

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 34:

What does home mean to you?

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for psychotherapy or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the Editor in Chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. The meaning of home is deeply personal and understanding what it means to others can alter our views of our own home.

Hannah:

There's some real complexity there when we look at people who are displaced. How they might maintain a link with their country of origin. So even when we've moved away from our homes, we have a sense of connection and loyalty to our family of origin home.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Hannah Sherbersky. Hannah currently works as lead family therapist at a regional adolescent inpatient unit. She holds a number of psychotherapeutic posts within the University of Exeter and is a contributor to a BBC Three documentary on family therapy. She recently completed a doctorate in clinical practice, which explores service delivery and notions of home within inpatient children and adolescent mental health services. In this episode, UKCP CEO Sarah Niblock talks to UKCP psychotherapist Hannah Sherbersky to better understand how our collection of experiences affects how we view our home.

Sarah:

Home, it means something different to everyone. I mean, everyone has a different relationship with their lived environment. I wanted to ask you how, in your experience, do we form our personal definition of home?

Hannah:

Yes. Great. Well, thank you for having me, Sarah. Firstly, I just want to say this is an enormous and complex idea. Perhaps one of the most interesting things about this conversation, for me, is just what a commonplace word, the word home is. And we refer to and talk about home in a very ordinary, everyday sort of way. But actually, when we start trying to unpick definitions of home and really think about what the word home means, it all starts to get very complex and very interesting. And I think for many, home is really how we define ourselves. It could be a central concept of who we think and feel we are. We often use our homes to distinguish ourselves. So home often becomes like an external, objective reality that reflects back our internal and subjective lived experience. So, when you meet someone and you go to their home, it tells you something about who they are, you know, we become very interested in preoccupied with how our homes reflect who we are as a person. So, our homes become very much part of our identity. And our ideas about homes, I think, are formed and shaped very much by our culture, and our family and our past experiences. Interestingly, although there's a lot of research and literature on the meaning of home, particularly within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, for example, philosophy even,

there isn't actually as much psychological and psychotherapeutic literature on how therapists and their clients conceptualise home, which I think is quite surprising, really. When we just start to get into kind of definitions of home, there are some interesting questions about whether a home is a space, or a feeling, or a place, or even a practice, or a state of being. There's a nice quote from the feminist Bell Hooks. She describes home as 'the crucible of affirmation, for our sense of our social and cultural identity.' So that's quite an enormous concept. So, our own identity is bound up inevitably with the notion of home. And I think the notion of home is especially important to psychotherapists, as we're often very interested in the idea of a secure base in therapy. So, I became particularly interested in how the idea of a secure base and notions of home run alongside each other.

Sarah:

I think it's fascinating. As you're speaking, I'm thinking of myself, I'm a Scouser, living in London. Even though I've lived in London far more than I lived in Liverpool, you know, more than half my life now, I definitely have an attachment. I think it's very interesting what you say about psychotherapy, and the need for more research into this.

Hannah:

And that's why I think once you start digging into some of these ideas, it's striking how fundamental notions of home are and certainly in some of my research, I was really surprised to discover that even family therapists who are very much focused on relationships and family, and family often is equated with home, but even within family therapy literature it really seemed to be under-explored and under-researched. It was a sort of blind spot, I think maybe it's a blind spot within psychotherapy generally.

Sarah:

Home is something we often hear in connection with black and other minority ethnic individuals and couples and groups and families, isn't it? Because home may be to do with even a generational divide, home may go back two or three generations, but there may be an affinity, a sense of home being in a faraway land. Is that something that you've experienced in therapy, where that has come up?

Hannah:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think what I also identified was that home is often talked about when there's an absence. A lot of the literature and the research around home is about homelessness, migration, displacement, but there's less talk about what home actually is, rather than what it was or what it isn't. So, it's interesting how often notions of home show up and their in-sharp focus, when there's a lack of or an absence of home. Perhaps why we don't talk about it as much, because it's something that's assumed or it's a given that we will have a home or that we feel connected to our homes. And I think that's a misnomer. I don't think that is actually accurate. But it seems to be around as a kind of cultural norm, that home is a positive, good place that we're all aspiring to get back to.

