

Michael Jacobs

Therapy takes time. If you can get hold of one thing in the hour, that's great. If your client can, that's even greater.

It's OK to say no to clients. When someone wants therapy, is willing to pay for it, and yet from the initial assessment appears to be completely unsuitable for what the therapist can offer, it's OK to say no. While it is true that every new client will teach us more about how to work, and that experience of new situations and new issues enlarges our knowledge and extends our skills, we should also try to avoid any learning from those mistakes which damage the client, or exploit the client just because we need the work.

Sometimes we have to forget what we learned. All our training has emphasised knowledge: theories about people, and knowledge of appropriate skills. This we draw on as we try to understand what the client is telling us. But if we wish to be as open as possible to what a client is telling or showing us, we may want to consider when we have to empty ourselves of everything we have learned, because in the end what probably contributes most to the value of a therapist is that they are someone who has listened, and worked with many people.

All therapists need a core. When we decide to train as a therapist, we are normally drawn, as if by a magnet, to a particular type of therapy, and that attraction normally stays with us in whatever direction we develop. It is important to have that solid core, that pole that runs from north to south through our practice and our thinking, to which we return, especially when we are confused or needing to check out our understanding. It has the ability to support us and help us locate where we stand.

We need to take the flak. We need to be able to take on ourselves, for as long as necessary, the angry feelings that the client is expressing or wanting to express. We do this whether the anger is aimed at ourselves or not, trying to make it safer for the client. We may ask whether the client is feeling angry 'here' and 'with me'. Or rather more confidently, we may actually suggest to the client that 'I think you may well be feeling angry with me too'.

And admit when we've messed up. It may help clients to address the mistakes we have made, our lack of understanding, or a response that we got wrong. Acknowledging our fallibility is another of those personal qualities we need to have on a par with being empathic and genuine.

Empathy is not enough. Empathy is central to counselling practice, and perhaps for some therapists this is the only way to be alongside a client. But empathy comes from knowing the client, and if we do not know enough about the client and the client's way, then we risk harming them and ourselves. We need to learn from the client, and need to learn to distinguish our clients from ourselves. We really need to be saying more often than we do: 'Can you help me understand what you are going through (or what you have been through)?'

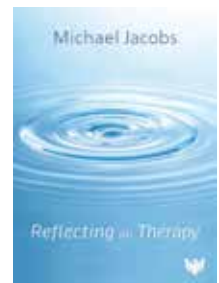
Rules should be flexible. We have to have a structure for our work, and we seem to expect clients to fit the structure, without really involving them in the process of creating a structure with them. Do sessions have to last 50 minutes for everyone? There are some clients who would find a shorter session less threatening – I remember a client asking for two 20-minute sessions a week rather than one 50-minute session. It worked well in helping him cope with the stress of his disturbed inner world as well as enabling him to take the initiative for what he needed for himself.

We can't rescue people. In therapy there are times which are just like those agonising moments on wildlife documentaries when we wish someone would step in and help. But they can't. And we can't. We have to let it be. ●



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Jacobs is one of the pioneers of psychodynamic counselling and therapy in the UK and the author of many books, including *Psychodynamic Counselling in Action* (Sage) and *The Presenting Past* (OUP).



- These edited extracts from *Reflecting on Therapy*, recently published by Karnac (karnacbooks.com), show some of what Michael has learned over a 50-year career.

