

Make or break

Currently in her first year of training, *Eve Menezes Cunningham* has discovered that therapy courses should come with a health warning: they can seriously affect your relationships with partners, friends, family and colleagues

When I signed up to train as a psychosynthesis counsellor, I was motivated by how great I thought it would be (when I'm all trained and qualified) to help clients. I'd hoped that all the personal development work I've already done would mean I might have a relatively smooth ride. Instead, I'm over analysing myself so much I feel like I need to wear a 'closed for refurbishment' sign while I continue the training.

Between the theory, being in therapy, the group work and my attempts to apply all this new knowledge to my life, I often feel exhausted. So it's comforting to know that I'm not the only one. It turns out that underneath our calm exteriors, students, therapists and trainers are all aware of the swirling sediment that gets stirred up. No matter how finally we think we've dealt with things, they can suddenly start affecting current relationships with everyone from partners, friends and colleagues to children, parents and neighbours. Even strangers can trigger things.

Health warning

Some training institutions do their best to ensure that applicants know what they're getting into. 'I always say to prospective students, "I'm going to give you a Government Health Warning: it's likely to change your life"', says Jennie McNamara, Head of Child Psychotherapy Training at the Northern Guild for Psychotherapy in Newcastle. She explains that the course will change everything from the way they relate to their partners, colleagues, bosses, friends, family and strangers. When a block of training is over, she prepares students for 're-entry' – as if they're coming from space into the world. 'I warn them to be aware that they're carrying tools with them,' she says. 'These are tools that you need to handle like a surgeon's knife. You carry the learning rather than trying to live it out.'

I think this is where I've been going wrong. I've been trying to live out what I've learned so far in my professional life as well as when I'm with friends and family. Still, being single, I figured I'd have less to deal with than people whose partners are on very different paths. 'Partners often feel very excluded and this can cause huge strain,' says Bev Gold, a psychodynamic therapist with 20 years' experience. 'If you don't try to minimise these effects, it could mean the end of the relationship.'

Recently employed as a student counsellor at Anglia Ruskin University's

Counselling Service, Gold has also taught on Cambridge University's advanced diploma in counselling. 'I've seen trainees get separated and divorced,' she says. 'With friends and partners, always try to take up a fairly humble position – if someone asks about what you're doing, be open and share. Avoid using lots of jargon, though. And if they aren't asking, don't push things before they're ready. As students learn more about themselves and their patterns, a lot can suddenly seem very clear. It's important to remember that your partner might not want things to change. Even if they do, at some level, they may be scared of losing you as you change faster than they can.'

Big decisions

Ideally, perhaps, we'd all be able to press pause on our lives. We could then revisit current challenges when armed with new information. If relationships needed to end, we could end them with honesty and kindness. And if they could be saved, we could shift them with minimal pain. But real life and relationships can hurt as well as enrich our lives. And there's no way to pause things.

'Don't make any big decisions about relationships during your therapy,' Maggie Rogers was advised while she was in training. Rogers is Chair of Training at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies. She also offers therapy through The Institute for Arts in Therapy and Education. 'I felt it was excellent advice because while you are in it you can't see it. It isn't until you end your therapy and training that you can see things as they are, including relationships.'

For some students, the training gives them the courage to make the break. It's not that the course has forced things but they knew something was wrong before even signing up. 'For the first time ever, I've started to know what I want instead of focusing on what I don't want,' says Abby, a foundation year student at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust. Since starting the course, she has split up from her long-term partner but she sees this as a positive thing. 'Take each situation separately,' she advises. 'Think, what do I want from this particular situation/relationship? Then ask, Am I getting it? And if not, do something about it.'

'When one person's going through training, it cannot not affect the other person. It has a knock on effect,' says psychosexual therapist, trainer and supervisor, Juliet Grayson. 'Trainee therapists are the worst for wanting to fix their partners. They're very good at seeing what's wrong with them. It's good for

'It's good for a couple to sit down at the start of the course and be realistic about the fact that one of them is going to be changing a lot'

a couple to sit down at the start of the course and be realistic about the fact that one of them is going to be changing a lot.'

