

# Self-awareness: a joy or a burden?

Cordelia Galgut questions the benefit  
of heightened self-awareness



I have come to realise over time that being a psychotherapist, a job I have enjoyed doing for 20 plus years now, has had and continues to have a huge effect on my relationships outside my consulting room, as well as on the way I react to life events. These effects are both positive and negative, though increasingly I think there are more negatives than positives for me. Furthermore, I'm not sure there is much I can do to shift my reactions at this point in my career and life. I'm interested to know how other colleagues think and feel about what I say in what follows, because I have seldom heard talk of this potential problem, though I know others who feel similarly.

I remember years ago when I first started working as a counsellor, other colleagues telling me that they felt constrained with people outside the profession because they felt under pressure to behave in a certain way. For example, not to act in a carefree way in public. I remember thinking, why can't we? People in other professions do. But I also remember thinking about a potential road rage situation I'd been in while driving and how I'd stuck two fingers up at someone, but decided I had a duty not to behave like that anymore, now I was a qualified psychotherapist. These colleagues also alluded to the impact of their job on their relationships, but there seemed a reticence to elaborate, which bemused me at the time.

## Relationships

The fact was though that training to become a counsellor/psychotherapist had already catapulted me into completely new terrain in some ways, even though I'd studied psychology as an undergraduate and been in many non-explicit counselling relationships with pupils as a teacher in my previous career. I think that the part of my training that sowed the seed that has ended up creating such a gulf between me and others outside the profession, and indeed some people inside it, is to do with raised self-awareness. This can be both a joy and a burden, I find. Why a burden? Well primarily because most of the people I meet do not appear to be that self-aware and this sets up an inevitable tension between the other person and me.

I'm aware that saying this might make me sound as if I think I'm 'sorted', which I don't, nor do I think I ever will be. It's rather that I have this heightened awareness of my own issues, not always very processed, but there all the same. If I'm honest, apart from when I'm working with clients, others' lack of self-awareness irritates me. Maybe I also envy those who lack self-awareness, because perhaps life is easier emotionally for them than it is for me, and I can find myself yearning for the clock to be turned back to a time when I was blissfully less self-aware. These days if I'm in a situation with someone I'm trying to get to know and they are super-unaware, I can find that impossibly hard. They are, of course, entitled to be as they are, but I find it difficult at that point to know how to proceed. Most of the time I will walk away if I can, feeling fairly hopeless about any future interaction between us.

I'm aware that there is a social context issue too in what I am raising, namely that we are taught within UK society not to dwell too much on things and that to do so is an indulgence, so this society doesn't value self-reflection in any real way. We only have to look at the plethora of self-help books that often try to simplify that which is not simple and give people false hope of sustained recovery from that which is just part of the human condition. However, self-help books are extremely

popular, as we know. We all have strong emotions and we share a common humanity. We all struggle at points in our lives.

An additional factor that affects my social relationships is the curiosity of others about their own psychology. However, I also find that mostly there is a distinct limit to how self-aware people want to be, and one could argue this is very sensible. When these same people try to tap into my knowledge and experience, answering their questions can end up backfiring on me. However, I find it can be enormously hard to refuse to answer them. Also when someone I meet asks me what I do, and I tell them, and their reaction is 'Are you going to psychoanalyse me?' I find it hard to dispel that difficult dynamic. I tend to reply these days by saying, 'No, actually I'm too busy sorting myself out.' But that's not entirely honest because I do make judgments, which I don't like doing, but I can't stop myself because it's an automatic pilot-type of reaction that largely happens in spite of me, as it is so engrained and largely unconscious.

Then there are those who think they know more about psychology than I do, based on no or very little training, and who consider themselves self-aware when they appear not to be. These same people don't hold back in telling me how I'm going wrong in life, with alarming confidence if they get half a chance. I resist telling them how long I studied to do what I do, as the response has been, 'Oh well, training counts for nothing. I'm a member of the school of life and hard knocks.' All these responses irritate me, against my better judgment, though I believe we are all entitled to our opinions and they can be good and insightful ones, whether people are trained or not. Whether it's because people feel threatened at the mere thought of a mental health professional and get defensive, I don't know – it's possible, I guess. However, I certainly believe that those of us in our profession get more of this kind of treatment than medical doctors, for example, and it can be hard to bear. Medical doctors also seem to get more respect from the public at large than the average mental health professional.

