

What is Person-Centred Therapy?

Research tells us that the most important factor in any therapy is our relationship with our therapist¹. Simply put, we need to feel connected with the person we are having therapy with. They may challenge us at times, and therapy can also be a deeply uncomfortable process but beneath all of that, we need to feel some safety and rapport with another human to explore what is troubling us.

However, along with finding somebody that we can talk to, we will also want to work in a way that feels right for us, which is one reason why there are also many different types of therapy. The National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society has an overview of the main types of therapy on their website (<https://ncps.com/find-a-counsellor/types-of-therapy>), but my main task here is to tell you a little about the type of therapy that I practice: person-centred therapy.

The Key Parts of Person-Centred Therapy

Person-Centred Therapy was developed by psychologist Carl Rogers in the 1950s. It is also known as the Person-Centred Approach, or PCA, because it can also be applied to many other areas of life, such as education, healthcare or parenting.

To give an idea of what you might expect if you choose a person-centred counsellor, I will describe some of the person-centred approach's main parts below:

The Actualising Tendency

The actualising tendency is the idea that all of us have a drive within us to grow and develop. Rogers developed this idea after working with many clients and observing them trying to find ways forward out of their difficulties. A person-centred therapist will trust that you have, somewhere within you, motivation and the solutions to your own problems and they will work with you as you explore what those are, and what your barriers are to getting past them.

¹ Norcross, J., Lambert, M. (2019) Psychotherapy Relationships That Work: Evidence-Based Therapist Contributions, 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press

When we feel emotional distress, this might be because our actualising tendency has been diverted to survive a difficulty in our past. We can then become stuck in that response, even when the threat has gone. For example, to survive as a child and keep ourselves safe, we might learn to be nice to people who are a threat to us, but this might then create problems when we look for a partner in adulthood.

An important difference between person-centred therapy and many other types of therapy is that the person-centred approach doesn't see emotional difficulties as an illness or a sign of being broken. Instead, they are responses to the things that have happened to us. A person-centred therapist doesn't ask 'What's wrong with you?', instead they might ask 'What has happened to you?'. Our responses to distressing events are like our immune system trying to get us back on track and the solution is to give ourselves the right environment to allow ourselves to do this. The ability to heal is always inside us, we just sometimes need help to release it.

Conditions of Worth

Rogers came up with the idea of 'Conditions of Worth' to describe these things that can get in the way of our actualising tendency. These are the ideas that are imposed upon us by other people, mostly our parents as we are growing up, but also later from other significant people in our lives and from society in general.

These conditions are the things that other people think make us a good and worthwhile person but these might not agree with how we would like to be. This means that we can then change how we act in order to feel accepted by others. This is especially strong in our childhood because we rely on others for survival but it can continue into adulthood.

You might be able to list some of the conditions you have absorbed by finishing the sentence 'I'm a good person if...'

- I'm a good person if I work hard
- I'm a good person if I am strong
- I'm a good person if I am independent and don't ask others for help
- I'm a good person if I'm kind and caring
- etc.

It can be easy to feel that we are only worthy if we meet certain conditions. Rogers said it would be impossible to grow up without any conditions of worth, and we all feel them to some level, but if these conditions are very strong, then they can really affect our lives.

The Core Conditions

The core conditions are what a person-centred therapist will offer you to allow you to find the answers to what is causing you distress. In many ways, these are the opposite to the conditions of worth I just described, which is why they can be really good at allowing us to drop those values absorbed from other people and to find our own values instead.

The core conditions are:

- Empathy – your therapist will try to really understand your life from your point of view
- Unconditional Positive Regard or non-judgment – your therapist will respect you as a fellow person, worthy of care and appreciation, and free from as much judgment as possible
- Congruence, or genuineness – your therapist will always aim to be open and honest with you and not hide behind a mask of ‘being a therapist’ or any other role

A key part of a person-centred approach is that these conditions will then create an open and honest relationship where you, the client, no longer have to put on any masks to please others. You are then freer to get on with your task of finding your way forward and allow your Actualising Tendency to lead you to flourish.

Non-Directivity

Because person-centred therapists believe that our clients are the experts on their own lives and that everyone has a built-in drive towards a better life, we don’t believe that we need to tell you what to do to fix your problems. In short, we aren’t the experts on your life; you are. This means that a person-centred therapist won’t try to tell you what you should do or give you a list of solutions.

You might now be wondering what a person-centred therapist actually does! If we don’t give advice, tell you how to get better or fix you, what’s the point? If you’re feeling distressed enough to search for a therapist, you don’t want to end up sat in a room with someone who’s not going to help you. This is where a person-centred therapist’s empathy, non-judgment and genuineness come in. They will understand that you are feeling lost, scared, overwhelmed or many other things that brought you to them. They will aim to be by your side as you figure things out and give you time and support to do this at your own pace, but they won’t try to ‘fix’ you because they won’t see you as broken.

It also doesn't mean that they won't ever give you any information or the benefit of their experience, but they will do it only if you want them to, and it will be offered to you to take or refuse rather than you being told that 'this is what you need to do'.

How Do Person-Centred Therapists Train?

While training as a person-centred therapist doesn't involve learning about agendas, techniques or lists of exercises to do with clients, it is still a very challenging process. Most person-centred therapists will have spent a lot of time learning to tune into other people's feelings and express their empathy. They will also spend a lot of time looking at themselves to work out what might cause them to make judgements of other people and get in the way of them being able to offer you unconditional positive regard. This should include reflection on race, class, gender, disability, and many other life experiences.

Being congruent and genuine with clients also takes a lot of self-awareness. Person-centred therapists need to be aware of what is being brought up from their own lives by whatever their client is sharing with them. They need to be able to notice this and set it aside so they can really hear what their client is saying, with as few distortions or assumptions as possible. Many training courses require students to have many hours of therapy themselves, too, to work through all their own conditions of worth and experiences that might impact their work. It also means we can know how it can feel to be a client.

So, you can see, there can be a lot going on in a person-centred therapist's head, just so they can then let it go and really hear what you are telling them. It can sound simple – but it's not easy.

An Analogy

An analogy I like that describes working as a person-centred therapist is of the therapist and client taking a walk together. The client decides where to walk, what paths to take and where they don't feel comfortable exploring just yet. It's the therapist's role to walk alongside them, share the experience with them and hopefully to help them to feel safer as they travel. The therapist will try their best to understand how the walk feels to the client, sharing what they notice about the journey and where the client is choosing to go. The therapist may share some of the things they notice along the way and a little about how the walk feels to them – but the client will always be the guide. To do this, the therapist has already spent a lot of time walking in their own neighbourhood, so they know what might make them want to start leading the expedition and what might distract them, so they can let go of this and be openly curious about this new trip.

Find Out More

I hope that this has given you a little more of an idea of what person-centred therapy is. It's a lot to squeeze into one page, so here are some places to find out more, if you'd find that useful. If you have any questions or comments then please add them to this page or you are very welcome to contact me.

The Person-Centred Association - <https://www.the-pca.org.uk/about/what-is-it.html>

Person-Centred Therapy on Wikipedia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Person-centered_therapy

Introductory books on Person-Centred Therapy:

Person-Centred Counselling in a Nutshell

Tony Merry – Learning and Being in Person-Centred Counselling



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