All the issues I'd hoped to avoid by staying single now crop up with all the other people in my world – from family and friends to neighbours and people I work with. Last week my head was swirling so much, I wanted find a cave to live in for a while. No neighbours, phone, email, friends or people of any sort. Solitude and space sounded amazing (and impossible). Now, having spent a weekend looking at relationships and realising that they're never perfect, I'm enjoying people's (and my own) company much more. I find myself sharing more with friends I've had since I was a kid as well as people I've only recently met. In some cases, it helps turn acquaintances into friends. In others situations I worry that I'm saying things that will send them fleeing.

Work and family

No matter how mature we get, it's really easy to regress around our parents. All my usual angst is trebled as, while dealing with my own subpersonalities, I recognise some of theirs. Then I try to figure out which ones I've inherited. I figure if they didn't have theirs, I wouldn't have mine. Sometimes I recognise theirs and think they should approach things in a different way. Fortunately I'm close to both of them and the training has already given me some useful tools to begin bringing up stuff that I've been suppressing for years.

Joanna is planning to complete the diploma year of her counseling course at Anglia Ruskin this December. She's finding her parenting skills are generally helped by her new knowledge but sometimes her 17 year-old daughter says, 'Stop counselling me. Can't you just be my mother?' Now Joanna makes a conscious effort to observe her own motives by checking whether her 'anxious parent' has kicked in.

Work relationships can be massively affected too. Some people find their colleagues and bosses respect them more. Others find themselves feeling frustrated by the gulf between the work they're doing to pay the bills (and training costs) and the work they're training to ultimately do. I'm fortunate to be self-employed. Psychosynthesis fits so well with my existing work that I can apply what I'm learning very quickly. The downside is that I want to know everything now.

On a recent course about relationship counselling, I learned that we humans

generally find it easier to be ourselves with strangers than with people we love. We worry that if we reveal our true selves to our loved ones, they won't love us anymore. That's why so many people spill their guts to the stranger next to them on a plane. Personally, I've always worried way too much about what everyone else thinks about me. But it's definitely easier to practise new ways of relating with them than it is with my nearest and dearest.

Turning the heat up

'The training is a bit like being in a crucible,' says Morgan, who completed her counselling training at the University of Cumbria in 2007. 'Everything gets hotter and hotter for you. My tutors advised us to be brave but I wish I had been even braver and taken risks to encounter people at a deeper level.' Maggie Rogers adds, 'As you progress through therapy and training it is likely that the "self talk" that filled your head at the beginning will lessen. It is a relief to be able to fill your head with something other than ruminations like, "Did I say that correctly?" "Did I make a fool of myself?" "Should I ring her up and apologise?" You can begin to let yourself be!'

I find this reassuring as, at the moment, I'm second guessing myself several times a minute. Even when I'm alone. Keeping a journal is very useful but at times makes me feel even more self-obsessed than ever. 'I found it really helpful,' says Ali, an integrative counsellor. She's completed the course at Anglia Ruskin University and is now working towards accreditation. 'When you're writing journals each week, you've got a space to really consider how you're feeling and what you're going through. It's a hard course academically but it's also about you.' Ali's journaling helped her process her divorce and juggle single motherhood with work and the new course.

In theory, by becoming more aware of our own patterns as we progress through training, our own therapy and the process groups (not to mention our actual lives), we can improve all our relationships. I've (possibly just temporarily – I don't want to get carried away here) taken some of the pressure off myself about trying to be a perfect coach, journalist/writer and psychosynthesis trainee. I'd been hoping that by the time I got to the end of my training, I'd find all the things I'm happy helping clients with but hate doing myself, a breeze. That setting boundaries and asserting myself would become effortless. At the moment, though, I feel fine about the fact that being alive means things get messy sometimes. ■