

Your own mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a person-centred approach (2)

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Acceptance
- ▶ Carl Rogers
- ▶ Core conditions
- ▶ COVID-19
- ▶ Mental health
- ▶ Person-centred approach
- ▶ Self-awareness
- ▶ Unconditional positive regard

After previously providing an outline of the three core conditions (acceptance, understanding and genuineness), I would now like to use the next three articles looking at each of these in more depth and see what it might offer us in terms of our care for both ourselves and others, starting with acceptance.

In my last article (Molyneux, 2021) I outlined the Person-Centred Approach (PCA) to Counselling and began to look at how we might use this to help inform our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic as health professionals. After previously providing an outline of the three core conditions (acceptance, understanding and genuineness), I would now like to use the next three articles looking at each of these in more depth and see what it might offer us in terms of our care for both ourselves and others, starting with acceptance.

UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

In Person-Centred Counselling, acceptance is often referred to as Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) and I think this gives us some insight into the attitude that underlies this offering. Our aim is to offer our clients respect for their humanity, a lack of judgement and a positive regard for both the choices they make and their personhood. The reason that this approach can be so powerful is because people are often the product of the conditions that they face growing up, and continually throughout their lives in the form of societal, relational and institutional conditions that are put upon them (e.g. boys don't cry). Therapy can so often be a process of "counter conditioning", providing a space that is free from judgement so that people can begin to make their own choices and develop their own internal compass, ultimately becoming a more congruent being.

So, how can we use this to help inform our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic? I would

like to look at this from two different angles. Firstly, our approach to others, whether that be patients, family, friends or partners and secondly (and maybe more difficult!) our relationships with ourselves, sometimes referred to as Unconditional Positive Self-regard.

OFFERING ACCEPTANCE TO OTHERS

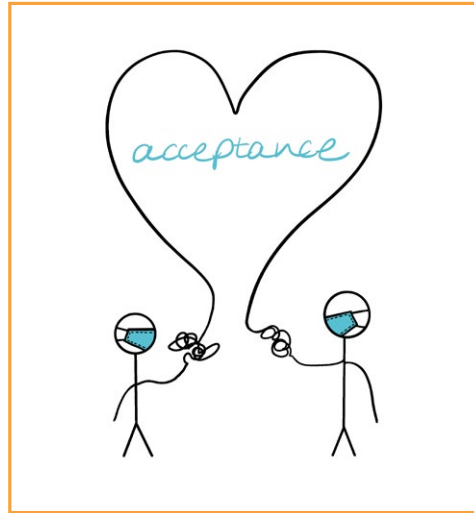
While this piece of work is influenced by counselling theory, acceptance has continually been shown to offer a positive impact on any relationships we have, whether they be personal or professional. With conditions and judgement being such a common feature of our lives, an attitude of acceptance can contrast this, often resulting in an experience of freedom and relieve. It can allow us to be true to ourselves, as well as providing the space to gain more clarity to understand and act according to our own preferences, without fear of judgement.

So many of our decisions and actions can be informed by what we feel we "should" do, which can create a tension between how we feel we should act and our personal truth. Acceptance can often be received as a feeling of relief in being able to be more congruent with our experience. It can also facilitate a space that is lacking judgement, in order for us to find our own way and ultimately act in line with our true desires.

There can be many challenges and barriers in offering acceptance to others, which are often founded in a lack of understanding, in turn, leading to judgements. Other barriers could be

CHRIS MOLYNEUX
BACP Senior Accredited
Person-centred Counsellor and
Supervisor; Brighton and Hove;
Co-founder of the Person-centred
training centre Haulm

chris@chrismolyneux.co.uk
www.chrismolyneux.co.uk



Drawing courtesy of Lucy Warner (@lwarnart)

due to feeling as though we lack capacity (especially in the pandemic), having an idea of how people “should” be acting or living, and we may also feel threatened by the choices people make and the person that they are. In counselling, these are often indicators to take our experience to supervision. Our responsibility and intention is to be able to discover and own our judgements and experience, in order to remove some of the blocks to our offering of acceptance to others.

One clear distinction, which feels important to state and is often a misunderstanding of UPR, is that acceptance is not the same as having to like or agree with a person or their actions. To hold acceptance of another’s choices, as well their right to be self-governing, does not mean that we have to agree or like how or what they are. Instead, we can focus on holding acceptance and respect of their freedom to act in their own way, as well as the uniqueness and best efforts that underlies each person’s behaviour.

Our attempt, here, is to view others through a lens lacking in judgement and ultimately respecting both the person and behaviours that we see before us, even if we would do it differently or do not understand the reasons behind their actions. If we are particularly struggling with this, then attempting to understand the other person may be a wise

approach. We can remain curious, maybe even take some time to try and enquire, as an attempt to understand the other person’s point of view and try to bridge the gap that is so often plugged with judgement.

