

JOE PAWSON

‘Denial of dependency is fundamental to crises in our relationships and within society at large’

An egocentric culture denies our vulnerability and our reliance on each another, says integrative psychotherapist **Joe Pawson**, but this dependency is our lifeline to the world



Last year UKCP launched a book series in partnership with Karnac Books called *Psychotherapy Matters*, consisting

of accessible books on a range of topical subjects for psychotherapy professionals, with a crossover into a general readership. The series aims to bring diverse subjects into focus and to energise much-needed conversations around mental health.

This spring sees the release of UKCP

integrative psychotherapist Joe Pawson's book, *Dependency and denial: the stories that divide us*, which explores connection with self, with others and the interdependency that lies at the heart of our existence. Here Joe reflects on writing the book, the impact it has had on his life and the importance of self-care.

Tell us how the book came about.

I was sitting on an idea about dependency and the environment. I wrote a proposal for that, about how our issues with >



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More books in the **Psychotherapy Matters** series will be published soon. UKCP members interested in contributing a proposal for the series should email the series editor Linda Cundy at lindacundy57@gmail.com



dependency underpin our attitudes to nature and the climate crisis. The editor came back and suggested I widen the scope to dependency and denial in general, so I began broadening it out around those themes. I now think that I couldn't have written anything else. The more I wrote, the more the twin ideas of denial and dependency seemed to relate to and touch on everything: society, relational difficulties, existential issues and all of the most personal, primal struggles.

We're split from nature and have a very egocentric culture that denies our reliance on all that we're connected to. Our connection to one another is our lifeline to the world. Yet, it also makes us vulnerable. To manage this, we often end up turning away from our need for each

'WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FEELINGS OF DEPENDENCY ARE EXILED FROM OUR AWARENESS?'

other and instead seek security in the fabricated stories of our denial.

How does the book explore that?

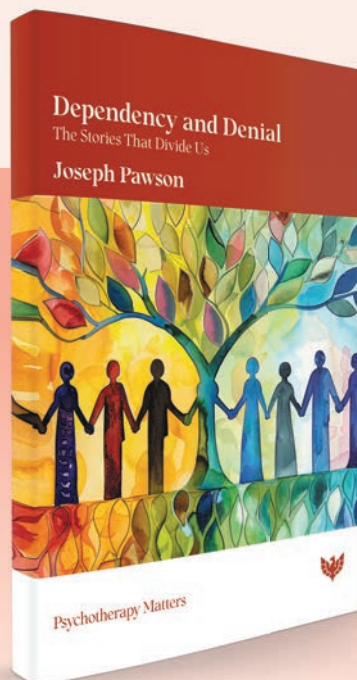
It is an exploration of interdependence, identity and culture, looking at the consequences of what happens when

feelings of dependency are exiled from our awareness and excluded from cultural narratives. And how, as a result of this, we find ourselves behaving in ways that we have little understanding of – such as in our relationships, outbursts of anger, addiction, jealousy and commitment issues. These all signal the presence of hidden feelings of vulnerability that exert their control from outside of our awareness.

A denial of dependency is not only fundamental to crises in our most intimate relationships, but also within society at large, contributing to racism, inequality, misogyny and the destruction of our environment. We are inextricably woven into the fabric of all things and therefore, when we turn our backs on dependency, we turn away from the heart of existence itself.

Do you use examples from clinical work?

In the book there are stories from the therapy room that have been anonymised and amalgamated to maintain confidentiality and I draw on ideas from developmental, Jungian and Buddhist psychologies to capture the journey of reconnecting with our banished dependency. I always want to integrate the personal and transpersonal, drawing parallels between what happens in the therapy room and the world beyond. Confronting our denial can heal more than just our own interpersonal





**Dependency and denial:
the stories that divide us is out
in April karnacbooks.com**

difficulties. In venturing into the dark places that our need for each other takes us, we can rediscover a profound interconnectedness that surpasses the symptoms that lead us into therapy in the first place.

How difficult was it to write?

I wrote it in a year alongside client work, I had 10 clients at the time. It kind of poured out of me. Some of what I had to say was on the tip of my tongue and some of it was like an archaeological dig. It sounds a bit grandiose to say that I was discovering something, but it was an amazing experience to find that lots of strange, disconnected ideas seemed to fit into this larger narrative.

It's a bit like psychotherapy; you look back on it and think there's no way anyone could have designed it how it happened. It's more than what you were conscious of. I had to trust that it would come together.

Will there be another book?

I've got an idea that I had before this one – it's still undeveloped, but it's there – on a similar theme of nature and interconnection. I feel I have to make sense of what I've been through, that if I don't work with it, the momentum that has gathered will run me over.

How did you become a psychotherapist?

I first became interested in psychotherapy as a teenager exploring psychedelics, then later shamanism, which profoundly changed my world view. When I was 21, I had what could be termed a 'spiritual

emergency', a period of six months of intense psychological opening.

I had to find new ways to make sense of the world and at the same time deal with the psychological processes that were still in motion. I did a degree in herbal medicine that I started when I was 19, but found that it never felt like quite the right fit for me. However, I was inspired by learning about the placebo effect, which when you consider what it is, the body healing itself in response to certain meanings and rituals, is really quite incredible.

Not to say that herbal medicine can be reduced to this alone, but rather that it made clear to me the power of working with meaning itself. I think therapy has that same quality. At 25 I started to train as a psychotherapist, choosing an integrative and relational approach, despite all the transpersonal experiences that I had been going through. I guess I have always been drawn towards integrating both things.

Will you carry on doing client work?

I'm now splitting my time between the UK and abroad, so I'm doing all client work online. At first I was averse to not working face-to-face, but I've really adapted and now enjoy the difference and the possibilities that it can open up.

I'm pretty happy doing it and when I think of the future, I feel like it's something I'll continue to enjoy. The one on one, there's something so special about it – that sense of limitless possibility and potential that comes from just two people in a room. I don't imagine running out of inspiration there.

Are you careful to avoid burnout?

I'm definitely careful with managing my workload. I want to make sure I have plenty of energy for my client work. Small adjustments to client numbers, or even just the timings, can make a huge difference to how the overall balance feels. Some people are so different constitutionally, they seem to have a capacity I lack, and the more they take on and carry, the more momentum they have.

But for me, when I get overloaded, I start to have trouble sleeping and quickly crumble. I don't have the best foundations in terms of stress tolerance. I'm not someone who can steam on, so I try to keep my workload and client numbers at a level that never feels overwhelming and allows space for everything else in my life too, including space for its own sake too.

I've always struggled to feel as if I've done 'enough'. But I've found that I have to trust my own process, working with it rather than pushing against it. Like when I write, I've got at most an hour of good words in me a day, where I can put down on the page what my unconscious has been working on the rest of the time. Sometimes I try and do more, pushed on perhaps by this judgement of not doing enough, and can easily spend another few hours just shuffling words around on the page.

So I keep coming back to the importance of trying to work with the process and with my own constitution, rather than trying to force something different. And when I do find that alignment, it's amazing how easy and efficient it can feel. It's most apparent when writing, but I think it also applies a lot to life in general too.