

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

KEY WORDS

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

Throughout the next four issues of this journal I will be exploring the impact and management of the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of person-centred theory. In this article, I hope to give an introduction to this series as well as the person-centred approach, with future articles on each of the core conditions — empathy (understanding), unconditional positive regard (acceptance) and congruence (genuineness).

A phrase that I have heard continuously from clients and those around me through the pandemic has been ‘I know that everyone is facing this and people have it much worse than me, but...’ For me, this captures the essence of the relationship many of us have with both ourselves and the pandemic itself. An acknowledgement of some of the struggle that we face, but some form of reframing or maybe even minimising how we relate to what we are experiencing ourselves. Often, this can cause us to not fully acknowledge what we are up against and the drastic impacts of adapting to a completely different world and routine, which undoubtedly takes its toll on us.

Carl Rogers’ Person-Centred Approach is phenomenological in its nature. That is to say, it focuses on people’s direct experience and the belief that each person’s individual experience is the ultimate authority. It can be easy to overlook this, especially when we are in the midst of a global and universal experience. It may even be easier to begin to acknowledge this truth in our patients and people we come into contact with, but what I would like to focus on, primarily, is our relationship with ourselves. How successful are we in offering some of the same conditions that we extend to others, to ourselves and what does this mean for our mental health through the COVID-19 pandemic?

THE PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH

I would like to base this series of articles (one for each journal issue throughout 2021) on the Core Conditions of the Person-Centred Approach (PCA). To give a very brief introduction to the PCA, it was developed in the 1940s and 50s by a psychologist named Carl Rogers who, at the time, was working as a child psychoanalyst in New York. Rogers had a significant exchange with a child’s mother at one stage in his work and, rather than supporting her through the usual psychoanalytical methods, decided to simply listen to her sharing with understanding and acceptance. The impact of this exchange was significant for Rogers and he began to see the power of these conditions, which resulted in the beginnings of the PCA to counselling.

The PCA was quite a revolutionary approach to counselling, as up to this point theorists like Freud and Jung had very much been seen as the experts in the therapeutic relationship, and the ‘patient’ or the ‘neurotic’ individual was in need of guidance and interpretation from the expert therapist. However, Rogers posited the suggestion that it is in fact ‘the client who knows what hurts, what directions to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried.’ (Rogers, 1961). As a result of this, Rogers believed that ‘all’ we needed to offer clients was a relationship based on

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acceptance, understanding and genuineness, in which clients would find their own direction, as well as developing greater understanding and acceptance of themselves as congruent individuals. These conditions came to be known as the core conditions, made up of unconditional positive regard (acceptance), empathy (understanding) and congruence (genuineness).

I would like to use these conditions as a basis for exploring our own approach to both ourselves and the pandemic, as well as our interactions with others during this time. I will spend future articles looking at these conditions in a lot more depth and the learning that we can take from each of them to help us through what is a very challenging time.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP

Rightly so, there are many different approaches to counselling and psychotherapy. Therapists and clients are naturally suited to different methods and approaches in dealing with their individual struggles. However, the one thing that continues to present itself in therapeutic research is the paramount importance of the quality of relationship itself in providing effective therapy. In fact, it is the number one overarching factor that can be attributed to client change and the efficacy of therapy (rather than the individual approach or method itself).

I believe that this gives us good insight into the importance of the quality of relationships in general and what may have been most severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With isolation, divorce and loneliness continuing to rise through the pandemic and capacity, quality of patient connection and morale arguably decreasing, it feels unsurprising that we find ourselves in the position that we are in.

With increasing lack of physical contact as a result of PPE or virtual consultations, a reduced capacity to give the time and energy that we would usually like to offer

patients, having to deal with loss and grief on a regular basis, on top of the increasing risk of burnout and reduced support systems, I feel that it is as important a time as any to not only acknowledge how our personal and professional relationships are suffering, but also our relationship with ourselves. It feels vital that we are able to begin to tend to ourselves with self-care and compassion in order to acknowledge and soothe the inner wounds that we are all carrying as a result of our situation, especially as health professionals.

THE MOST IMPORTANT OF RELATIONSHIPS

The age-old adage ‘You can’t pour from an empty cup’ seems fitting here. While I can acknowledge the all-encompassing nature of how much we are up against it and the extra, unquestionable demands that may have been presented in the last year, I believe that self-care and self-awareness seem paramount to not only care for ourselves, but also to continue to care for those around us.

I can acknowledge in myself that it took a good few months of the pandemic, maybe even six, until I really stopped to acknowledge the impact it was having on me, largely behind the scenes. While there were no immediate individual events that I could pinpoint, there was something of the gradual chipping away of energy, spirit and care that had clearly been eroding, out of awareness, just through facing a new day-to-day and all the challenges it presented.

I believe that self-awareness is nearly always the starting point for attending to and working on ourselves. We first have to make the space to try and discover and accept what is really going on for us. Returning to the phrase that began this article, this can be one example of how we may dismiss, distort or belittle the truth of our own individual experience, in the name of keeping our heads down and surviving the obstacle course that is COVID-19 and work demands.

Although we may be drained of energy at the end of another hard day or week, lacking

