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Student top tips

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IF ONLY WE HAD KNOWN...

We first wrote this chapter when we were nearing the completion of our Doctoral Psychology training. Five years later, reading back what we wrote at the time, we feel that most of this still stands and is relevant. At the same time, we all feel that our recent professional years have provided an added insight and a retrospective perspective that we hope will enhance the helpfulness of our 'Top Tips'.

We have, therefore, added a segment at the end of this chapter which takes into account the continued evolution of the field of counseling and psychotherapy during the past five years, with particular relevance to the experience of trainees preparing to enter those professions.

COMMON ANXIETIES ABOUT BEING A BEGINNER THERAPIST

At the beginning of training we all felt apprehensive about meeting clients and this undoubtedly had an impact on our confidence as therapists. When speaking with colleagues we realized that we were not alone in experiencing this anxiety. It was a relief to discover that we shared many common unhelpful beliefs about ourselves as therapists.

'I'm not good enough'

One of the most common beliefs held by us during training has been that we are not 'good enough' therapists. At the start of training we felt that we were playing

an almost fraudulent role as a professional therapist. The inaccurate positioning of ourselves as inferior to more ‘experienced’ therapists has often led to feelings of therapeutic incompetency. At times, this has had a negative impact on our confidence.

Here are some challenges to those unhelpful beliefs that we have found useful.

- ‘Everyone needs to start somewhere’. Even Freud, Rogers and Beck had a first session!
- You have been accepted on to your training course by professionals who can see a potential therapist in you, even if you sometimes find it hard to!
- Don’t forget that you are in a similar position to your colleagues. There is a tendency to imagine that peers are more competent and experienced. Talking with them about therapy experiences and self-doubt can help normalize your thoughts and feelings.
- At times of self-doubt it is tempting to turn to model-specific theoretical literature for guidance. Nevertheless, it is often helpful to remind yourself of core counselling skills.

‘I will never get a placement’

Finding your own placement can seem daunting. It may be difficult for you to decide at the start of your training what type of experience you are looking for. Do you, for example, want to be model-specific? Do you want to have experience of group therapy or individual therapy? Are you more interested in adult- or child-centred services? Try to view your training time as a golden opportunity to sample as wide and varied a range of clinical opportunities as possible. It is important to remember that competition is fierce, but don’t worry, we have some tips which we hope will help you secure the placement you really want.

- Plan ahead! Placements are assigned quickly and you do not want to miss out on the one you have set your heart on because you have left it a bit too late.
- Identify two or three placements which interest you so that you can increase your chances of getting a training placement at the time you need it.
- Consider the number of hours you need to accrue for your course. By discussing these requirements with the head of service at the outset, it is more likely that your needs will be met by the placement.
- Remember, initial impressions are important so try to introduce yourself in the best possible way. For example, if you call in person, make sure you leave a number on which you can be contacted or that has an answerphone which clearly identifies you. Placement supervisors are unlikely to call you back more than once!
- If you apply by email or letter, try to make yourself unique. For example, highlight why you are applying to that placement and be specific about what it is about it that interests you.
- Avoid writing ‘Dear Sir or Madam’. Find out the name of the head of the service and treat this initial contact as an important part of the next stage of the process, which is the interview.

- For the interview itself, be prepared and do your reading. Remember that you will not be expected to know everything – you are still training!
- A follow-up email after the interview, expressing your interest in the placement, can often be helpful.
- Think ahead! Remember that each placement will contribute to and strengthen your CV. Each and every placement will go towards making you a better candidate in the future.

‘Poor client, they got me!’

In our early sessions with clients there was a tendency to assume that we could not be competent therapists because of our lack of therapeutic experience. While acknowledging the importance of experience, we have realized that competency is not solely synonymous with years of practice. Remember:

- Trainees provide a significant contribution to people accessing psychological therapies. In some cases, if trainees were not employed by the service, your client may not be seen for many months, if at all!
- You are not alone. You have the input and expertise of your supervisor on which to draw. These can inform and guide your client work.
- It may be the case that your anxiety about initial sessions results in increased reading and thinking about your client work. This may enhance your therapeutic confidence and positively impact on your client work.

‘What if I don’t have anything to say?’

A further concern that we experienced was that we would get ‘stuck’ and not know how to respond to our clients. Consider:

- You cannot listen and worry at the same time. We have found that worrying about what to say next distracts you from actively attending to your client.
- The relationship between you and your client should be paramount. From our own client feedback we have noted that an empathetic presence and good listening skills were highly valued.
- Do not panic about the silences that arise during sessions. Remember that silences can be an important part of therapy and should not necessarily be avoided.