Sarah:

In so many conversations I've had with a psychotherapist, this is what happens. There are certain things that we think are normal, in inverted commas, that we talk about in everyday life that we just accepted norms. And through psychotherapy, you realise that nothing is fixed or set. We've touched on this question already a little bit. But are there any other ways that our histories and experiences affect how we view notions of home?

Hannah:

Yeah, I mean, I think a sense of home really can provide security, and safety. And perhaps in many ways, that's where we develop self-esteem. Some of the research suggests that, actually, that's also a space in which we can resist oppressive forces of our society. There are ongoing processes, and a sense of belonging, or a feeling that home changes over time throughout our lives. But for those who are homeless, or forced to leave their homes through war, or displacement, I think that sense of belonging and ultimately a sense of being at home becomes really ambiguous and complex, as we were talking about. It's important to say that our cultural concept of home, from a Western perspective, really might be quite different to those held in other parts of the world. So that's where I think our cultural, maybe social construction, around home becomes really important. So, in the West, our concepts of home are really heavily influenced by economic expectations, and things like social mobility and individualism. Whereas in other parts of the world, notions of home might be considered much more continuing interactive process with a place or a landscape that somebody inhabits. For example, if you search on the internet for home, what you'll see is many, many images of a house, when we're talking about home, we are often referring to a house. I think home and house are often conflated, those two ideas are often overlapping. And in the popular media, perhaps ideas like home ownership, symbolically, in Western cultures become really significant. Again, also ideas around the notion of ideal home. So, you know, that's a term that's often referred to, isn't it, that there is an ideal home, which emphasises this relationship between house and home. And I think that's where also the focus is on a physical structure: it perpetuates this dominant idea that there is an ideal home. And in fact, deconstructing the idea a little bit, there were quite a lot of feminist writers in the 70s and 80s, who identified home as a site of oppression and patriarchal domination of women. So, home also then becomes a place in which societal expectations of a certain culture are enacted. So how gender is enacted within the home, how families behave together, how the boundaries between work and home operate, particularly now, for example, how family members enter and exit the sort of family space, this all takes place within the home. I take a sort of relational framework view of home in that the term home can kind of function as a meeting point for the interrelated and sometimes contradictory, ideas about relationships. Relationships with one another, relationships with family, relationships with places, spaces, and also things, so objects because home is also often equated with particular precious objects that represent something to us.

Sarah:

If we do you think of the home just for a moment in a physical location, does our sense of our community, where we live, affect how we feel about our home?

Hannah:

Yeah, completely. And perhaps, that's also shown up now whilst we're locked down, because everything's got very pared back, I suppose, whilst we continue to be living much more at home than we would have done normally. So, I think whilst the particulars of the meaning of home are likely to change over time, the need for a sense of belonging remains essential to our wellbeing throughout life completely. So, the sense of belonging is especially important, I suppose, also for marginalised populations, as you were saying before, you know, who are denied a sense of belonging, perhaps by the dominant culture, or for migrant groups who need to find a way of recreating their sense of belonging within a new culture. And there's some real complexity there, when we look at people who are displaced, how they might maintain a link with their country of origin.

So even when we've moved away from our homes, we have a sense of connection and loyalty to our family of origin home, even if it's through choice, even if we haven't been displaced in any particular way. There's a body of literature that sort of identifies home and migration, and the ambivalence of this sort of in-betweenness. I know also, there's some interesting writing about people who have left their home, and then if you return to your home, it somehow doesn't feel the same. So, I'm thinking about people, perhaps who've grown up in a different country, and then moved maybe to the UK, for example. And they may have a sense that the UK is never really their home, but equally when they go home, because they left it, that's also not home either. So, there's this strange in-betweenness that I think can emerge. There's quite a lot of exploration into the notion of a home-place, a sense of belonging, you know, our need to be kind of rooted and connected to kin and place. So that sense of home place which can elicit a sense of belonging, safety. I was thinking about some quite startling examples of where people haven't had that sense of rootedness. For example, in Aboriginal communities in many parts of Australia. So, attachment to traditional lands and homeplace were taken away and huge communities of people were rehoused in kind of shoddy social housing. And I think what we've seen there is a real decimation of the sense of tradition and community. Some people have written about that as a sense of spiritual homelessness. So, there's something about the spirit, you know, something quite esoteric, really about where we consider home to be.

