TRANSCRIPT: SOCIAL RESPONSE CYCLE RESOURCE

INTRODUCTION

Hi, I’m Beverley Costa, author of this resource and founder of Mothertongue and The Pasalo Project.

In 2013, like many people, I watched the news unfolding. And like many people, I felt appalled by the Syrian humanitarian crisis. I couldn’t get what I saw out of my head, and I knew I wouldn’t get any peace until I found out how I could possibly contribute something productive in the midst of all the destruction I was witnessing. But I felt completely helpless in the face of such an enormous task.

I think this is a feeling shared by those of us, who are trained as counsellors or therapists and who are deeply concerned about ongoing global humanitarian and environmental crises. Many of us also hear about the local impact of social injustice on our clients in the consulting room. What can we can do as therapists, when compassion moves us to take action in response to events in the wider world? Initiatives such as Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility bring together practitioners with concerns about how to respond to these issues.

In October 2019, BACP jointly put on a conference alongside the American Counselling Association and the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. The conference was called: Let the voices be heard! An international conversation on counselling, psychotherapy and social justice.

But is there anything we can actually do?

 The challenge is to hold the boundary and to recognise the limits of what can be done within our professional frameworks and, at the same time, take action grounded in our ethical principles. As therapists we have a duty to think carefully when we move along the beneficence/ autonomy continuum. The BACP Ethical Framework (2018) is based on a set of ethical principles, one of which is the respect for client autonomy. But when we are working with the most vulnerable people in our society, the pull to help can appeal very strongly to the part of us that wants to protect and save people from pain. The line between empowering people to find their own solutions and solving their problems for them, can be very thin. So how do we find a way to take action that is empowering and ethically anchored?  We may need an additional set of ethical guidelines to support us when we extend our work beyond the walls of the consulting room. A set of guidelines for the counselling profession, published in the USA suggests that finding the balance between practice which takes place in the consulting room and practice in the wider social frame, is a skill of assessment.

To quote these guidelines:

“Effectively balancing individual counseling with social justice advocacy is key to addressing the problems that individuals from marginalized populations bring to counseling. Certain situations will call for individual counseling. Other situations may require interventions that take place in the community. The challenge, therefore, is knowing when to work in the office setting and when to work in the community realm”

Coming back to the question “But is there anything we can actually do?”

One of the authors of the guidelines, Manivong Ratts a professor of counselling at Seattle University, attempts to answer this in his reply to the question in Therapy Today “Should counsellors be social warriors?” He talks about how he and his co-authors specifically added the word “action” to the counselling guidelines, even though they knew it could be viewed as provocative.

Dr Ratts says:

“It became more controversial when we added “action” to the requirements for knowledge and skills and asked people to get out and do something about the inequalities.”

He recognises that this isn’t easy by continuing to say that:

“Counsellors embrace the idea but they don’t like it in reality, because it asks them to leave the comfort zone of their office. But there are people doing that in the US and it’s growing, because counsellors are understanding that it’s the environment that shapes us and we shape the environment. What we are trying to do is connect the two in practice.”

Some counsellors and therapists may have experience outside of the counselling office. Many will not. The aim of this resource is to help counsellors and therapists to prepare for the challenges of working in the social context. The examples I use in this resource are drawn from my own experience. That approach is of course limited, but it is authentic. I hope you feel that you  can apply the principles to your own contexts.

So how does a counsellor do the “doing”?

Back to 2013.  I did manage to get some peace. I set up a small international project to work with refugees from Syria and elsewhere, in partnership with an NGO in Egypt. It is a very small project. To create the project, I used the Social Response Cycle, which will be described in detail in this resource. Using the Social Response Cycle was how I managed to engage with what I have also called: ethically anchored and therapeutically framed social action.

To move into action, required me to harness the spirit and behaviours of a pioneer and an executive and financial manager, which I didn’t know I had. Before I knew it, I had become what some people refer to as a social entrepreneur.

So, if you feel that you want to move from a  sense of powerlessness when faced with issues of social justice and that you would like to use your professional therapeutic skills to be a part of social change, then I hope you find this resource on the Social Response Cycle useful. And I hope you find a way to use it that helps to make a change.