



Short Term work and its long term benefits

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When I was eleven years old and just started at secondary school, a supply teacher took over my English class for a couple of weeks. She was young and inexperienced, but had a real passion for her subject and a desire to connect with us on a meaningful level. She asked us to write a story and said we should just step into it ourselves and tell the reader what we could see. I remember, for the first time, doing just that. As I wrote about the scene I experienced myself as in it and enjoyed the journey that my imagination took me on. Even now as I write this I can remember some lines from that story and the places I travelled to. It was a pivotal moment for me, and one that began my journey to becoming an English teacher.

I tell this story because it illustrates two things: firstly, a relationship that lasted only a couple of weeks had a huge impact on me and secondly, the imagination is a powerful tool that can leave a lasting imprint on one's sense of self. Both of these factors underpin my belief in the value of short term counselling.

Of course there are practical reasons for favouring short term work; it is less of a commitment of time and resources for agencies and individuals, but for many, short term counselling smacks of short-termism where clients can expect some degree of relief of the present symptoms but no ongoing 'cure' or proper

addressing of the underlying patterns of difficulty. Indeed my own first experiences of working as a counsellor felt unsatisfactory for this reason. I remember saying to my supervisor 'If only I had more time' on many occasions. Being a client in long term work myself, my own journey of discovery was timed to a slower fuse and I could not imagine that real depth and progress was possible in other models.

And yet there is evidence that brief contracts can bring about long term benefits even in contexts where longer term intervention might seem necessary. Pugh (1992) for instance, found that brief

intervention with children who have been bereaved or who are living with someone who is dying can have significant long-term effects.

One of the reasons practitioners sometimes dislike short term work is because we are less likely to see the 'happy ending', and it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that therefore it did not happen. In practice clients spend a far larger percentage of their lives not in counselling than they do in it, and small avalanches may seem insignificant at the time but lead to significant change when seen from the longer view. I fear that in the early days such was the pull of the desire to see change that I suspect I sometimes encouraged the client towards making changes quickly in their lives, in an effort to get some feel good factor happening within the therapeutic frame. Often disheartened, I told myself that when I had the experience then open ended work would be what I would do.

Some years later that is exactly what I did do, working in private practice in contracts set to end 'when the work was done' and not before. I am sure in this period of my life I did do some good work and that there is much to be offered by staying with someone over a long period. However, if I examine the shadow, I think this work also satisfied my own sense of neatness and my need for control, to see people with particular issues and work with them until the issues were resolved, to check the ground for other issues, work on them and only end when clients were

feeling really good about their lives. I felt good about myself, 'look at all the lives turned round because of me.'

I might have carried on working like this if I had not reached a point in my own life when I wanted a job with more flexibility. I didn't want to have to work with clients over several years but to feel I could move in and out of work more quickly. So it was for pragmatic reasons that I first applied to work in a GP practice working in short term contracts.

Before I began the work I decided to read more about the art of short term work and was greatly helped by Jenifer Elton Wilson's book 'Time Conscious Psychological Therapy' (1996) to see that there might be positive reasons for choosing short term work. It was freeing to place less importance on my role and to picture my clients as capable of coping without me and of living productive lives without counselling. Armed with a kind of pragmatic optimism I began to set up my working frame: an assessment session, followed after a waiting list break of up to a month by six working sessions and a review session three months after the end of the counselling work.

It was an extraordinary change in pace for me to work in this setting, some weeks I had six new clients to assess, six in various stages in their contracts and a couple of review sessions. Although I made my own notes to help me keep tabs on client narratives, I found that when each person walked in the room I did straight away engage with

who they were and where they were at in that moment. At a point where I was never more conscious of the shortness of time, most of the clients, who had never had counselling before, were luxuriating in the fact that they could have a full hour with someone attending to them, as opposed to the seven minutes allocated by GPs.

I decided early on that I wanted to experiment with client-written records for the work, and developed a format where in the assessment session clients would be asked to write a paragraph describing what was concerning them and their present state and suggesting what they wanted. Some dictated to me, some took up the pen themselves. This statement would be available in every session so that they could gauge any alteration in circumstances or feelings. In session six and again in the review clients would be asked to write a paragraph summarising where they were then in relation to their original hopes. The records make for moving reading as clients' voices convey so vividly the reality of their own experience. They also show the movement and change in the counselling process in a way that other more technical descriptions can miss. In very few cases do they communicate that everything is better, rather they show gradual movement, increased optimism and some sense of a direction to be followed by the client themselves.

It is tempting to think that in short term work we need to look for the easy thing to 'put right' as there won't be time to address the biggest issues. My

experience is that the very opposite can be true. After a while, as I got my bearings I realised my task was very simple: I needed to meet authentically with this other human being, hear the heart-beat melody that was their present life and what they were yearning for and notice with them where leverage might lie. Very often I would say 'so we will be meeting six times, that means you have my undivided listening attention for six hours. What is it you really want me to hear?'

