

Working one to one with young people

What can youth support workers learn from their therapeutic counselling colleagues?

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Introduction

The current state of the global economy means that many young people are facing particularly challenging times. The difficulties inherent in navigating a safe course through the turbulence of adolescence and making sense of their own physical, emotional, social and psychological development, are exacerbated in an environment where the landscape relating to education, employment and training opportunities appears to be increasingly bleak. At times like these, “youth support workers” (a generic term encompassing a range of roles involved in supporting young people; youth workers, counsellors, mentors, tutors and so on) who engage with young people on a one-to-one basis, aim to build relationships of trust with their clients. In a climate of openness and transparency, youth support practitioners work alongside young people to encourage them to reflect on their lives, identify the barriers and challenges they face and consider ways in which these can be managed and overcome. In other words, youth support workers assist their clients to move towards change and achieve positive outcomes. This work involves more than simply providing relevant information to young people (although this, of course, is helpful where necessary and appropriate). Rather it requires an understanding of approaches to engaging young people and the development of skills to build and sustain meaningful professional relationships with clients.

This article focuses on the importance of the one-to-one relationship, based on the premise that, like their therapeutic counselling colleagues, youth support workers use counselling skills in their practice with young people. It introduces a research project which examines the central features of effective therapeutic counselling practice with young people from the counsellor’s perspective. The research asks five qualified and experienced therapeutic counsellors who work in a voluntary youth counselling agency to reflect on “what works” in their counselling practice. It is hoped that the participants’ responses, outlined below, might inform and contribute to youth support practice – in particular to one-to-one work with young people.



Findings

Four key shared themes relating to the question “what works” in one-to-one counselling practice with young people, emerged. They were: the need for safety for clients in therapeutic counselling, the quality of the client–counsellor relationship, flexibility in theoretical orientation and the use of creative methods.

OFFERING A SAFE SPACE

Participants in this study referred to the environment and the importance of providing a warm, comfortable, confidential and private space to clients. In addition, each participant referred to the psychological dimension of “safety” alongside the physical factors. The significance of safety in the counselling relationship is well documented and the provision of a “safe space” implies paying attention to two elements: the physical environment and the counselling process.

The focus on offering a respectful and nurturing environment in which clients can feel secure is, perhaps, particularly important for young people, many of whom do not feel safe in their

surroundings: as homes, classrooms, clubs, the streets, can all pose threats. The counselling room too, may be approached with trepidation, anxiety or even fear. Pope (2002) makes the case for “youth-friendly” counselling services, recognising the specific needs of this client group and the challenges they may face in accessing support.

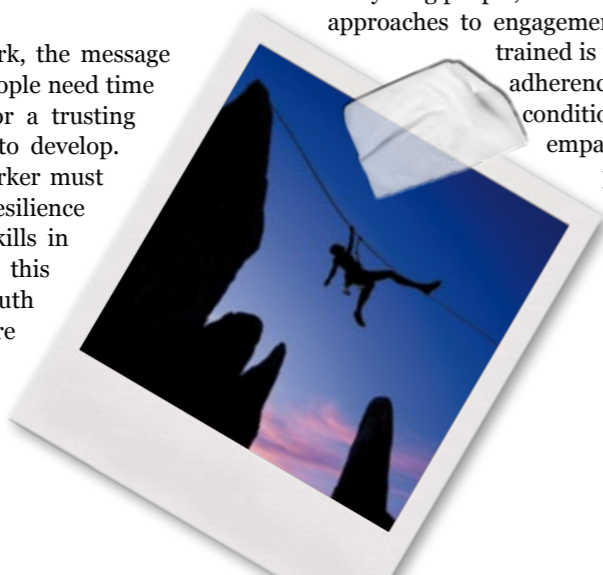
The physical space alone does not provide the “safety” alluded to by participants in this study. The concept of safety in the process of counselling refers to the boundaries of the relationship, containment and the adherence to a code of ethics and the law, which includes recognition of the limits of confidentiality in the relationship. Without explicit boundaries in place – behavioural, ethical and legal – the safety that is crucial to building a meaningful relationship may be compromised. In a recent study (Lynass et al. 2012) young people spoke about valuing the confidential and private nature of the counselling process. There appears to be agreement here between what counsellors think works and what young people themselves identify as helpful. This finding is likely to resonate with many youth support practitioners who will also be aware of the need to provide a safe and confidential space to their clients.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

