A Good Therapist Gets to the Heart of Things

As a therapist, when I hear people talk about trauma, it often has its roots in a challenging childhood experience. This does not mean we lay blame at the feet of those who raised us. For the most part, our carers did their best. it is not so much what people did to us, but what we have done to ourselves. And to get to the root of what may lie at the core of trauma we need to explore our past.

As children we do not have a voice, but we certainly have a felt sense. Things affect us. How we were raised and the extent to which our emotional needs were met often show up many years later. A sense of fear, abandonment, rejection or feeling overwhelmed can hit us in our adult lives. And one of the most common ways these emotions manifest themselves is when clients find they are unable to say ‘no’ perhaps because of the guilt they feel when they have done something which meets with another person’s disapproval. We look for love, so we suppress our anger.

We can also feel shame, the right not to exist. It is linked to how others see us. And it goes to our core. It plays into not being enough, not feeling good enough, poor self-esteem and lack of self-confidence.

When Ad came for therapy, at the suggestion of his partner, he seemed overwhelmed by the demands being made on him by his family and others. He was in a new relationship which he felt was the best thing that had ever happened to him; he was about to learn that before he could be fully present with his new partner he needed to come to terms with his past and himself..

After a few sessions he discovered that he has been both the rescuer and victim within his family dynamic and previous relationships. . He was one they went to, the one they lent on; and he was the one they turned on and blamed when things went wrong. In one session he turned up with a black eye and limping badly. We talk about what had caused this, and he revealed that he couldn’t cope anymore with all the stress and following a drinking spree got into a fight in town. When he described his early years he had been wrapped in cotton wool, over protected. He was also diagnosed with autism, so the stigma of a mental illness would have led to feelings of shame and not ‘being normal’ and risking becoming the ‘scapegoat’ of the family. Society often reinforces this ‘not normal syndrome’ so he probably felt isolated and unimportant. He felt blamed, an outside, he didn’t fit.

We talked about how we bring these feelings into our adult relationships without awareness. Therapy can help him to reflect and work on changing his life script and develop strategies for moving forward. He no longer needed to please people, he also needed to listen to his body and what it was telling him. Empty inside from vomiting this may have been saying something. It could be the body rejecting and creating a block to him healing, Now he needed to assert his rights and needs, and to differentiate between feeling responsible for his blood family and being there for himself. Shame has a physiological effect on us which can lead to inflammation within our bodies. The brain informs, te body intervenes. So it was important for Ad to listen to his body.

Ad understood that as things stood, he risked not being able to care for his young children if he did not care for himself; and on occasions that means saying ‘no’ to alcohol, which formed a large part of this family’s culture (followed by aggressive behaviour). Without a clear head it was unlikely he was going to think clearly enough to put strategies in place. He had been smothered as a child and had learnt that to get attention he needed to help others. The chances were that when he did attempt to get his voice heard, he was pushed aside, in a family where scores seemed to have been settled by showing aggression rather than talking things through.

Another client, Lee, recalled being rejected and abandoned by his father who left the family home when he was 7. Now 50, to this day no one had explained to him how the situation came about. So he did what a lot of us do – came to believe there was something wrong with him. Through therapy he came to realise what he had been carrying negative feelings since his earliest years. The template for how we come to understand ourselves and relate to other people is set in our early years. As children, we view ourselves through our interaction with our carers. As infants we take everything personally. Separation which is not rebuilt can affect us decades later and it can have an effect on our subsequent relationships.

When his Dad left home, he remembers feeling shamed at wearing shabby clothes at school and feeling mocked by others. He internalised this shame and for years felt that no matter what he did and how much he achieved, it was not enough. Suffering from depression, Lee began to become aware of what he had been carrying, and once we recognise it we can make a conscious choice as to whether we need to let go or not. He recognised that he had continue to prove himself, work 24/7 - yet there was this internal emptiness which would not heal. So proving himself at work became an addiction. He kept returning to something which was neither fulfilling or healthy and could lead to serious health issues – yet he kept doing it.

Before therapy he decided to contact his biological Dad to see if they could re-connect. Deep down, he admitted, he wanted to fill that empty void for fear of what he might uncover if he left things as they are. I then asked him what did he think he would do if his Dad turned up at his door? He said he would invite him and ask him the questions he needed answering. Yet there was no guarantee he would get the answers he wanted. And then what? Work even harder to fill the void?

When L came for his third session, he said he was still angry about the way he felt let down by his Dad and he continued to want to tell him a few ‘home truths’. Lee began to realise that for all these years he did not know who he was and what he was about. He had no sense of belonging. So when he reached out to his biological Dad on two occasions and was rejected both times, he felt shamed and belittled like when he was a little boy.

In a subsequent session, I suggested he write a letter to his Dad, to get his feelings out of his head and onto paper. We could discuss at our next session what he would do with this letter, but for now, in order to clear his head and find an outlet for his feelings, writing may help. When L returned, he reported the process to be ‘challenging’ but worth it – the pen seemed to have a ‘life of its own’. He read his letter aloud and he said he could hear how he felt and recognised he had been harbouring a lot of shame and fear of being abandoned since he was a that young boy. Now it had been released, and he felt relief. We talked through what he would do with the letter now, and he decided not to send it (even though he wanted to) but to keep it in a folder and to look at it from time to time. I suspect that when he came to read it again it would tell a different story and will probably give him comfort knowing that finally, he had let go and he could now work on going forward.

*So I encourage potential clients to find a therapist who gets to heart of things. Let the therapist help you uncover what makes you think the way you do. Unpeeling those internal layers can help to get to the root of what is causing the problems.*