walked away without the certificate, I would have walked away from that for years and said, 'thank you very much. That's been amazing. And I've learned so much about myself. And so much of this will transfer into my life.'

Sarah:

On a practical level, what do you do when you're learning to be a psychotherapist?

Andy:

Yeah, I mean, the structure, I really like the structure, and he really wants you to practice what you preach, the weekends were fantastic, there was plenty of space for that level of connection and that level of discussion. Time for the group to be able to kind of process some of the figural, the more focused things that were happening for us. Really good slots within the structure in the days on the actual theory as well. But again, what I really loved about the training was that recognition that we could sit in a session and talk about the practicalities and the theory and the know-how and all the things that we absolutely need to cover in training to make sure that we are qualified psychotherapists. But what accompanied that, and I absolutely loved this, was the space to say, 'we know that that theory, if you're internalising that will impact you.' So, you know, there's plenty of time to process that.

And as we were writing personal journals, and completing the essays, there was enough space, to be able to put some of you into that as well and share some of this learning and these awakenings and this process that was happening. And then again, still plenty of time on these training days to actually practice as well. So, you get this real rich experience of trying to understand not only yourself, but what it is to be a psychotherapist, and in relation to the group as well, so really great dynamics.

Sarah:

So, tell us a little bit about how that creation of safety for the client relationship is grown.

Andy:

Yeah, as I was mentioning there, one of the real advantages to training is having that group dynamics so that we can have those rich discussions around ethics as well and process, what this means to us. And of course, working for a national charity as well and thinking about the ethics and the policy, it's crucial, it's crucial in all that we do. We're not in this to do any harm, to create any more harm, so it really is about understanding the ethical approach around psychotherapy. What we offer, how we offer that what underpins why we do what we do, and even looking at the procedures that sit behind the scenes around, 'well, what happens if someone's not happy with their therapy then, how does that work?' And that whole kind of structure that's in place, from the education around ethics, and how we should be practising, and the thinking behind all of that as well. So, those wider structures as well to know that your part of this bigger community, that is absolutely about bringing psychotherapy to people to help as much as we can. But make sure it's done in a safe and healthy way.

Sarah:

Through your training, you evolved from a student to then a trainee who works with clients. Tell us a little bit about the other aspects, like you have to have supervision, you also have to have personal therapy, I think in most trainings, don't you? What does that look like?

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Andy:

Yeah, if you truly involve yourself in your training, that things will emerge for you, and a awareness will develop. Therapy is a great space to go and be able to talk about that, make meaning, make sense, process all of that. I was quite anxious when we kind of got to that stage of saying, 'right, okay, you know, you can now go out and practice as a psychotherapist.' At the time, I'd worked as like a key worker in teams, but I was really starting to get a truer and a deeper sense of that difference between maybe sitting down with people and completing recovery or care plans working in the charitable sector. And then, you know, becoming a psychotherapist and working with people. So, there was a level of anxiety which was short lived if I'm honest, because even before practising as a psychotherapist, I identified a supervisor, got involved in supervision. And I love supervision, I think supervision for me at times is like an extension of the psychotherapy training. There's a lot to learn and get a sense of what is actually happening in therapeutic relationships. It feels like it's that lovely kind of anchor as well, it feels like it's a great place to go and talk about your practice and just get sometimes that reassurance and check things out as well. The personal therapy, without a doubt for me, I had to be very mindful that I was coming from a place where I was still learning, I'm still learning about who I was. And that was really important to me in both personal therapy and supervision, that I wanted to meet people in the most authentic way possible. I didn't want my history to cloud a therapeutic relationship, but I wanted an awareness and I wanted to be able to just sit and be who I was in that relationship. So, all of that support helping me be a much more authentic and available therapist.

Sarah:

You've made such an important point there, Andrew, about the fact that the training doesn't stop when you graduate either does it? To be UKCP, registrant, you have to then continue once you've graduated. The course that you take is just the launch pad, isn't it?