MANDATORY THERAPY

The mandatory aspect

The issue of whether personal therapy for trainees should be compulsory remains a contentious issue which is widely reflected in the trainee literature. However, since

personal therapy is an integral part of the overall training experience, it can be helpful to think of it as more than just ticking a box. Within the trainee population there will be those who have already experienced personal therapy, while others may be embarking on a completely new and unfamiliar experience. Stepping into the unknown is likely to trigger a range of emotional reactions and responses, including ambivalence. Our experiences of mandatory personal therapy have covered the whole range: the good, the bad and the ugly! We hope the following tips will be beneficial.

Choosing your therapist

During training, when time is a precious commodity, it may be tempting to select a therapist based purely on location. Try to approach your search with flexibility and consider different options, which might include finding a therapist in the same location as your placement or study institution. We found these recommendations to be helpful:

- A good way of learning about different therapists and individual styles of working is by asking for recommendations. Your supervisor, personal tutor and particularly other students can be excellent sources of information.
- Affordability is a critical factor for many trainees. It can be helpful to ask at the outset whether your therapist offers discounted rates for students. While it may be important to shop around with cost in mind, try to think of personal therapy as an investment in you.
- There is much to be gained from meeting different therapists. This can provide the trainee, and indeed the therapist, with the opportunity to see whether they are likely to be able to forge a good working relationship. Some therapists will agree to a 20-minute introductory meeting. This process may not guarantee that you find 'the one' straightaway, but it can help to foster a sense of control and choice over the experience as a whole.
- The therapeutic model might be a deciding factor when choosing your therapist. At the outset, and with relatively limited knowledge of the different approaches, discussions with therapists from different disciplines may help to guide your decision. At a later stage, and as you progress through your training, you may wish to change the therapy to a model which may either complement or provide a contrast to your clinical practice.

Venturing into the unknown

The world of counselling may appear relatively small and that can raise concerns about 'who knows who?' Remember that your therapist is a professional and as such will be adhering to ethical boundaries, including confidentiality, from the first contact.

- Trainees will sometimes feel a need to impress their therapist and demonstrate that they are a 'good enough' trainee. Remember, your therapist is not interviewing you and will be aware of the potential for anxiety to arise in relation to your novice status.

- Try to drop the ‘trainee mask’. Be yourself and remain as open to the experience as possible. This will provide you with added insight into how your own clients are feeling. It will also enrich your overall experience of therapy.
- Therapists may also worry about being ‘good enough’. Trainees are often acquainted with recent research, theory and psychological models. Your therapist may experience some anxiety of their own in relation to the scrutiny of their own professional expertise.
- As you progress through your journey of personal therapy you may start to experience change. This might impact on your personal relationships with significant others. Try to include your nearest and dearest by explaining the therapeutic process.

Making the best use of your personal therapy

Personal therapy is contentious and challenging and so we have reflected not only on our feelings about this part of the course, but also on how we went about getting the most we could from it.

- Whatever your feelings are regarding the mandatory nature of personal therapy, you are investing time and money in the process. Think about what you want to gain from the experience and what your personal goals are. Some of us found that after many hours of therapy we wished that we had given it more thought at the outset.
- Feel free to be open with your therapist and talk about the fact that it is a requirement. Therapy can evoke strong emotions, both positive and negative. Remember that your therapist is likely to have similar experiences sitting on the other side too.
- Think about the timing of therapy. Consider both your emotional capacity and the time constraints. If you are feeling under pressure, it may make it difficult to engage in the process. Conversely, for others this may be the optimum time to seek support.
- Sometimes the boundaries between personal therapy and supervision can be unclear. Try to consider whether something may be more suitable for supervision than for therapy. If in doubt, you can discuss this with your therapist.
- It may be tempting to be an observer of ‘therapist techniques’ as opposed to fully engaging in the process. While this can be useful, if you find yourself copying your therapist in a client session, question whether it is your voice or your therapist’s.
- Be honest with your therapist. If it is too difficult to open up certain issues at a particular point in time then let your therapist know. They are not mind readers!

When it just isn’t working...

Some trainees will find the experience of personal therapy nerve-wracking and can doubt themselves if they feel that the process is ‘not working’. We think it is helpful to remember the following points.

- It is important not to blame yourself. Try to be open with your therapist about your concerns and talk to your peers about their experiences.
- While therapy is an evolving process, if it is not working, you do not have to stay with that particular therapist. Your therapist should be able to handle this.
- It can feel like a hassle to change therapists but trust us on this one. If you feel there is no way the relationship can move forwards, it really is time to move on.

ACADEMIA

Studying to become a therapist can be a rigorous and time-consuming process. These study tips offer advice on how to manage this.

