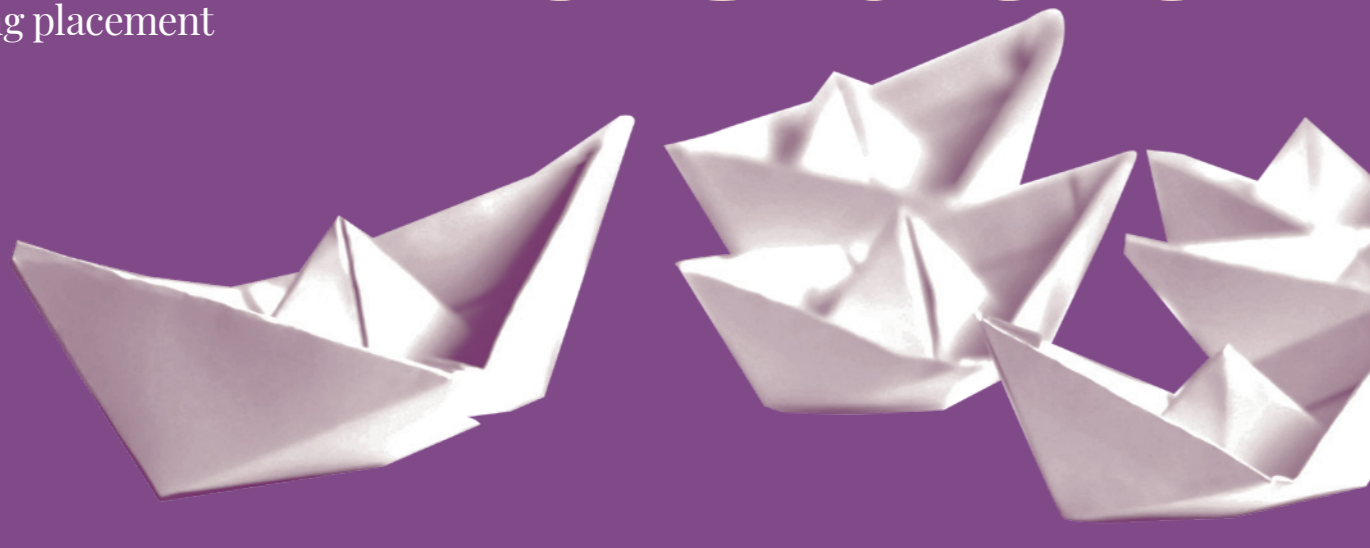


Generation next

Could you provide a trainee counsellor with a placement? **Colette Lewis** considers what trainees need in order to thrive during their counselling placement



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Autumn is a time of new beginnings, and as the new academic year starts and students seek out training placement opportunities, this could be the perfect time to think about recruiting a student practitioner for your counselling service. Last issue, I made my case for the benefits of taking on a trainee counsellor and how the right trainee for your service can bring benefits to your organisation, help you to grow as a counselling professional and to contribute to the development of our profession and professional standards. In my role as Clinical Manager at Newman Health and Wellbeing, I work with counselling students from Newman University in Birmingham, providing a counselling service for the local community based on the university campus.

Workplace counselling is one of the areas for growth in the profession, which Peter Jenkins identified in his recent book, *Professional Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*.¹ Unfortunately, finding a way of getting into the sector can be problematic and so encouraging experienced practitioners and *BACP Workplace* readers to look at creating placement opportunities in the

workplace sector is something that I feel strongly about. That said, I also know that it can be a challenging process and that time, energy and resources need to be available to support a trainee practitioner to join a counselling service.

Here, I'd like to focus on the experience of the trainee practitioner as they embark on their training as a counsellor. If you can remember your student days, you'll probably recall that while beginning counselling training, the act of seeing clients was the goal. Sitting with a client for the first time as they unburden themselves of their current or historical concerns can feel a somewhat nerve-racking experience. Students have told me that this can sometimes feel like a leap of faith; and without the familiar feedback from peer/learning groups of students and tutors, trainees are usually looking for an environment that helps them to meet the many challenges, where they feel supported and have the space to grow.

As soon as the placement search starts, some training providers may give their trainees a list of organisations that have previously taken on counselling students, or alternatively, may let the

students seek their own opportunities. It's common for the trainee counsellors to undertake their student placements in the voluntary sector, local agencies offering low-cost or free-of-charge counselling or within colleges. Working with counselling students, I've become aware of their specific needs and I want to encourage reflection about how your service or organisation might be able to work with these. Even simply acknowledging these needs in your meeting with a trainee, could be a good starting point in developing a relationship, while helping you to find the right person for your organisation.

What helps trainees on a placement?

1 Training

Joining a new profession and a new placement organisation means a lot of change, all at the same time, and is likely to challenge even the most confident trainee. Consider what training your organisation can provide to make this more manageable for the trainee. At the very least, training should involve an induction into the team, meeting other team members, and learning about internal processes and procedures for the context of the counselling. It may also involve including your student practitioner in other opportunities that may be available to the wider team, such as team training days.