Andy:

Yeah, absolutely. And that solid grounding, that information that I got over the four years of training is phenomenal, and it still stands true for me today. I've really integrated it into my way of being, it's not necessarily a training, it's a way of being. But after the training completed, I was really excited, a bit like a kid in a sweet shop, really, I was looking at all the training that was out there, the conferences, and I thought, 'where am I going to go, you know, where's my learning, where's my curiosity as well as my personal development?' There were a few conferences that I picked for the training aspect because it was around specific things I thought, 'I really want to know about this, I want to learn about this.' And I've been really fortunate as well, in meeting colleagues throughout the UKCP. I've been invited to take part in conferences as well. And it started with kind of getting involved in some of the continued professional development and then getting to a point where actually, we can start presenting workshops, particularly around the subject matter of addiction, I've really taken to presenting at conferences and delivering my psychotherapeutic understanding of that, alongside of the colleagues. When I talk about where I came from, that was a place of such social isolation, and a kind of a barren existence. I didn't feel connected to anything, and I really didn't want things to continue and then I catch myself today on a conversation with you and reflecting on this. Being part of this really wide network of people just, you know, meeting up learning together, it's an amazing experience that feels like such a long way down that path of development that I've been on.

Sarah:

There must have been some challenges. As you say, it's a long training, you have to think about the finances, that's for sure.

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And then there's, you know, the extra sums involved because you know, you have to also do work experience, you've got to pay for therapy, and so on and so forth. Somebody's listening to this, they need to be aware of what those challenges might be before they go in. I just wondered whether you can outline things that people need to be thinking about before taking the step.

Andy:

Absolutely, Sarah. I think there was some training weekend's where the subject matter for discussion was very close and very personal. And without doubt, that would have an emotional impact. It took me a little while, I think, to learn that, particularly after training weekends, as well to give myself that time and space and plan around that. But also, recognition of the people around me too, because obviously, you know, if this had a huge impact on me, then the people closest to me would notice that and feel that as well. I don't think I fully anticipated that whole process and the full impact of what that would have on me. Whilst I wouldn't want to paint a picture of like, after a training weekend, I absolutely collapsed. However, there was a sense sometimes of a rawness, of an openness, because learning about some of the theoretical models of psychotherapy and some of the information that's shared with that, the minute I begin to apply that to myself, and how I am in the world, I did start to ask myself some big questions about, you know, who I was, why I was, where I'd come from, but what I do and why I do it today. And there is a process in that. And that, again, lends itself to the importance of your personal therapy after a weekend, should I need to be able to step into that space and do something with the energy that had emerged. I think there is, from a practical point of view, I absolutely agree, I think I was always mindful of that and making sure that I could juggle my work, my day job and then be able to pay for the training. But again, once I started working as a psychotherapist and could work privately, that started to balance off a little bit as well. The resource to do this absolutely takes some thinking about and balancing, because the information was given to me prior to the course. The transparencies there about, you know, this is the course, this is what it cost, and these the expectations and I really had to have that kind of adult moment of sitting down and saying, 'how does this work?' What I didn't want to happen was for me to get into the training and think 'I can't make this work.' With the institute that I went to as well, they were always open for conversation and always available to support where possible. I know some people have also reached out to employers as well, where employees see this level of training as an investment in what they deliver, if there's ever any scope with things like that. So, it's just checking out all the avenues are available, really.

Sarah:

Just say, you hadn't got to the end of the training, can you envision how what you learned and how you developed would have helped you in other careers? Because there are so many transferable skills in a psychotherapy training, aren't there?

Andy:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it was during this process that I really arrived at that conclusion. A bit like core standardised training, it's like, 'well, everyone should do this, really,' it's great for awareness. You know, for people listening, I'm not assuming that everyone needs to do it, because they need to, I just think from a relational sense, and from some of the friends that I've spoken to, when they've asked me about psychotherapy training, they genuinely kind of get this sense of, it would be really great to have that space to be able to just reflect on who I am, learn some of this information, learn about the relational side to things that are happening in my life, learn about what it is within me that maybe creates some of these cycles that are in my life that I constantly look at and think you know, 'I'm doing that thing again,' or 'am I destined to just be this.' You know, ask some of those really big wider questions as well.

