

# Talking Therapies: Therapeutic support in times of a crisis

With Martin Weaver

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast where we explore the different therapeutic settings our members work in and how they came to their career. I'm Jenna Rachid, the Digital Engagement Officer at UKCP. Our host Helen Willingham is the Head of Content and Engagement at UKCP, overseeing all our communications to members and the public as well as our policy and research work. In this episode, Helen speaks to UKCP psychotherapist Martin Weaver. Before training as a psychotherapist Martin was a volunteer with the Terrence Higgins Trust and took the first call on the AIDS helpline on the 14th of February 1984. He went on to work in the NHS in HIV and AIDS services. In 1997 Martin started working as a psychotherapist and qualified as a supervisor in 2002. Martin went on to supervise the counsellors at the 7th of July Assistance Centre, caring for the bereaved, survivors and first responders after the London bombings of 2005. Now working in private practice, Martin is an author, podcaster and in 2019 released his album of guided meditations titled Mindful Happiness, which is available to download free on Spotify and other platforms. In this episode, Helen talks to Martin about his career prior to training, and what led him to work supporting people in times of extreme crisis.

Helen:

Thank you for joining me today, Martin. It's really great to meet you and to talk about your psychotherapy career. I want to kick off with one question, and that's how did you find yourself volunteering to take calls on the AIDS helpline.

Martin:

Thank you for inviting me to have this conversation together. Difficult to know where to point the finger to say, 'this is where it all started'. I suppose I was working, or volunteering, on the student nightline service at Portsmouth Polytechnic, where I was studying marine biology. And between Portsmouth and London, I used to sort of move between the two. It was 1980. I started in Portsmouth and 1980 New Year's Eve, I think, that I first went to London. And so I began to use London as a kind of a playground, but also see what was happening in the gay community at that time. And then after I left Portsmouth Polytechnic, now University, in early 83, I was unemployed, looking for a job. And I decided I really should do something. And of course, because I've been familiar with London for the previous three years or so, I drew up a list, so I had Gay Switchboard, the Terrence Higgins Trust, and The Gay Bereavement Project. And part of the reason for doing that was the nightline work had encouraged me to get trained to do telephone advice work for students and I've had two years' experience doing that. And so, I wanted to carry on that kind of work because I had the time, the availability. And I went to Gay Switchboard, I went through their process, which was very interesting. They declined my offer of service. And so, I went to the Terrence Higgins Trust, which was just getting itself organised at that time. And they were talking about setting up a phone line. And so, because I had the experience of the nightline telephone service, I was both available and I had the experience and training to take the first calls on the helpline on February the 14th 1984.

Helen:

Do you think that was what started really your interest in psychotherapy then?

Martin:

Absolutely. I was asked to go on the lifeline service, partly I think because I've set up a new gay society at Portsmouth Polytechnic. And the people there obviously saw how I ran that and said to be really good at the nightline service. And I said, 'Oh, no, no, no, no, I couldn't possibly do that.' But I was persuaded to give it a go well, after a bit of training and I found actually, yeah, this is really useful.

Helen:

Thank you. And before your psychotherapy training, you worked in the NHS helping those with HIV and AIDS. Can you tell us a bit about that and then how that led into your psychotherapy training?

Martin:

Because I'd done that work at the Terrence Higgins Trust and that got me into not just counselling, but also working directly with people with AIDS and their families and doing education work. So, the whole psychotherapy profession was sort of growing within me as it were. And then jobs came up in the NHS. And so, I applied for them thinking this is going to be an extension really, of the work I've been doing in the Terrence Higgins Trust. And I realised that through the THT work, I could do the politics and the policy development. And I could work in organisational systems but working in a public body wasn't my first choice, but it was incredibly important. And I learned a lot about power, influence, and about accountability. And a lot of that still stayed with me today. And although we're that NHS work, I thought, 'yeah, I can do this. I can talk about policy, and I can talk about the development of services.' It's not where my heart lies. And what I noticed was that the switchboard in the various places that I worked would get phone calls from people who were just diagnosed with HIV or HTLV-III, as it was then called, or they've been diagnosed with AIDS, or they were friends or families, and these phone calls would get passed through to me. And I found myself back in the student nightline service, counselling people, referring them on to the best people, providing them with some support. And more and more, I thought, 'actually, yeah, that's why I wanted to direct my work'. One of the problems I found was that I couldn't find a philosophy, a modality that really interested me, one I could accept. And then I found a colleague of mine, when I worked in a local authority, invited a trainer, and this trainer was using this thing called neuro-linguistic programming. And as I spoke to her, I suddenly began to realise, 'oh okay, so there is something that says there's a codified way, it's not so much a scripted way, although that does help'. There's a series of interventions, a process, which you can repeat, and get similar results. So, I need to get some training in that. And there was a bit of a gap between being introduced to it and then through the NHS, using my management development training, to take the first level and the second level in neurolinguistics. So, it really gave me a better way to focus my energies, both in my NHS work, and then to think about, 'actually, I don't want to stay in this policy development work for the rest of my life, I want to get in working directly with people'. So, I began the process then, of thinking how I could do that. And in fact, in some senses, the decision was made for me. 1996, I went into hospital with appendicitis. And I was in hospital for three weeks and I had two operations. And when I came out of hospital, the NHS then said, 'well, we're not going to renew your contract anymore.' And so I thought, 'okay, where do I go from here?' And I've been speaking with my husband about potentially setting up a practice. And then I remember going for some interviews in the NHS to continue by NHS career. And midway through a couple of those interviews, just thinking, 'this isn't where you want to be, this is not what you want to do'. And so, it was in the middle of one of those meetings, literally, in the middle of an interview, where I thought, 'no, I need to set up a psychotherapy practice'. I made that decision, and my husband supported me. And so when I left the NHS, it was in May 1997. I set up a practice and started thinking about what else do I need. So, it was a slow realisation. Interestingly enough, it never occurred to me to get a job in the NHS. I think after 11 years working in the NHS, I'd had enough. And I wanted to get out and get that direct contact with clients.