- Record! We have all regretted not recording a session. There is much to be gained from recording each and every session, simply because you then have a greater choice when you are selecting segments for process reports. We also found that listening to our work has helped us to learn much more about ourselves as therapists, particularly from those sessions we would never have submitted! Try to see yourself as a work in progress.
- Process reports can be challenging, and choosing the best 10 minutes is often the biggest hurdle of all. With the benefit of hindsight, and based on our markers' feedback, our top tips to keep in mind when making your choice would be to:
 - include a piece which explicitly represents the specified therapeutic model; if you find yourself explaining a core belief in a psychodynamic report you might want to think again
 - include a segment in which you are able to demonstrate a level of competence not only in your chosen model, but also in core therapist skills; remember, listening and empathy are key
 - ask your supervisor to listen to your recordings; an objective view can be invaluable.
- The benefits of clear and concise clinical notes cannot be underestimated. These notes are not only a core professional requirement in practice; they will also provide the best possible foundation for your client studies.
- The grass is always greener... We have all experienced self-doubt at different stages. Many of us have found ourselves regretting academic decisions as deadlines draw near. Remember that it would not necessarily be easier another way.
- Different students will progress at different rates. While peer support is invaluable, we found making academic comparisons was frequently unhelpful. Maintain a focus on your own progress and congratulate yourself on your achievements along the way.

In case of failure

Failing is not necessarily the end, so do not panic. Sometimes things do not go to plan. The reality is that these courses are difficult and not everything will be achieved as you want 100 per cent of the time. Please try to remember that you can move on from this. This is how we did it:

- It is likely to hit you hard, and this is understandable. We were surprised by the emotions that surfaced when we failed. Failing a piece of work is never nice. Allow yourself a period of 'wallowing', but then make proactive plans as to how to motivate yourself and undertake the necessary changes to move on.
- Try not to internalize your feelings. It may be tempting to want to burrow under the duvet and to isolate yourself for a lengthy period of time. We found talking to peers and/or to friends outside the course helped us to get a sense of perspective. Remember, there is more to life than the course, although it may not always feel like it.
- Attempt to look at it in a positive light. Although you may be reading this in horror, failing can be a very positive learning experience, both academically and personally. It may not feel like it at the time (and we know), but it can help you find inner strengths and also be invaluable in progressing academically. Some of the best pieces can be written after learning how things can be improved.
- Discuss your feedback with your tutor. They want you to pass and will be there to support and guide you. Do not be afraid to ask for a clarification of feedback, but also be prepared to accept constructive criticism.
- Find a 'study buddy' with whom you feel comfortable. To be successful this needs to be mutually beneficial. Sometimes you may be so close to your own work that it is difficult to take an objective view and everything may seem a bit overwhelming. Looking at it with a peer may offer a fresh perspective.
- The experience of failing may result in a blow to your confidence. If you feel it may impact/be impacting on your client work, discuss it with your supervisor. There is no shame in taking time out if you feel that this would be beneficial. Remember that this may also be constructive for your clients as well.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Being a trainee on a counselling or psychotherapy course will have an impact on many aspects of your life. You will be juggling high volumes of academic work, placements, personal therapy, and – if you're lucky – a social life too! While we are still learning to achieve this balance, we have developed some practical strategies along the way that we have found helpful.

Self-care

The importance of taking time off should not be underestimated. However, it can be difficult to switch off completely. We found it helpful to plan breaks in advance and to identify effective methods of relaxation.

- It is helpful to identify ways to relax. Be self-aware. Accept your limits and respect them.
- Know your rewards. We found ways to 'treat' ourselves.
- Learning how to separate client work from personal life can be extremely challenging but is very important. Carefully consider what is likely to enable you to do

this. For example, some trainees would wear different items of clothing at work from what they would in their personal life.

- Remember to celebrate success along the way. Whether this comes in the form of a 'thank you' from a client or from passing a piece of coursework, give yourself a pat on the back.

Time management

We found the following methods useful to balance our work–life demands.

- Plan, and plan ahead. It may appear to be overstating the obvious, but in order to minimize stress and maximize the potential for academic success, familiarize yourself with the coursework deadlines for the entire year. From our own experience, it is never too early to start on a piece of written work which will require thoughtful reflection and the time to source relevant references.
- Every minute counts. Keep an academic 'toolkit' with you at all times. For example, replacing a novel with a textbook or an MP3 player with a client recording can help to alleviate stress, and also help you to feel more in control of your precious time as you move between placements, therapy, supervision and college. This also applies when clients do not attend sessions in placements. Although potentially disappointing and frustrating, this can be viewed as an academic opportunity.
- Optimize your time. Find out when you work best. Most people know that there are times when they are more likely to be able to work effectively. Sitting at the computer for hours with a deadline approaching may simply create stress and worry. If you are not in that zone, try to do something else constructive with your time. Organizing your folders or updating admin can be therapeutic and foster a sense of achievement.
- If it really is not working, give yourself permission to have a break.
- At times, the volume of academic and client work can become overwhelming. It may be a struggle to focus on one aspect at a time. Remember, you cannot work and worry at the same time.