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When I think about my work. I mean, even before qualifying as a psychotherapist, a lot of what I was learning was making its way into my life, it was just about being able to say what I need, just about holding healthy boundaries with work colleagues. As I joined psychotherapy training, I was still in this semi-nebulous place of not knowing who I was in the world. I'd come from a place of survival, and just existing really, and I didn't have an identity, I didn't think 'well, I'm Andy, and I want to be, or, you know, I really love this.' And it kind of helped me make sense of all of that and start to understand some of my own needs. But then when I think about transferring this into work, and just being able to understand what was happening around me. And some of the practical sides to this is over the years, a lot of the modalities, a lot of the learning, a lot of the text that I've read has made its way into the work. It's influenced some of the programmes we deliver. I brought a lot of the psychotherapy training I had to a course that a few of us delivered for our national charity. We developed a course on self-care and a lot of the learning that I had from the training in psychotherapy absolutely made its way into that and now it's helping hundreds of people in a charity. So, there's lots of practical implications. And today, you know, I'm Head of Recovery and Addiction Services for Changing Lives and we do a lot of talk around system change. And I think this is this stuff. This is absolutely it's good. When you look at some of the theoretical and modalities and the learning from psychotherapy, it fits absolutely into ways of being, and particularly ways of creating system change, because I think I have lots of conversation about system change, but it's in the doing really, and I think that's where psychotherapy really comes into its own.

Sarah:

I think you're so right and I just imagine a world where the worlds of policymaking, politics, business, all caring professions - imagine if those practitioners had been training that you'd have, it would make for a very different worldview. There's a huge movement within psychotherapy and I think there's any modality, which is looking at the individual in the context within which they live and how to navigate that. It really does offer a very different view of the world and a really rich one, doesn't it?

Andy:

Yeah, absolutely. Something that I've had a lot of conversations around over the last few years. And I know there are a lot of commissioners out there, because we work with local authorities, commissioners, public health, PCCs, the integrated care systems that are emerging, and I'm really fascinated with the conversation where people are starting to talk about data and KPIs. And I think, 'oh if we could just have a psychotherapeutic angle and look at actually what we record, why we record it.' Sometimes I get a sense that data drives systems, as opposed to it being about the people that we're trying to help and really starting to understand from that relational perspective and that therapeutic perspective. This seems to be a rich conversation emerging and I'm really, really hopeful.

Sarah:

It's a rich and much needed discourse on the world we are facing and the change that is happening in the world. We're living in a world which is going through exponential transformation and making sense of that we need to put that human discourse into things.

Now no doubt, Andy, you will have inspired listeners to this podcast who may be thinking ‘where the heck do I start?’ If I'm interested in training, whether it's to become a psychotherapist or just for life, there are so many courses, there are so many different types of psychotherapy, there are so many different roles, psychologists, counsellors. What advice would you give to somebody who's trying to unravel all of that and make some life changing decisions?

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Andy:

It feels quite self-absorbed at this, Sarah, because I often defer to my experience. Absolutely, one of the things that triggered me and going back to kind of how we started this conversation was, I got some therapy, I went to a psychotherapist, and I got some therapy. I wanted to get a sense of different modalities and what this might mean. I didn't truly understand because I think psychotherapy at times has a language. But I started to read, and it led my curiosity to particular kind of modalities or just understanding. I spoke to a few people that are trained as psychotherapists. I just spoke to a few people that I know that had accessed therapy themselves. There are websites out there for the institutes, I've watched some of the videos from the Manchester Training Institute as well, with Bob Cook, they did some fantastic YouTube videos on modalities. Lots of people kind of writing from their perspective as well. So, there's lots of stuff out there that you can maybe quell some of the curiosity and answer some questions for you.

Sarah:

Andy, I can't thank you enough for sharing your story with us today and for your richly helpful details about all of the intricacies of that and how that's impacted upon you and how that could benefit others. I think the big takeaways from this are that we should be curious, and that we should be open, and just enjoy the journey. I think that's the big message I take away from this. So, I just want to thank you for all that you've said today. Thank you.

Andy:

Thank you, Sarah. Thank you for your time.

Suzy:

That was UKCP member Andy Ryan speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist then go to the Find Therapists section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and use the Find a Therapist tool. We'll also be discussing psychotherapy training in Psychologies magazine this month. You can find us online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us, too. So, join us again next month. Till then thank you so much for listening and take good care of yourself.

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