The common occurrence is that the more that we understand another person, the more we find acceptance towards them. This seems to make sense because, in some way, each person is always doing what they think is best or right, even if it doesn’t look this way from the outside. If we take time to step into another’s shoes and see the world through their eyes, their choices begin to make more sense and even become obvious.

While this intention is easy to write, it can be a much harder task in reality. However, I believe that all we can do in life is have the best intentions and allow them to inform our actions, even if we may fall short, get it wrong or get in a mess sometimes. If we try and take the intention of acceptance into our relationships, which may require patience, a desire to understand and curiosity, then I believe it will undoubtedly have positive impacts on the varying relationships we hold. Although this will likely be a precious offering in the intensity of the pandemic, I believe it will also be a gift and a valuable offering as we return to some normality and beyond.

If this sounds like a tough task, I’m afraid to say that we are going to move onto something that might test us even further, offering this acceptance towards ourselves!

OFFERING ACCEPTANCE TO OURSELVES

In my experience, both professionally and personally, this can often be the most challenging aspect of offering acceptance. I believe that it is very common to be our own worst enemy and as a result offer conditions to ourselves that are much harsher, as well as standards which can be much higher, than those we would offer to others. I’m sure there can be plenty to be said about why this might be the case, but for the time being, let’s focus on how we may begin to offer ourselves, at least to a minimal degree, a

little more acceptance. Especially in the face of a global pandemic.

One example that I raised in my previous article was around the process of casting aside our own experience in the name of people having it worse and that the whole world is going through this current pandemic. While there is truth in both of these statements, the danger is that in recognising these things, we actually come to play down or belittle our own experience. Yes, it is undoubtedly true that many people will have it worse and also that we are all in this together and yet, this does not mean that what we are feeling is insignificant or unworthy of our attention. This comparison or awareness of others can be helpful in holding on to humility and also having a balanced outlook, but it can also risk not giving our own experience the awareness, acceptance and care that it deserves.

I wonder if a good approach is to hold this as an “and” statement as opposed to a “but” statement — let me explain! If we approach this as “I feel x BUT people feel y,” then we are likely to set up comparison between the two and decide which is more worthy. However, by framing it as “I feel x AND people feel y” then I think this gives space to both experiences; they can co-exist. We no longer have to change or dismiss our experience in the face of others, but instead acknowledge both our own feelings AND another’s, they don’t have to be in battle — phew!


Being accepting of our own experience can give it the time, space and care that I believe it deserves. It can be very easy to try and assess our feelings through a rational lens, however, I feel this is an unfair valuing system that is similar to trying to measure the weight of something by using its colour! Our feelings and experience are an organic phenomenon that we often do not choose and yet, we can so easily judge them through grounds of rationality or validity, using a completely separate valuing system. This is where “shoulds” so often come from — “I am feeling really upset over x but it’s not important and it shouldn’t be affecting me this much.” The reality is, you are really upset and maybe the sentence should end there. When we begin to decide if our feelings are valid or not, then I believe we are fighting a losing game with unfair rules. How

would it be to just acknowledge how you feel and try not to do anything with it?

Of course, this can be a painful and challenging experience. The lesson that we have so often been taught in society has been, if there is a problem, then do something about it. Make it better, reassure your friend, make them stop crying. Unsurprisingly, we can transfer these same values onto ourselves, and as mentioned before, usually to a harsher degree. So next time you notice a difficult feeling emerge in you, I would like to offer a challenge — try to give it some attention, become aware of how it feels (nothing else!) and try to offer it some acceptance and know that is likely there for a very good reason.

CONCLUSION

I hope that this article has given some explanation of the place and importance of acceptance in our relationships, both with ourselves and others. How we may begin to offer acceptance to others, no matter what our personal preference or view may be, and also ways that we may begin to offer ourselves some of this care and acceptance too. I believe that this is a lifelong task that we are going to get wrong and muddle through a lot of the time, but our intention is key here. Ultimately, I believe that intention underlies all of our actions. If we can be aware and purposeful with our intention and attitudes, then I believe this is the first step to making conscious choices and changes.

I have touched on the place of understanding/empathy within this article and in the next journal, I will be looking at this in more depth. I will cover the importance of being able to understand ourselves and others, as well as ways in which we may develop this and try to listen as fully as possible to another person’s experience. Once again, I believe that this attitude will improve relationships and also help our journey through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. 

REFERENCE

Molyneux, C (2021) Your own mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a person-centred approach. *Wound UK* 17(1):62–64.

