

Your own mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a person-centred approach (4)

KEY WORDS

- » Carl Rogers
- » Congruence
- » Core conditions
- » COVID-19
- » Mental health
- » Person-centred approach
- » Self-awareness

In my last three articles (Molyneux, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c), I introduced the person-centred approach, before looking in more detail at the ideas of acceptance (sometimes referred to as ‘unconditional positive regard’) and empathy in relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this final article of the series, I will be taking a closer look at the place of congruence in our lives and, more importantly, how it can inform our approach to both ourselves and others during the current pandemic.

As we come to the end of my four-part series of articles, we will be looking at the idea of congruence in the person-centred approach and how we can take this theory to influence our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. In my last three articles (Molyneux, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c), I introduced the person-centred approach before looking in more detail at the ideas of acceptance (sometimes referred to as unconditional positive regard) and empathy. In this article we will be exploring what ‘congruence’ is, how it fits in with the person-centred approach, and how we can also use it to inform our way of being, both during this pandemic and beyond.

Congruence

Congruence can most easily be thought of as a kind of authenticity or genuineness. That what we are communicating (verbally, behaviourally, or otherwise) matches what we are experiencing on the inside. It may be easy to think of this in terms of its opposite – for example, if we say something that doesn’t feel completely truthful, or covers up the truth for whatever reason we may have, this would be incongruence.

We can never really know if someone else is being congruent or not (although we may have a sense or intuition about this, which may be accurate). We may also not even truly know if we ourselves are being congruent (we may trick ourselves, or the truth may be out of our awareness), but I do think we can make an attempt

to be congruent, authentic and genuine in our communication and actions with what we are aware of.

In person-centred therapy, congruence is an essential part of the therapeutic relationship and one of the three core conditions that we have explored through this series. Clients will often come to therapy in a state of incongruence (often not being aware of this) and, for this reason, there is an importance to the Therapist being in a more congruent state, in order to facilitate the space and process for the client. This includes a good amount of self-awareness on the Therapist’s part, and also means that all that is communicated to the client in the therapeutic exchange comes from a genuine and authentic place in the Therapist, hopefully creating a trusting and reliable relationship.

As mentioned above, and in the other qualities throughout this series, self-awareness has a big part to play in our ability to be congruent. Firstly, we need to be self-aware (and open) enough to be able to tune in to what we are experiencing and how we feel about that experience. Then we have a choice about how we communicate this (congruently or incongruently), as well as the way in which we may communicate each of these.

This self-awareness may take effort to tune into, or be more in touch with, to realise our direct experiencing. We can often have a tendency to be quick in our reactions or behaviours due to habit or expectations. By giving ourselves time, and space, to really tune into (and be open to) our varying

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and changing experience, I believe that we give ourselves a better chance of being congruent. A simple way of doing this may be to think of how we would like to respond or act if there were no expectations, rules or 'shoulds' around us.

Of course, this is not a green light to just say everything we are thinking (although I'm sure that might be a relief sometimes!), but I believe it gives us a good chance of being in touch with our experience and, therefore, increasing the chances that the things we do choose to communicate are congruent, and come from a place of authenticity.

There may be times when we feel that incongruence is in fact the best choice. For example, if a friend asks us if they look nice in their new outfit and we don't think they do, is this a time when we should be genuine or focus more on protecting their feelings? Of course, we also have many choices on the way that we may communicate, whatever we decide in relation to this, but, ultimately, we have a decision on whether to communicate congruently or not.

Congruence and the COVID-19 pandemic

I think looking at congruence, in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, brings together the series to date nicely. The reason for this is that congruence is best used and communicated alongside the other conditions that we have looked at so far (empathy and acceptance). Again, we are not merely blurting out everything we think in a rude and uncaring fashion, but instead making an attempt to communicate authentically, with acceptance and understanding (of ourselves and others). I think we can agree that these conditions are often the things that are missing, in many examples of conflict or disagreement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have suffered, in many ways, with mental health issues continuing to rise. I believe that congruence, and authentic relationship, really has a healing and connecting quality. Granted, we may be wise to choose who we bring this authentic and open relationship to, as it can often be a vulnerable and exposing way to be, but I think that authenticity can so often be a therapeutic and

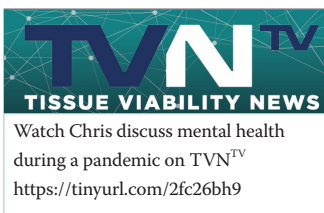
profound experience, especially in relationship.

My personal experience has been that when I take the risk to share more of myself, or allow myself to be in a more vulnerable position, it is often met with appreciation and care. As I said earlier, we are wise to think of the places where we may feel safer to do this as a starting point, but in a time when there has been so much struggle and impact in the last 18 months, we may be surprised in being met with similar experience of support, in showing a more authentic, and potentially vulnerable part of ourselves.

The difficulty that we can often face is that there are many messages in society that actually teach us to be incongruent: maybe the most fitting example being the British stiff upper lip! I believe that there are many areas of society (such as work, families, social events) where we may feel a need to not bring our authentic self or have to adapt to be a less congruent version of ourselves in order to fit in. This can often be what we are up against when we try to be a more authentic person in the world. I can say from personal experience that the reactions can be quite mixed – it has brought me much closer to many people and created more intimate and genuine relationships, and for some others, it can be a little uncomfortable or unexpected to have norms and expectations challenged.

Incongruence can also be a very tiring endeavour. I am sure we can all think of times when we may have had to put a front on, or maybe this is the approach that we feel we have to do consistently in many areas of our lives. From both my own experience and hearing many of those of clients, incongruence can be such a draining and challenging way of being in the world. Conversely, being able to find and be our authentic self, free of the expectations and conditions of our past or those around us, can also be a very enhancing and energy-giving experience. It could be said that, ultimately, this is often the outcome of therapy: to be more in touch and aware of our experiences and process, and work towards a more authentic way of being.

We often have a habit of preempting things to be worse than they actually are in practice.



We can imagine that to say something honestly and openly might cause huge ruptures and distress (and, of course, sometimes this may be true!). But ultimately, I think if we take small steps to just be a little more open and honest with people who we trust and value, then we may be surprised by the reaction we get. Not only does this create more authentic relationships, but it can also be a huge weight off our shoulders in being able to speak more openly.

Some final thoughts

I have really valued being able to share some of the person-centred theory with you, and also being able to relate this to the current experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. My hope is that by explaining the concepts of acceptance, understanding and congruence, we may begin

to see the importance of these attitudes, both towards ourselves and those around us.

The pandemic has been testing for most people, and has drastically impacted the relationships and connections we have with others, as well as ourselves. I hope that the idea of offering acceptance to ourselves and those around us, making attempts to truly understand another's experience, and also to have a more authentic way of being in the world, will give us all some much-needed catharsis in an event that has changed our world history.

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CONCLUSION

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