

# A year in the life

In 2006, **Nicola Banning** gave us quarterly updates about her year as a newly trained workplace counsellor. Here, she shares her 2007 update

When asked if I was interested in writing a review of my second year post-counselling training, I confess that for someone who enjoys the process of writing and reflection, I had to think twice. To use one of my mother's expressions, this year has been something of a curate's egg – good in parts. Despite the continued learning and growth that goes hand in hand with the territory of being a counsellor, 2007 has been most memorable as a year defined by my experience of loss. No surprise then that this has impacted on my professional self and left me pondering my own vulnerabilities as a professional within the therapeutic field – a field which, as my counsellor put it, 'requires all of you'.

Counselling training at its best will encourage its trainees to be aware of their own self-care and draw attention to the practitioner's need for self-respect. My training did exactly that. It highlighted that there would be times when we were not fit to practise and encouraged us to consider this professional reality and the emotional vulnerabilities within us all. But as with most things in life, it is only experience that can teach us this most difficult of balancing acts.

Knowing the theory of loss does nothing to minimise its impact, nor aid one's ability to cope. Taking time out from my client work was vital, but once back in the counselling room, it took months for me fully to realise how challenged in my client work I had become. After I thought I had passed through some of the worst of it, I found myself reeling again as grief overtook me once more. Struggling personally is one thing. But professionally I was on new ground, feeling emotionally fragile in my client work, lacking energy, robustness and regularly bringing to supervision the ethical issue of my fitness to practise.

Feeling overwhelmed, I was conscious that I struggled to hold timekeeping boundaries. I noticed I ran over in my sessions – not with every client, and not by very much, but with those clients whom it became so much harder to challenge when I felt vulnerable. My sleep was often interrupted, as I awoke at night carrying the client's material on top of my own sea of messy, angry grief.

As a lifelong journal keeper, the feeling I

documented on waking in the morning was a sense of heaviness – my own and the heaviness I carried from my clients. Working both in private practice and within an organisational setting, I noticed that internally I struggled more in my private practice work. Explaining to my supervisor that I felt more supported when I worked within an occupational health unit than when I worked in private practice, my supervisor simply responded, 'Well, you are'. She's right. Having rapport with colleagues, a sense of belonging, the support of reception staff, a waiting room, computerised diary and filing system all leave me feeling less alone and, as I am discovering, this counts for a lot. Put simply, I am learning that I prefer working within an organisational setting and my private practice might well end up being very small indeed.

In the midst of this period of grief, having my home broken into was an act of violation involving yet more loss, and served as the proverbial straw that broke this camel's back. It highlighted to me one of the principles we teach in our stress management training; ambient stress is the day-to-day stress that happens day in, day out – for example, commuting. Acute stress is the stuff of crisis, an accident or acute illness. We can't do much about the acute stress but we can affect the ambient stress and reduce it. My break-in served as a catalyst for change as I reviewed my ambient stress levels and the impact of my client work on my wellbeing.

Supervision, revisiting the BACP framework and exploring the ethical issues surrounding my fitness to practise helped me draw an end to some client work. In what would have been a long-term piece of work, I recognised my limitations and referred my client to another practitioner. Not an easy decision and one I struggled with, considering both my needs and the needs of the client. Congruence and my need to show self-respect, as well as considering how my less than fully functioning self might impact on my client, was at the heart of my decision. I felt immediate relief. My counsellor commented, 'That is not the Nicola of old. I think she would have put the client first.' She's probably right. And it would have cost me dearly.

And yet it remains a less than satisfactory ending,

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leaving me with unanswered questions about the welfare of my client, questions of myself, most often, 'Could I have managed this better?' Increasing my supervision, receiving more counselling, reviewing my client workload and giving myself more space away from my client work have all helped me to recover some inner strength. My supervisor smartly observed that this learning will undoubtedly help my supervisees of the future, as one day they too will inevitably struggle with one of the trickiest ethical issues we face as practitioners – our fitness to practise.

Being able to change professional hats and work as a trainer, facilitating regular workshops within a local authority setting has offered me the perfect antidote to my role as 'counsellor'. Working with the organisation in this way is responsive and means working 'upstream' with managers keen to address issues of staff wellbeing, stress management and looking to promote positive working environments. After a day's training, I am not left holding the client's material, most often I am inspired and buzzing from the shared learning – mine and that of the delegates.

Reviewing the delegates' feedback over the last year, my co-trainers and I are left with an acute sense of the value of the particular training environment that we offer. To put it mildly, the working lives of many of the delegates from social services backgrounds attending our workshops are, in my view, unenviable. In the highly political climate of local government, where budget cuts, accountability, meeting targets and constant organisational change are the bread and butter of daily working life, it can leave managers driving through difficult changes which may leave them vulnerable to accusations of bullying, or needing support to manage work-related stress in their teams.

I have learnt that the great strength of having workplace counsellors fulfilling a training function within organisations is our willingness to work with the reality of our delegates' working lives. Conveying our understanding of the organisational culture in which they work is met with a mixture of responses on the part of the delegates, from eureka moments of insight, surprise and, sometimes, near tears of relief. As counsellors we don't feel compelled to fix, deny or suppress the truth of what is expressed in the training room – we just work with it. This allows delegates to feel truly heard and it may be one of the few places within the organisation where they do so. Their feedback consistently expresses that the value of this to them is incalculable. One delegate noted, 'This workshop did not mask the issues as so often happens on training courses'.