Sarah:

Because I was going to ask you, you've done some research yourself into notions of attachment and safety. Is there any more than you can tell us about your findings? Was that connected with the Aboriginal study?

Hannah:

No, it wasn't actually. But it is interesting how once you start research with notions of home, all sorts of other ideas emerge. So, I conducted some qualitative research that explored how young people, their families and staff conceptualise notions of home within an adolescent inpatient unit. As a clinician, I became very interested in the fact that many young people, when they are admitted into a psychiatric unit, are admitted from home and discharged back home, and that they will stay there for a period of time. And so, I became really interested in preoccupied with whether the inpatient unit was like a home and/or a secure base, and did it matter, you know, what were the clinical implications of the unit starting to feel a bit like home, and whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. And for the staff, you know, how the staff also felt the unit was a bit like home. And of course, what came through very powerfully, unsurprisingly, was really a lot of ideas around attachment, and about how very careful and thoughtful we need to be about taking young people away from their homes and disconnect them potentially from their communities and from their parents. And whilst obviously, many, many admissions are really important and need to happen, my research seems to suggest really, that there are theories that haven't really been operationalized. So, there are some ideas around attachment ruptures that happen between young people and their parents, that can have a profound impact on the admission, and often those are kind of unspoken. Because if you think about it, when a young person goes into an inpatient unit, sometimes the staff become a little bit like parents, you know, that inevitably happens, and those staff become transient or temporary attachment figures for the young people. And that's important, that needs to happen therapeutically. But there are implications then for their reattachment to their existing family. So, my research really concluded, and I make some clinical recommendations about trying to manage the dilemmas that are associated with a unit becoming like home, and also made some recommendations about training for staff to help us think in more detail about these really complicated issues.

Sarah

For some of us home is a place of confinement. And I think that in good ways, obviously, it's protecting us from experiences like pandemics, but it also can be quite negative. I mean, there's been some quite harrowing headlines over the last few months about domestic violence, or children at risk. If somebody has experienced something negative in a home situation, can that change? And do you have any advice about how to bring about some kind of transformation and a sense of feeling much, much safer?

Hannah

Yeah, I think it's such an important idea. My initial thought is really that we have to start asking much more probing questions as clinicians for us as psychotherapists, and for anybody really, about what our own internalised working model of home is. What are our fundamental beliefs about home? Is it a place of safety? Is that actually our experience? And I think in our clinical practice, we often work with those who have an ambivalent relationship with home, ambivalent relationship with family. And sometimes if you've got an ambivalent relationship with family, inevitably, there is a complex relationship with home or notions of home in terms of your family of origin. So, I think we really do need to be very thoughtful about people who've experienced abuse, neglect, or prejudice, violence in the home, when we're working clinical practice. And perhaps we need to be asking a lot of questions for ourselves as clinicians or for people receiving therapy about what home means to us, and how it might link to a sense of safety. I think we probably wrongly make assumptions that home always represents something positive. But for many people, as you're saying, home represents something quite dangerous. So, we need to think about how we're carrying our sense of home. I do believe that even if people have had very negative dangerous experiences in their actual home, that often we are still carrying with us a sense of home, inside ourselves. The writer and therapist Philippa Perry in one of her books, she describes a counsellor talking with some refugee children. And she notes that the counsellor empathises with the idea that they have no home and the children piped up, 'oh, we've got a home, we've just got nowhere to put it yet,' which I think is a really lovely example of how resilient people can be and that you can kind of carry your own sense of home inside you and place that pretty much anywhere. So, there's a lovely book by a Dutch photographer called Henk Wildschut and he explores the lives of refugees and migrants, and he explored how many refugee camp residents find hope in nurturing small plants, and planting very small, little gardens, or even just a few tin cans planted with flowers. And this really seemed to symbolise a longing for something resembling a normal existence or a normal home. And I feel like that really speaks to the incredible resilience that people have, often in the face of incredible adversity, that actually we can find something homely for ourselves, or we can recreate something of home. Often, it's through nature, actually, I think through gardening, through the landscape through being outside.

