

Family affair

This is an introduction to a regular new column on relationships, in all their rich diversity



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We are all in relationships. Even the curmudgeonliest curmudgeon at some point interacts with other people. And quite often we have layers of relationships. Our colleagues are our friends; our friends are our financial consultants; our siblings are our business partners; our neighbours are our hairdressers; our lovers are our everything. Managing any relationship requires a delicate mix of understanding our own feelings and trying to understand the other's.

Relationships are a fascinating area to work with in counselling. In couples work, there is the relationship between the clients; the relationship between the clients and the counsellor; the relationship between us all and our past and current systems. These all come together in a tantalising dance: thoughts, feelings, memories, hopes, fears, expectations and a thousand other things intertwine to produce new ways of being through therapy.

And counsellors who only work with individuals can't escape the relationship. After all, my client and I are in one of the most intense relationships either of us will experience. And our clients bring with them all their relationship history; while, as counsellors, we reflect on how much of our relationship history is present in the room.

I want to examine relationships in all their rich diversity. Clients bring all kinds of relationships into the counselling room, so my column will cover a range of relational issues with a focus on gender, sexuality and relational diversity. What follows is a personal reflection on my and my family's relationship with both the process and the business of counselling, and how we manage the complexities of being a family of counsellors, running a counselling business.

On a rare hot, sunny day my sister (Kirsty), dad (Bill) and I sat down to have a conversation about how we manage our multiple relationships. Mum (Carole) died in 2013, just as we were setting up our counselling business. Whenever the three of us are together, her absence becomes a presence, which is sharply felt. Carole was there in our

thoughts, guiding us as ever. My name is Alex. I'm civil partnered to Kevin and a Relate-trained relationship therapist working in private practice and for TLC: Talk, Listen, Change in Manchester. I specialise in working with LGBTQ+ clients. Kirsty is in a relationship with Dan and also trained with Relate. She works in private practice and for Relate's Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programme and is now training to work with children. Bill is a semi-retired business coach. Carole was a Relate counsellor for many years, and I expect will be known to at least some of you reading this. Her character, will, strength and wisdom live on through us.

For all of us, a strong ethical stance and sense of compassion are at the core of our work. But it was real-life events that led us to actively pursue counselling as a career. My experience of trying to cope with coming out in a still very hostile world; Mum and Dad's experience of mourning the loss of a life they expected for their son; my sister's experience of the impact on the family, and later her own divorce. All these events led in one way or another to our little counselling dynasty.

But life doesn't always follow the path we expected. Mum started her training at Relate, and finally found a proper place for her innate desire to help people. When we've talked as a family about this, Dad has often wondered what it was about counselling that she enjoyed so much. What was it that 'helping' others did for her? And I guess the answer, as it is for many of us, is something to do with healing ourselves. Mum's childhood wasn't easy; extreme poverty and a difficult relationship with her own mother combined to leave her with a sense of unease, of not belonging in the world. In our family, she found some peace, and in counselling soothed that wounded child by giving others what she lacked.

Working in private practice also means running a business, and this is a source of tension. I wanted to get out of a corporate world, as it never suited me. I don't enjoy strategy, business plans and expenses forecasting. There is a constant battle between how much time we spend on 'business' activities and how much we

spend with our clients. As siblings, Kirsty and I know each other pretty well, and in fact are closer than most other siblings I know. But we also disagree about stuff. We have different views on some things but we also have different skills and abilities. Luckily, Kirsty is much more into admin than me, and is better able to call strangers and negotiate with them. I'm happier writing blogs and articles, putting together training and doing all that stuff. While we work separately in terms of our own face-to-face counselling, we also operate as KAS Counselling Services. And this is where the family connection also works, as Dad is a business super-guru and understands business plans and the like. This has been invaluable for us in terms of the discipline needed to run a business as well as deliver our counselling.

We're still in a process of learning (SEO is my particular bugbear at the moment). We're constantly trying to balance face-to-face work with clients with managing and running a business and getting on with the job of being a family still struggling to come to terms with the loss of such an important part of our lives. Sometimes we get it wrong, and a crucial part of our success is in giving ourselves permission to do so. I hope you'll enjoy reading my column, and give pause to consider where you are in relation to your relationships. I'd very much welcome any thoughts. ●

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