Bringing our experience of the counselling room into the training environment brings a depth and richness to our workshops which delegates are unlikely to find in your average staff management manual. Working both in the counselling room and in the training environment, I have identified the need managers have for a checklist on how to manage staff returns to work after sickness – focusing not just on what they do, but how they do it. So often, my experience in the counselling room is of clients receiving a poorly handled return to work which damages staff/manager relations, undermines trust and respect and has a detrimental effect on the member of staff's otherwise improving health.

In the training room, I have been able to offer managers an understanding of how they bring their humanity to their role, what helps and what hinders when staff return to work feeling vulnerable and when they may still be experiencing the side effects of medication. The relieved response of managers affirms just how much they have valued having guidance on these more subjective aspects of management – where otherwise no formal training is ever given. They leave with a new-found confidence at dealing with some of these more challenging aspects of management. This is one of the most rewarding facets of being a trainer and I value more fully my experience in the counselling room and how this deepens my breadth of knowledge as a workplace trainer.

Since September 2006, we have run over 20 workshops and worked with almost 200 managers training them to manage bullying and harassment. Our aim is to strengthen their capacity to tackle workplace bullying, and to offer strategies to promote positive working environments to reduce the likelihood of such bullying taking place. A quagmire of boundary issues exist for me, as I train in the same organisation where I am employed as a workplace counsellor. Sometimes clients attend these workshops, or I may recognise names of individuals that are familiar, often for less than positive reasons, and on occasions I may end up training the person accused of bullying my client.

Most often these individuals are 'sent'. They may come feeling angry, bruised, victimised and more. We always work with the level of resistance in the room and always name it, acknowledging that being sent on a workshop might not feel that great. I have learnt to tune into the feelings I am picking up from individuals in the group. Whenever there is someone in the room accused of bullying, I have been powerfully struck by how often the emotion I pick up is fear – and I know it isn't mine.

As a trainer, holding the core conditions to

individuals and the group is an essential part of my work. We are not there as judge or jury but to create a training environment that encourages self-awareness, provides a safe space for reflection and to model what dignity and respect at work might look like.

Training someone I have come to know as the person who bullied my client is not a comfortable experience. Supervision is essential. But it also helps me to see this issue from another perspective, to see the impact of how organisational processes/grievance procedures so often fail to deal sufficiently well with either the victims of bullying or the accused, and to recognise the ambiguities and complexities that remain despite all the policy making.

Supervision in my training partnerships is as important to the health of our work as it is in my client work – not as frequent, but often enough to process the spoken and the unspoken and to address the shadow side. I continue to be excited by the ideas we share, collaborating and researching to develop future work, pooling together our networks and resources. Next year, we launch a new workshop within the organisation on teaching self-help skills for health and happiness, drawing on positive psychology approaches to support behaviour change.

Starting all over again, with a new workshop, I clock the 'I know nothing' feeling going on in me. I now know that this as an inevitable part of the process, of planning something from scratch, of starting again, of developing a new programme of materials and researching new terrain. I notice it and no longer fear it. My green-fingered co-trainer equates this with the feeling he has at the start of each new year in his garden, when everything is chopped back and he is waiting for the signs of spring, he feels that he knows nothing about gardening... that is until the cycle begins all over again. It's no wonder that gardening analogies are so often used in the field of counselling and personal/professional development as they speak of new growth, of time to rest, of fallow periods, and of the beginnings, middles and ends that are an intrinsic part of the life cycle.

As 31 January approaches, I don't need to dread the ever-present Adam Hart Davis adverts popping up reminding the self-employed to complete their tax returns. My first year's accounts have been handed over and I can report that I am keeping my financial head above water. I am clearer about how I want to continue to develop my practice and my training work, about what supports me in my endeavours and what doesn't. And were I asked to put last year's learning into a nutshell, (and thankfully I wasn't) I realise I have a greater appreciation of the responsibility we carry as practitioners and the self-insight and self-respect we need in order to fulfil it. I have always known this, but as my counsellor helpfully reminded me, 'There's knowing – and then there's really knowing'. ■

# The Vocational

Mapping out a path for workplace rehabilitation, by Tim

**T**he Vocational Rehabilitation Association (VRA) is a national charity covering all regions of the UK, whose mission is to:

- help our members in the public, private and voluntary sectors working in the field of disability and employment to develop their professional practice and to maintain their awareness of a broad range of disability issues
- raise awareness of the issues of disability and employment with other beneficiaries, such as disabled people, carers, employers, the insurance industry, law firms, trade unions and health professionals.

## The VRA's current status

First established in May 1994 as the Vocational Rehabilitation Association Limited, the organisation changed its name to the National Vocational Rehabilitation Association (NVRA) in the late 1990s before being re-launched, with a new constitution, as the Vocational Rehabilitation Association (VRA) at its annual general meeting on 17 March 2005. It currently has a membership of 220 reflecting a wide mix of vocational rehabilitation practitioners including:

- rehabilitation counsellors
- rehabilitation case managers
- vocational/employment consultants
- rehabilitation treatment/training providers
- disability employment advisers
- employment support workers
- occupational therapists.

The new constitution paved the way for adjustments to the role and function of the Association arising from major changes taking place in the UK in vocational rehabilitation and in incapacity benefit reform by the government.

The purpose of the VRA was also re-defined as being to:

- support and protect people with disability through a strong professional provider base
- ensure professionals working in vocational rehabilitation are responsible and accountable for their delivery
- develop national standards of practice for professionals working in the field of disability and employment
- liaise with relevant organisations to establish education and training processes for new and existing practitioners
- establish certification and accreditation processes in the field
- hold meetings and seminars on issues of relevance to all those involved in vocational rehabilitation
- publish and distribute a professional journal, currently *Rehab Network*
- influence government policy relative to disability and