Helen:

It was kind of the mid-to-late 90s you started and then you became registered with UKCP in 2000 and then it's supervised in 2002 as well.

Martin:

Yeah.

Helen:

One of the things that you did in 2006 is you were asked to supervise the counsellors at the 7th of July, London Bombings Assistance Centre, which was part of the humanitarian offering to support those that were affected by the London bombings. Can you tell me a bit about this work and your involvement there?

Martin:

Well, it's all a part of this whole unfolding story. And I guess, my kind of willingness to grab opportunities when they arise and to take risks, I guess. I remember being in my therapy room with Classic FM playing when they reported that there'd been a massive electrical failure on the London Underground and all the delays that went with that. And I didn't think much about it until a few minutes later or half an hour later, they reported the bus that had been bombed in Tavistock Square. I didn't have clients that day, but I left my therapy room and turned on the television and like most people, I guess, I was kind of glued to it for the rest of the day, as that whole story unfolded. And parallel to that, I was providing supervision services for Hounslow Bereavement Services, which is a low-cost community service provider and I'd been doing that since 2001, during my training as a supervisor. And then the coordinator, Paulo Pimentel, called me, and he asked me to come and be the supervisor for the new July the 7th Assistance Centre, because he'd met me in my work with Hounslow. A bit like the work in the AIDS field in the early 80s, it was very intense. And there was that feeling of being at the centre of a national project. Most of the counsellors there were still in training, and they were volunteers. They were very committed and very passionate. They came from all different backgrounds, and philosophies, and ways of working. And my job, as I saw it, was to be very practical, grounded and to some extent take the drama out of this intense work, you know, we, well the counsellors worked with the bereavement, the bereaved, the survivors, and the first responders, as well as other people caught up in this whole terrorist event. And I found that many of the counsellors were in danger, and some were developing vicarious trauma, getting traumatised themselves from the stories they were hearing. So, I had to guide them to being a resource for their clients and not a friend or a rescuer. So, I have to ground myself. They were an excellent group, and they grew so much in the time that we spent together. A bit like my work in the NHS, there was so much experience to be had in an organisation like the July the 7th Assistance Centre, because virtually everything was sort of thrown at us. And there we were, in the heart of this national project, providing these services, and in some senses, building the resources, building the experience as we went along. And one of the most fascinating things for me was being present in the very early days of the inquest the first few days and seeing how that works. And hearing the audio recordings of the first responders, as the details of the bombs began to filter through to them. And they slowly, as the rest of us did, began to recognise the enormity of what they were dealing with, and the very difficult decisions that they had to make in the moment.

Helen:

Why is psychotherapeutic support after crisis so important, do you think?

Martin:

I think comedy comedians say that timing is everything. And Paulo was quite clear from July the 7th Assistance Centre that sometimes when other events happened, therapists want to go in and they go in too quickly. So much changes after the crisis.