2 Financial support

According to BACP, the cost of training to be a counsellor is now estimated to be approximately £6,000 for a foundation degree and up to £15,000 for a master's,² and this excludes living costs. In addition, training to be a counsellor/psychotherapist has the costs of personal therapy and supervision to add to these figures. For trainees on a placement, it can mean the world to join an organisation that shows some recognition of the costs incurred and that provides some financial support to help ease some of the pressures. Mandy Ross is a trainee psychotherapist studying at Newman University and undertaking her placement at Newman Health and Wellbeing. She explains the strain: 'There are so many different costs involved in becoming a counsellor, it can feel never-ending. Counselling students are

often mature, balancing study with raising a family and working part time as well. Any placement provider that recognises these financial strains helps the student feel a sense of support.' You

might consider whether your organisation can afford to pay or contribute towards supervision costs or even to reimburse travel expenses for the trainee to get to and from their placement.

3 Supervision

Some training institutions stipulate that trainees can only have supervision from a supervisor that they have approved. Other training providers will allow students to find their own clinical supervisor. Both perspectives have their merits, but any supervision arrangements would need to fit with the organisation's policy. I am aware that some organisations require all client-facing staff to attend internal supervision and may want any trainee counsellor to fit into this process. This offers you peace

of mind that the trainee is working safely. However, it is helpful to make any placement trainee aware of the requirement to be part of internal supervision arrangements and ensure that they are able to meet these commitments, both practically and emotionally.

4 Seeing clients

Training courses will ask for a designated number of client hours for students to achieve their counselling qualification. It's usually 120 hours for a foundation degree student and somewhere between 300 to 450 hours for master's students. Initially, it's not unusual for a trainee to see three clients over a half day, with a view to increasing the number of clients seen as the trainee practitioner becomes more experienced (although this does depend on the trainee). Ask yourself whether your counselling service can support this.

Trainees need to have clients who have issues appropriate for their level of skill and competence and work towards seeing clients with more complex presentations as they gain experience. Student counsellors are often required to work with difference, so it's worth also giving consideration to how diverse your workplace is and whether your service will be able to support a trainee to work with a diverse range of clients.

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5 Having a mentor

Is there someone in the organisation who can support a student practitioner and be a mentor? Ideally, trainees need to be able to talk with an experienced counsellor who also has the time to give to the trainee. This may involve simply checking in with the student after seeing clients, rather than requiring a huge time commitment. Trainee psychotherapist, Alec Morgan, explains: 'It's hard not to feel pressurised when you hear a real-life client talk about their suicidal thoughts, however well prepared you think you might be. The analogy I give to people is, it's the difference between reading what it's like to be in a room with a tiger and being face to face with the tiger. Being able to talk through these experiences with a mentor can help the process to feel more contained.'

Some university training providers have a placement co-ordinator and it's worth making a connection with this person to give you the opportunity to meet with possible applicants seeking placements, as well as to meet other mentors, to support you in the process.

6 Feeling connected

Training to become a counsellor can be an isolating experience as it is often such a process of change and transformation. Are there ways you can support your trainee? This might be inviting your student counsellor to any training you offer, or to join you at a team meal or even to spend time in other parts of the organisation to connect and understand the business. Being able to spend informal time with experienced counsellors can help a student practitioner to see that all this hard work does lead to a future career. Having more than one student practitioner may also help to reduce the sense of isolation and offer a source of mutual support.

7 Research potential

Your trainee may be required as part of their course to write a dissertation, and often the experience of working with clients on a placement provides a natural topic for further research. When I was studying for my master's, it was the experience of working for an LGBT service in the NHS that

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provided the inspiration for my dissertation around working with BAME LGBT clients. By having a regular intake of students, the workplace sector can also benefit from a new body of research in what is a growing sector within the counselling professions.

8 Short-term and long-term clients

During training, all students will need to have experience of both short-term and long-term clients. In most workplace settings, the therapy is usually short term, eg workplace conflict or helping a client return to work after sickness. Is there scope to offer your student practitioner any long-term clients? If that's not possible, being clear about the length of client work that is on offer from the start, ensures student

counsellors are aware that they may need to find an additional placement where long-term clients are a possibility.

Closing thoughts

In writing this article, it is my hope that I might encourage service managers to think about the value of offering a trainee practitioner a placement within their counselling service. From an organisational perspective, it can help a service to see more clients, and offer a wider benefit to the profession overall, and at a personal level, it can enhance your skills as a counselling professional. During my own counselling training, it was my placement experience in the NHS that gave me the confidence in my client-facing skills to help me secure my first paid job, working in policing. It was invaluable to me and vital to my development in my career as a counsellor. With the support of experienced workplace counsellors, more workplace-based placements could be offered to trainees to help nurture and develop the next generation of workplace counsellors to their full potential. ●

With thanks to Mandy Ross and Alec Morgan, Year 2 MSc Integrative Psychotherapy students from Newman University for talking to me and giving their permission to be published in this article.

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