It comes with the territory, you may say, and I agree. My way through the mire these days is to focus on acceptance of the 'it comes with the territory' approach to my relationships and on trying not to expect too much. This approach does help, but often leaves me in a fairly lonely and uncomfortable place, even while surrounded by people. That's an attitude of mind, you may say: you don't have to feel like that, you're being a victim. Well yes, but it nonetheless creates a gulf between myself and others when my heightened self-awareness gets in the way, coupled with my awareness of others' lack of

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awareness – mostly a joy to work with inside the consulting room and a pain outside it.

So why a joy inside if a pain outside? Perhaps because people choosing to come to therapy usually want to change, are open books and are open to me. I never pretend to be other than flawed with clients, but mutual respect for the process definitely helps. Of course, the power balance is in my favour too, much as I might not want it to be, plus these relationships are contained, so safer and generally more pleasant all round.

### Other issues

I have also wondered at points whether a heightened self-awareness has hindered me more than helped me through breast cancer and through my mother's death. I am clearly no less prone to strong and conflicted emotions than anyone else, to feeling terror, awful grief, etc. Being able to access why I'm feeling what I'm feeling more quickly than if I were not trained or hadn't had years of therapy, helps to some degree, but I have often found myself wondering if the person who acts out, projecting all their emotions onto others without being aware of why they're doing it, is actually better off. I might be wrong, but that kind of behaviour is so expected and accepted in our UK society, that those of us who, for example, bend over backwards to recognise our triggers and not project them onto other people, are actually in the minority.

Doesn't this line of argument negate the worth of what we do? No, I don't think it does, because the average client does not raise their self-awareness anything like as much as we do/ have to, nor have they an ethical obligation to maintain and develop it. Perhaps that's the ideal state to be in: a kind of halfway house approach to self-awareness. I remember well, for example, how much extra emotional pain I suffered as a result of a relationship with an oncologist during the latter stages of my treatment for breast cancer. He appeared not to have much self-awareness and projected his stress onto me repeatedly, making for a difficult dynamic from the start. He would also chide me about how I was 'overanxious' and needed to 'move on', asserting with great confidence that his analysis of me and my emotional responses were correct, without any awareness of how my anxiety was making him feel and affecting the dynamic between us.

I knew in my heart of hearts that how I was feeling was a normal human response to what I was going through. In that situation, I was not the only woman who felt as I did, but his criticism really rocked me and made me question the extremity of my emotional responses, probably because I was so raw and vulnerable myself at that time. In a sense my vulnerability made me super-reflective and aware, which was very uncomfortable. My heightened self-awareness was also a burden, because of the pathologising nature of the medical community and a fair number of people outside it too. I felt so different emotionally from the way I was 'supposed' to feel. My partner, my therapist and some colleagues were my lifeline during that period.

Straight after my mother's death I was so shocked and numb that I was immune to others' judgment. As soon as I started to speak out about how I was experiencing her death, I was amazed by how much even those in our profession tended to minimise the impact of the loss of a loved parent on a person, and specifically me. Views ranged from, 'Oh, I'll be fine when my parents die – you're overreacting,' to 'Of course, you'll feel bad for a year or so, but you'll be over it soon.' As time has gone by I have heard enough from other bereaved people to confirm that my extreme and enduring emotional reactions to my mother's death are indeed normal. Nevertheless, as time passes, I am now sick of the awareness I have about how I feel about my mother's death and about her. I also wonder whether others with a less heightened self-awareness can push things away more easily. They certainly seem to be able to. I imagine that even when I retire, I will continue to have this same problem.