Sarah:

The boundaries can become very blurred between work and home life. Does that change the meaning of home? And can you give any advice around how we can maintain some sense of boundaries for our own wellbeing.

Hannah:

It's been a really fascinating time, from the perspective of our relationship with home. I think, in the short term, never before has home come to represent sanctuary, and safety and protection more keenly. I did a search for some of the public announcement and documentation that was around right at the beginning of the lockdown in March. And if you look at some of the language that was used, you know, perhaps quite appropriately to try and encourage people to stay at home, it was pretty incredible and in years to come, perhaps we'll look back at that signage that says, you know, 'stay at home, protect lives, don't kill people, don't leave your home'. It's a very, very powerful message.

And unsurprisingly, I think some people have struggled to then leave their homes as a consequence, because it's a very powerful message to take on board. I think, conversely, for some people, home was experienced as a prison, and particularly if they were living with family members who were dangerous, or that people were confined away from their loved ones. And I suppose in a way, I think our relationship with home has become amplified. So, if people have had positive experiences of home perhaps that's been amplified and equally if things felt difficult, and negative and dangerous, that's also been amplified by lockdown. So, you're right, home has become a workplace, a school, a social space, it became a space for everything really, didn't it? Also, it became a space for everyone but also for no one because in some ways, we're also then in this virtual world where we're having relationships with people remotely. One of the interesting dilemmas for people working from home has been the shift in what is deemed as a public or private space. So, for many people, if you ask them what home represents, it will represent something private, being forced to work from home very quickly, where you've got everybody in their shared space, often having to manage schooling children as well, and other family members. There's been a real dilemma about whether this space represents a public space, or a private space. And I think that's represented in some of those endless discussions about peering into someone's home on Zoom. And, you know, whether your space then becomes a kind of public space for anybody to see, and who you are within home then becomes a bit different, I think. Some people have experienced a real sense of contagion, that their home is no longer a sanctuary and protected from work. But work is happening inside home. And I suppose for those of us who work in a clinical context, that's quite complex, I think, for some people.

Sarah:

I'm interested to hear from you how you then create some kind of boundaries or protection around yourself to then not carry that with you into your wider home.

Hannah:

Yes, I think that's incredibly important. And there has been quite a lot of discussion, I think, already in the media and professionally about people's sense of also overworking and feeling like they have to be available and at work all the time when they're at home, because they no longer have that distinction. And I think that there's been quite a lot of writing already, and identification of people really reaching burnout, and feeling like they have to be available to work all evening. Because, of course, now with working online, you're available all the time, you can't say you've clocked off, I mean, I think you need to say you clocked off. You know, I think there's really a heightened need for a lot of ritual around how you begin and end your day, and being really clear with other people in the household about how you're managing your work time. And making distinctions between what's work time and what's home time. And I think that's very difficult often when people are shuffling around the house with a laptop, home just pops up. And obviously there are great opportunities that come alongside that. But I think we're probably going to see a greater and greater need for people to take great care of themselves in relation to not overworking at home, and to make sure that they really protect space that isn't available for work at all times.

Sarah:

Yeah, again, we're going through a revolution. I'm listening to so many podcasts I'm reading so much, we can't keep up with the pace of change.

Hannah:

Absolutely, and I think we're probably looking at, you know, as we settle into the kind of norm of working from home for many people, we'll see changes in home and house design to reflect that. So, I think this change is going to happen on so many different levels. We're already hearing about people starting to think about living further away from their workplace, for example. That's actually going to have quite profound effect, I think, on our society.

Sarah:

How can psychotherapy specifically help any one of us address any issues that we may be having around notions of home?