All participants in the study stressed the need to build a trusting, respectful relationship with young people. Without this, they explained, young people would be less likely to engage in the counselling process. The concept of the relationship or therapeutic alliance in counselling is both revered and contested. There are research findings that support the centrality of the therapeutic alliance and there are those that question its significance. But what is clear is that, for many young people, relationships of trust with adults in their lives may be in short supply. Times where they can simply “be” with an adult without having to meet expectations, risk feeling judged, criticised or ignored may be rare.

In order for young people to talk to adults openly and honestly, a relationship based on trust is likely to have developed. Lynass et al. (2012) found that young people in counselling valued the opportunity to talk or “get things out”, in particular they cited feeling listened to and understood by the counsellor as important. That is not to suggest that creating a positive counselling relationship with young people is straightforward. This is supported by counsellors in the study who each stressed the importance of taking time to build the relationship, welcoming the opportunity offered by their counselling agency to work with clients for up to 52 sessions.

For youth support work, the message here is clear; young people need time and space in order for a trusting and safe relationship to develop. The youth support worker must develop patience, resilience and key counselling skills in order to ensure that this can happen. Some youth support workers are



constrained by external factors such as the need to meet targets or a restriction on the number of times they can meet and engage with their clients. In some cases there is a risk that this can be detrimental to the quality of the work undertaken with young people.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FLEXIBILITY IN APPROACH

One of the most interesting, and perhaps contentious, findings from the research was the openness each counsellor expressed to being flexible in their therapeutic approach. In particular, counsellors, regardless of their specific counselling training, described their adherence to the core conditions of person-centred practice (Rogers 1951; Prever 2010). By taking an empathic approach, adopting a non-judgmental response through unconditional positive regard and demonstrating self-awareness and congruence in the work, each participant felt that a relationship developed whereby his or her young clients were encouraged to tell their stories and share their thoughts and feelings with the counsellor.

Interestingly, there is little evidence to suggest that young people themselves identify any single counselling orientation as more or less helpful. The learning here perhaps, for youth support practitioners who engage in one-to-one work with young people, is that attention to the specific approaches to engagement in which they were trained is important, and it is the adherence to person-centred conditions of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard that young people value most of all.



THE USE OF CREATIVITY IN THE WORK

The participants in the study also made the link between working flexibly, as discussed above and working creatively with young people in counselling. Geldard and Geldard (2009) make the link between flexibility and creativity in counselling, explaining that young people may become restless or bored with the counselling process and that the counsellor should be able to respond spontaneously where this is the case.

The use of creative methods is not widely explored in counselling training and therefore it relies on each counsellor’s willingness to engage with creative activities and learn more about their applicability. The use of creativity in counselling also raises the issue of resources. The participants in the study had excellent resources to draw on (toys, figures, sand trays, beads, building blocks and so on), but at a time of financial restrictions to public and voluntary sector budgets, there may be less inclination to invest in creative activities for therapeutic counsellors (and youth support practitioners) to use. Those working in the broad remit of youth support may find that they have access to a range of resources and creative methods with which they can engage and support their clients; finding alternative ways to reflect on issues, consider strategies and plan for change in the future. Like their therapeutic counselling colleagues, youth support practitioners should take an informed approach to using creative methods; being clear about what they are doing, why they are doing it and what they are hoping to achieve.

Conclusion

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on counselling young people, but there appears to be little written which examines the practice from the counsellors’ perspective. This study, albeit not based on a large sample, provides some in-depth, illuminative reflections from therapeutic counsellors on four key aspects of what they feel “works” in their practice.

The evidence here can be transposed to the youth support work context where practitioners also build one-to-one relationships of trust with their clients. Youth support workers are not necessarily trained counsellors, but nevertheless, like their therapeutic counselling colleagues, they are establishing one-to-one relationships with young people with the aim of working towards greater reflection, understanding and positive change. The evidence presented here is helpful in order to inform and develop this important area of professional practice.

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