

The Free Psychotherapy Network

Paul Atkinson

The Free Psychotherapy Network got going earlier this year. We are a group of five therapists wanting to offer free and low-fee psychotherapy to people on low incomes. We came together out of a political commitment to widen access to people who would normally not be able to afford private therapy, at a time when the NHS has been reducing its non-CBT talking therapies provision, and our political system is increasingly out to attack and criminalize poverty, disability and the suffering of psychological distress.

We are currently developing our own ways of doing no-fee work. We would like other qualified psychotherapists and counsellors to join us in building a national network of therapists and counsellors who are *already* offering, or who would *like* to offer, some of their time and experience to people who would not normally be able to pay for private therapy.

Most therapists have a sliding-scale of fees, and many of us will be seeing people for very low fees. In part, we want to create a resource which connects potential clients of free and low-fee therapy with practitioners offering it. But we are also wanting to offer therapists a conduit through which they can express their commitment to widening access to therapy as a statement of political commitment to psychological and social transformation.

We envisage a loose, mutually supportive network of practitioners offering their time, experience and energy to their local communities in whatever settings work for them. This might be through individual or group sessions, through facilitating peer-support groups or by working with existing community groups.

We are not talking about charity, nor are we interested in the current government's bogus vision of 'the Big Society'. We see ourselves as contributing to a broad movement of activism, pressing for social justice and community values in response to the social injustice and cynical market values that seem to have a tightening grip on our society.

We support the provision of psychological therapies by the National Health Service (NHS). But for the moment, we see little hope of a turnaround in the recent cuts to NHS

services – in particular, cuts to the open-ended talking therapies.

We believe that the state of our emotional and psychological lives is as fundamental as our material standard of living. They are clearly inseparable, though not necessarily in a simple way. We know that money doesn't buy happiness, any more than poverty destroys the possibility of love and a creative life. But we do live in a society whose dominant political and cultural messages seem to us to overvalue money, profit, property and consumption, while at the same time undervaluing the quality of our emotional lives and relationships with our families, friends, co-workers, neighbours and wider communities.

Inequality of wealth, income and power are growing in the UK. In some respects, they are becoming more deeply and subtly entrenched in the way we think about ourselves and the meaning of our lives. Gross inequalities of social, economic and political power corrode mental as well as physical health for everyone.

Most people find the rapport and understanding they need to live well in their everyday network of friends, relatives, colleagues and community. A significant minority, however, find themselves struggling in relative isolation with painful and debilitating experiences of anxiety, fear, depression or self-doubt. Usually, the sources of such psychological difficulties are environmental – poverty, early trauma or abuse, family breakdown. All too often the people struggling with psychological insecurity are also struggling with financial and social insecurity.

We want to work with local communities by supporting people who would benefit from the experience of practitioners, who cannot get the kind of support they need from their General Practitioners or from voluntary services, and who do not have the money to pay for psychotherapy. We want to work, as far as possible, from local bases in communities to which we are connected. We want to encourage people to collaborate, support each other and share experience and understanding of psychological

difficulties. We will work with people as psychotherapists, but also as equals in the common experience of wanting to understand ourselves and others better, and to live our lives with more freedom, more creativity and more responsibility towards the common good.

So far:

- a core group of five of us have been meeting monthly to develop the website, field enquiries, build up contacts;
- we now have a network of people who offer free and very low-fee counselling and psychotherapy in London, Devon, Cambridge, Oxford, Scotland, West Midlands, Manchester and Wiltshire. Therapists are members of all the main national organizations – cross-modality;
- we have begun clinical discussions on the significance for clients and therapists of working for free;
- we are writing and looking for contributions on the politics of psychotherapy practice and provision within the context of neoliberal culture and the crisis of mental health within the NHS.

How you can get involved with the network:

- (1) If you are already involved in free and/or low-fee work as a qualified practitioner and you support the ethos of the network, you could join us by sending a short statement about what you are doing, its setting and the social/political perspective you hold about the work. With your permission, we could add your statement to the website, and connect you with other therapists interested in developing support for each other.
- (2) If you are interested in starting a project, or you want some support for an existing project, get in touch with us and we will think about how we might be able to help.
- (3) If you want to support the network in some way – by getting involved in existing work, offering ideas for community projects, thinking about the clinical implications of working for free, setting up support groups for no-fee practitioners, or simply by endorsing the philosophy of the network – get in touch with us. ☺

Contact us at: freepsynetwork@gmail.com

Website: freepsychotherapynetwork.com

Note: See Paul's other article in this issue for his biographical details.

Announcing... 'Self & Society Events, 2015'

AN EXCITING NEW HUMANISTIC WORKSHOP SERIES (London)

Starting in January 2015, the newly constituted AHP board is launching a new series of innovative CPD workshops in London, which we're calling 'Self & Society Events'.

Full details still have to be agreed by the board, but we envisage holding ten monthly, reasonably priced events a year (excluding August and December), which would be held of an evening at an accessible venue in London, and would last for 2 to 2½ hours.

This new series is a key aspect of our re-launching of the AHPB, to rest alongside the purchase of the journal by international publisher Taylor & Francis (*aka* Routledge). This is a great opportunity to put Humanistic Psychology back on the 'psy' map where it rightly belongs, so that the core values of Humanistic Psychology are more easily made available to a world which sorely needs them.

This is therefore about *re-imagining the AHPB*, offering a place regularly to meet like-minded people and have enjoyable and growthful experiences, while at the same time gaining CPD through access to cutting-edge theory from leading figures in the HP field.

All the talks will have an experiential, participative aspect,

as well as leading-edge theory; and we may also look to have a round-table discussion at the end of each session, with invited guest panelists.

The workshops will be well publicized across all the usual networks, with AHP administering the bookings and payment, and S&S Events will both raise funds for the AHP and generate a fee for the workshop presenter (probably based on a percentage of the fees taken).

If you'd be interested in running a workshop under this banner, do please let **Serra Pitts** know ASAP at serra@arresmedia.com, as there will be just ten places to fill for 2015, and we're also writing to a substantial list of practitioners with an initial invitation to offer a workshop.

Finally, our first launch event has been fixed for **Sunday 11 January** at the **Open Centre, London, 2 till 5 p.m.** – this will be a general introductory session to the new Events series, chaired by **Andrew Samuels** – and also a party celebration! All most welcome – and there will be no charge for this first Event of the series. (Details for finding the Open Centre are available from <http://www.opencentre.com/ocloc.html>.)

Richard House, on behalf of the new AHPB Board