This offer on the surface seems a straightforward description of fact but I believe it also communicates on an existential level. In saying 'what do you really want me to hear?' you are offering to travel wherever they wish to take you, to let the most desperate voice be spoken. You are also saying 'time is short; let's get right to the point.' It was a powerful thing to truly offer myself in that way and I came to realise that to be met as a person at relational depth was not about being there all the time or even for the long haul, but that it had both an immediate and a timeless quality to it. As Mearns & Cooper put it:

'relational depth is...a state of profound contact and engagement between two people, in which each person is fully real with the Other and able to understand and value the Other's experiences at a high level'

(Mearns & Cooper 2005:xii)

It didn't matter that I wouldn't know the end of their story, or that I hadn't heard the half of

what had occurred in their lives before, what I was giving was a depth of connection in this moment which would enable a person to feel that their very essence had been met. If I have been met then I have been met and I can no longer believe I am unreachable. In this way relationship itself can be a peak experience.

Paradoxically, I also became aware of a need to enter a counselling relationship unpossessively, not holding too tightly to the client but meeting with the letting go embedded in the contract from the very beginning, and being willing to have no impact on the other if this was what the client chose. If we are willing to connect, and weather the ride of giving ourselves over to the work in this way, then we also model what it is to be more fully human. All those beginnings and all those endings make this a challenging medium, and not, in my view, the ideal for beginning counsellors, who, ironically, often get given this work.

I know I have had a profound impact on many clients I met only eight times, and that their impact on me was often equally profound, a little like with that English teacher so many years ago. I know that we know something extraordinary happened.

Of course not every short term counselling contract was like that. Sometimes it was the more mundane bread and butter of counselling work, the offering of intervention, of support, of challenge, the invitation to connect with feeling and to

express emotion. But even in those pieces of work I felt a meeting occurred which might leave a client with the hope that they could work with others to work things out, that they could communicate their needs and be actively engaged in their own lives. I am also sure that many clients do not remember me or the counselling and yet even then I trust that something has been gained: after all I know I have science O levels as well as English, but I don't remember those teachers.

So where does the imagination come in? In short term work my imagination is needed to fill the spaces time cannot fill and to take the journey into a client's world: it is an essential part of empathy and does involve stepping into the story, just as I did at eleven years old. The client's imagination is even more important. One of the things I often said to clients at the assessment session was 'how would you like things to be, and how would you like to be feeling at the end of the six weeks? And then 'and how about when we meet three months after the work has finished?' For some I would also go further 'how would you like your life to be when you are thirty/forty/fifty/sixty?'

These clients often felt desperate, going to their doctor as the final attempt to keep their heads above water, and rooted in the debilitating nature of the present moment they were sometimes shocked by the very suggestion that something could feel different in such a short time scale. Their imagination freed them up: they pictured a future that was better, and in that

moment took the first step towards it. At other times it allowed them to imagine something less hopeful, or through imagination to realise their sense of loss or a need to let go.

At the end of a piece of work things were not always positive, but the reflective space of the review session was available for clients to work through further what they needed next. It was rare to see no change, and often circumstances had not changed but the clients somehow had. What was noticeable was the impact on the client's sense of his or her self. I find myself relating this to Stern's sense of agency where a journey had been travelled from 'I can't' to 'maybe I can'. (Stern 1985) Often in the review session clients had already put some plans into action, had told the person they loved that they needed help, had joined the group, had made some step back into the human race. Some clients had easily met the particular goals they had had and now had more plans to relate, built of the self belief that had grown from these first small steps to a more positive future. Often my greatest challenge was to accept that I would never know what would become of them or whether the change was lasting, but by tuning in to the person in the moment I often felt a sense of hope and trust that unstoppable growth had begun.

Some time after I stopped working at the surgery a client sent a letter to me which I greatly treasure. We had worked together three years before and she was someone where I remember having the old feeling

of 'If only I had more time'. There was so much that was wrong in her life, such difficult past experience that I wondered if I had been any help at all. I felt we had really met, but that we had met in her despair and stopped our work with her still enveloped within it. The imagined future scenario she had pictured for herself was powerful but it seemed so far away that I feared it might have been unhelpful to have her attention drawn to it.

Now three years on, clearing through old papers she had found her copy of the counselling notes and had shocked herself by seeing how things had changed. She wrote because she wanted me to know that the future she had hoped for herself was slowly coming true. She had shaken off much that had repressed her at the time we met and was carving out a new life. She was full of trepidation and said 'I don't know what the end of the story will be yet, but I know that I am holding the pen'.

Humanistic practitioners hold an essential belief in the client's potential for growth and sometimes it takes imagination to believe this. In my experience, clients don't engage in brief work because something is a little amiss: more commonly, being socially disadvantaged, it is all they can afford or access. Their problems are often complex and debilitating. However, sometimes the greatest problem is the fact that they are out of touch with their human potential or perhaps have never really been invited to see it and grasp it.

Just as a parent holding the edge of the bicycle for the umpteenth time persists because in their mind's eye their child is already cycling free, so the short term counsellor must hold the image of a more positive future being possible for the client even when the client themselves cannot yet see it. Then by engaging in the imaginative play of counselling the client plants a seed of self belief, born of the healing gift of relationship.

In short term work we should not pretend to be anything more than a brief relationship for the client but we need to be open to the unseen catalyst this meeting may provide. For a while we step right inside the client's story and communicate what we see, challenging the client to see him or herself with new eyes.

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