I've tried all sorts of therapies to help me switch off a bit, but to be honest they just tend to bring new awareness to my already over-cluttered table. Maybe colleagues have ideas that I have not considered about how to handle enhanced self-awareness. I guess there will also be those who will read this and think, she actually isn't very self-aware if she can't switch off her heightened self-awareness; and indeed, there might be some truth in that. However, as is clear in this article, for better or worse, enough already, thank you! ●

### About the author

Cordelia Galgut is a BPS Chartered Psychologist, HCPC Registered Counselling Psychologist and MBACP (Snr Accred) counsellor and psychotherapist working in private practice. She is the author of two books, *The Psychological Impact of Breast Cancer: a psychologist's insights as a patient* (Radcliffe Publishing 2010) and *Emotional Support through Breast Cancer: the alternative handbook* (Radcliffe Publishing 2013). For more details, visit [www.emotionalsupportthroughbreastcancer.co.uk](http://www.emotionalsupportthroughbreastcancer.co.uk) Email: [cngalgut@gmail.com](mailto:cngalgut@gmail.com)

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## Karin Brauner on developing a successful private practice while keeping a day job to pay the bills

**A**re you, like me, in a full- or part-time job and working to build your counselling practice at the same time? Does that job satisfy you to a point but would you rather be working more hours as a counsellor? From counselling groups I belong to on Facebook and from conversations I've had with other counsellors, it is clear that many of us have to settle for jobs that might be related to counselling but are not quite counselling – in my case, working as a senior care officer in a children's service. Many of us want to leave those jobs and gain more financial security from doing what we love: counselling.

It has already been well documented in the pages of this journal and *Therapy Today* that while the number of qualified counsellors continues to rise, there aren't enough jobs to go round, and developing a successful private practice comes easier for some than others. I am one of those people who have been struggling to find clients and make a profitable living from my passion. This is not unique to life as a freelance counsellor and exists in other industries as well,

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as Gina Trapani highlights in an article titled 'How to Start Freelancing (Without Quitting Your Job)' posted on [www.lifehacker.com](http://www.lifehacker.com).<sup>1</sup> She gives a positive outlook on having a PAYE/permanent job while developing a freelance presence in your area of expertise. Indeed, in this era of job insecurity, those of us who still have a job in the traditional sense may be the lucky ones, as we have a safety net. Counselling and the other freelance work we do (I'm also a writer, interpreter

and translator) will be, to start with at least, a source of extra income.

Writing for *The Huffington Post*, Stephenie Zamora<sup>2</sup> provides some simple tips for those of us in jobs that we have to do to pay the bills. After years of frustration and heartache trying to find work as a counsellor, I have come to some of the same conclusions myself. Zamora says that even though we might not be where we want to be, doing everything we do to the best of our ability, and going the extra mile, will help us to develop the skills we need to build the career we want in due course. Changing our mindset into a positive one, no matter what, will provide more opportunities and help to build a good reputation. Zamora also emphasises the importance of practising gratitude and of doing one thing each day that will help to get you towards your goal – something that I find really helps me to keep frustration at bay. Make contact with people, network, engage in CPD, and develop your skills and expertise where you can. And trust that this period of time will only be temporary.

### Doing what you love

In a piece published in *Forbes*, titled 'Reasons Following Your Passion Will Send You to the Poorhouse',<sup>3</sup> J Maureen Henderson has a different take on doing what she loves, which in her case is writing. She doesn't want to associate writing with generating income but rather with something she simply loves to do, and she accepts that it may never be profitable for her. Now, don't get me wrong, I want to make some kind of a profit from working as a counsellor, but I know if I only stick to counselling that I may not earn the living I would like. I will need to continue to do something in addition. Plus, for my own self-care, I wouldn't want to work with more than 12 to 15 clients. So, as Maureen Henderson counsels, borrowing the words from the popular song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young: '...if you can't be with the one (profession) you love, love the one you're with'. Develop as a professional in other areas that you don't hate doing while working towards your goal of building a thriving private practice. I am in the hope stage of my career and optimistic that at some point down the line I will have those 12 to 15

clients and my workload in other areas will decrease. In the meantime I will do my best in my day job and the other freelance work I do.

I don't want to live with my work life on hold; I want to enjoy my current work until my counselling practice is what I want it to be. I'm going to enjoy my life in all the areas I'm involved in, and the knowledge and experience I gain while doing so will support me in the long term in my counselling career. I'm saying all of this in a confident way after having been humbled by troubles, disappointments and realisations over the past few years. Humility and reality checking are key to me at present. They help prevent the disappointments from getting the better of me. ●

### Reference

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