Hannah:

Well, I think as I was saying before, Sarah, I really believe that notions of home are so fundamental to who we are as human beings. And I do wonder whether we ask enough about what home life is now like for our clients, but also, what home meant for our clients when they were growing up. And what that might mean, it tells us a lot, as I said before about secure base, it'll tell us a lot about the kind of relationship that we might develop with our clients. I mean, in a group therapy context, the question I have asked of me over and over again in family therapy is how can we improve our communication as a family? How do we make home life feel happier? and, you know, improving communication between family members, and actually starting to really pare down to what it is that people want from their home is really important. One of the things that I haven't talked about so far is just the importance of recognising transitions in family life. So, when we think about family life cycle, for example. Family members need to transition in and out of home, and particularly, thinking about adolescence. So, adolescence is a really complex time that's associated with lots of ambivalence, pulling away and keeping close. But actually, transitions are difficult times for families. That's often very normal. But I think there's something about really helping families to recognise the normal family life cycle transitions that they're all going through, which might include young people leaving home, and helping young adults to develop a new relationship with their homes. One of the interesting things that I've discovered whilst thinking about home a lot is that home is often referred to as the place we're not. So, if you take the example of leaving home, they'll still frequently refer to home as the place that they came from, or where their family still lives. But when they're back at home, they may refer to their new address as home. So home sometimes manages to be both where we are and where we're not. And it seems to be sometimes a fusion of both sort of here and there. And I think in a way, late adolescence and early adulthood, which are a time of dramatic change, for young people and their families, is a really good example of the changing relationship with home. And this dynamic period within the family life cycle where adolescents need both autonomy and attachment. And it's often characterised by very extreme and unpredictable behaviour in adolescence and their family members. But leaving home is something that has to happen for society to continue in some shape, or form. So leaving home and letting go, are by their very nature, complimentary processes. Certainly for me, as a family therapist, a lot of my work seems to be working with that particular age group. And leaving home, of course, has got additional cultural determinants. And of course, now we have other economic changes, which means we're probably going to see young people leaving home later, and/or sometimes returning. If relationships don't work out, or they can't afford to live independently, maybe we're going to see much more of that over the next five to 10 years.

So all of these things will have a huge bearing on home, because I think a lot of the kind of contracting around how you live in your home is going to have to be reevaluated maybe they'll have to be complicated conversations about contributions to the home or how young adults live in the home in a different sort of way, compared to how they were when they were young children.

Sarah:

People cannot separate their homes, they have to continue together as well under one roof, maybe there's children there. It's very expensive, isn't it, getting divorced?

Hannah:

Absolutely. And again, we may well be seeing perhaps more of that, sadly, if we're in a recession, and relationships are breaking down, but people can't afford to move apart. And in fact, for many, many people, they still have to sell their homes when they split up, you know, many people have to sell their homes, regardless of how amicable or otherwise the relationship breakdown might have been. So, there's often a lot of work to do there around dividing up belongings that represent home for both partners, or how children in a separated family situation navigate two different homes, which is really again, so central to a lot of their clinical work that many of us do.

Sarah:

Hannah, that seems a good place to conclude this conversation. I think this has shown is that here again, we have something that we take for granted. We're recording this in our homes, most people will be listening to this probably in their home environments if the pandemic is continuing and we'll be looking upon our homes in quite a different light and perhaps reevaluating. And just checking in with that relationship. You shed light on how psychotherapy is such a beneficial tool in establishing that relationship, exploring our own sense of home within ourselves. And again, showing that psychotherapy doesn't have to be necessarily in response to a bad thing happening, it can actually just in life improve and enhance our relationships. You obviously work with families, as well as individuals, and it's such a fascinating insight into an area of work that we hear so little about. So, thanks very much, Hannah.

Hannah:

Pleasure.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Hannah Sherbersky speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for psychotherapy. If after listening to that you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to a Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychology.org.uk and look for the Find the therapist tab. We'll also be discussing notions of home and its effect on mental health in Psychologies magazine this month, or you can find it online at psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCPs psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So, join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.