Isolation

The trainee experience can often feel isolating with much time spent alone on academic work and placements. While every journey is unique, there will be common themes. The points below demonstrate how we managed this.

- Talking to your peers/colleagues can be reassuring. Remember, others are in the same boat as you, even if they are on different journeys.
- Whether you work as part of a multidisciplinary team or as an independent therapist, for example in a GP practice, it is possible to feel isolated. Try to build relationships with other members of staff. For example, a quick chat with the receptionists between clients can be invaluable.

- Be aware of the support available to you and identify who to go to for specific kinds of help. For example, if a client is having a particular impact on you, discussing different elements with different people may be beneficial. It might be advantageous to let people close to you know about the impact while leaving the details of the case to be discussed with your supervisor.

Managing other people's reactions to becoming a therapist

We have found it helpful to be mindful of striking a balance when communicating our experiences and thoughts to those who are not in the profession. Although therapeutic work may be fascinating to us, we have discovered that not everyone is as passionate about it as we are! We found the following situations to be common:

- In a variety of social situations, you may already have discovered that revealing that you are training to be a therapist can provoke some interesting reactions. Some of our favourites include: *'Can you read my mind?'*, *'I suppose you are going to start analysing me...'*, *'I had better be careful what I say to you....'* and so on. This may, on the one hand, imbue a sense of pride, although from personal experience we have found it is more likely to feel awkward! We found that over time we developed better ways of managing these situations. As a first step, it can be helpful to keep in mind that this type of work is often not accurately understood by others and it can make people feel anxious. Equally, it is often a line of work that intrigues others. A lighthearted response can usually serve to offer reassurance or diffuse any uncertainty. For example, *'I wish I could!'* or *'I'm not telepathic!'* or even *'I'm not at work now....'*. You will find your own way of managing these reactions over time.
- In a similar vein, we have also experienced being unexpectedly positioned as an unofficial therapist in social situations. We have felt uncomfortable when people who we barely know have shared highly personal information with us in a social context as soon as they have found out 'what we do'. This may arise by virtue of the 'therapist' title or even because of your enhanced empathic listening skills! We have found that this can be an occupational hazard. In this scenario, we have found it helpful to suggest that we could guide them towards accessing professional support (rather than providing it ourselves in this context!).

TRAINING IN THE CURRENT CLIMATE

The last five years have seen trends and changes in the field. Significantly, an increased emphasis of 'evidence-based practice' and the development of IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) services throughout the UK. Within this development there has been a surge in the dominance of certain models, such as second- and third-wave CBT. These models often adhere to treatment protocols for particular mental health presentations, as set out in the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) Guidelines. These approaches to therapy are recognized as advantageous in

terms of lending themselves to shorter-term interventions with more easily measurable outcomes. This development has had a significant impact on the work and careers of therapists working in the National Health Service, whether they tend to work in this way or whether their work is primarily informed by other theoretical models.

DEVELOPMENT

Keeping the development of your post-qualification career in mind can be important throughout training. We recommend considering these suggestions.

- It is helpful to consider the type of therapist you hope to become, how you would like to work and what kind of context or specialism you think you might want to pursue. These decisions can inform your learning choices and even research interests. It is common to be unclear on this, particularly at the start of your training. We would therefore advise you to seek out as broad a range of clinical experience as you can so that all options remain open to you. We found that an openness to a variety of learning experiences during training, which included CBT, has enabled us to secure professional roles both within the NHS and in other clinical practices or specialist areas.
- Another thing to be aware of as you transition from trainee to qualified professional is that your learning doesn't stop when your training does. Indeed, you will continue learning not just within your professional role, but also because of a requirement to do CPD (Continued Professional Development) training. Once qualified, it is important to keep up to date with the ongoing accreditation and regulatory requirements of your governing professional body (i.e., Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) or United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)).

CONCLUSIONS

While writing this chapter we were struck by the extent to which everyone's experience is unique to them. At the same time, we have been reminded that many of our experiences are shared. Finding a balance between sharing and comparing can be difficult but we have found this to be an integral aspect of our personal and professional development.

Writing this chapter has been an invaluable experience for us. Throughout the writing process we have reflected on our journeys as trainees and now as professionals, and many times have expressed the thought 'I wish someone told me this two years ago'. We hope that some of the tips presented here will help you facilitate the juggling act that is required to cope with the many demands of the training process. We wish you well on this exciting and challenging journey.

As you can see from the list of contributors at the beginning of this book, we have all moved on professionally and we can promise you there is definitely light at the end of the tunnel!