We ought to find some stability, some calm and some reassurance. And that takes time for people to understand what they've been through, and get through that in the initial stages, and then afterwards to make sense of what's going on. And one of the most important interventions I think that we can have as therapists is normalisation. As a therapist, we have the credibility to help people understand that what they're going through is normal. They're not mad, or bad, or damaged, they may have been hurt. The pain is real as is the fear, all that needs to be held to be contained, to be heard without prejudice, with compassion, acceptance and love. Because that's the only way this sort of healing can occur. And for some people, it will be very brief, days or weeks, for others, it'll take longer. And if they don't get that psychotherapeutic support, and the understanding, the meaning of their life in the world shifts and changes. We know that many people after July the 7th came out from the cheaper stations and went to work or went home. And we heard three or four years later of people who had divorces, people who'd left work. In fact, there are some people who were expecting their colleagues to turn up and their colleagues didn't, some because they died, some because what they've been through meant they'd made different decisions. And even the people who weren't directly caught up also had a shift in their understanding of their place in the world and what they wanted from their lives. But because they had nowhere to take that, they thought of themselves as feeling guilty for having these sensations, feeling bad for wanting to make changes and not understanding what had happened in their lives, even though they weren't directly involved in the event. And therefore, psychotherapeutic support is really important. Therapists can help clients understand what's happening to their physiology, to their bodies, because they're all these physical changes that take place, how medications can help, what's both good and bad about them, and how we put our sense of the world together in our own minds. And in this way, we provide positive, so not necessarily comfortable interventions, and education that helps the client heal. Resilience has been described as a swift return to normal functioning. And you can largely only achieve that with outside help. When you're in the system, when you're in the event, when you're in the dynamic, it takes a very, very skilled person to step out of that, in order to make a change. And most of us therapists can do that, because we train for years to do it. But most people get stuck in that dynamic. And therefore, through being with them, through educating them when they need it, supporting them, we can help them create a new build, a new idea of who they are. The good stuff from the past, and the stuff they may want to change for the future. We see our clients for a very short space of time, an hour or so a week for weeks, months, perhaps a couple of years, perhaps a bit longer. And we will perhaps never know the full effect that we'll have on clients and I'm quite happy with that. I'm quite happy with the relationship that I have for the times that I work with them and the belief that I have that at some point they will have an understanding, a revelation if you like, a change, a positive change that will probably stay with them for the rest of their lives, even though I wouldn't be there to witness it. So, I'm quite happy for that open-ended nature of psychotherapy that fits with my understanding about that's the way the world works.

Helen:

I wanted to talk to you a bit more about your training and you touched a bit on what led up to just before your training, but why did you become a psychotherapist, and what prompted you to go 'right, I'm going to get on this training and I'm going to do that'?

Martin:

Whether it's something in my makeup, my spirit, just remembering that at school we used to do visiting old people's homes and chat to them. I suppose at the age of 12, or 13 that was my first experience of just being with people, being with people who were lonely, being with people who were close to death. And so, there was something connected to me that said, 'yeah, this is the kind of engagement that I want'. So, it fits my values and beliefs. What is there in life that is more important than finding out who we are, and then using our skills, and maybe our spirit, to make a lasting positive impact. Over time, wanting to work as a psychotherapist, I used that training in the NHS and I found lots of turmoil in management changes in the NHS. And that led me to thinking 'actually, I need to get more skilled in this'.

On the first training, which gave me the basic skills, but I realised that that really wasn't enough. And this is where kind of UKCP fits in. And the whole point about the training that UKCP puts you through is that you have to learn things that you don't necessarily agree with or don't necessarily like and that, added to what I've learnt in the NHS, broadened my perspective and my understanding and gave me a more varied skill set that really set me on that path. So, as I say, some people say 'this is what I want to do,' and they set out the path and they follow it. Whereas I've kind of built it as I've gone along. And I think there's something about when one works in a larger organisation like local authority or the NHS, you get a much broader experience. You, like it or not, you come face to face with people and have to work with people from a huge range of backgrounds, a huge range of cultures, a huge range of professions and experience, and that still feeds into to my work today with individual clients.

Helen:

Who is your psychotherapy or counselling hero?

Martin:

I don't really have a single one. I think there are too many gurus in the psychotherapy world anyway. And I don't think I've been too starstruck by any single one. Having said that to people I trained with in neurolinguistics, a couple of guys called Ian McDermott, and Robert Dilts, who very much focused on the health aspects and the spirit aspects of the work that we do. Virginia Satir worked a lot with families in constellations, that was very much validating people's experiences and encouraging them to tell their own story in their own way, with a couple of nudges and a few questions. So, I guess they're the people that I might hold in my mind. But also, outside of therapy, there's Oliver Sacks and Jacob Bronowski. I remember watching *The Ascent of Man* back in the early 70s, not understanding most of it, but thinking there's something here that's worth investigating and exciting. And Oliver Sacks's work and the way he's weaves the stories together, and it's about people. And, bizarrely enough, I didn't know that Oliver Sacks was gay until after he died. But I remember thinking, 'how can I not know that', but I didn't. So, I think I will not necessarily have a hero, but I might have an element of somebody that's heroic, that I might want to copy, or I might admire, I might try and emulate.

Helen:

I think it's perfect. And I think yeah you don't always need that one person or one aspect, but to bring different bits together to create you and what matters.

Martin:

If you think about it, I'm not a modernist. I express myself differently in different contexts, and maybe even with different clients. And so therefore, finding different heroes or models or people to admire and understanding their story, and then see whether I can apply that. And if I do, is it beneficial to me? Or even if I don't like it, it tells me something more about me and that's incredibly important.

Helen:

Definitely. Is there anything you wish you knew before you started your training?

Martin:

Oh, loads I expect. As I said earlier on, you know, if we all knew the future, would any of us really start anything? If we all knew exactly what was going to happen, we might be too terrified to start out. I think what I've learned is that most of the trainers that I've worked with, not all of them by any means, but a lot of them only knew what they'd been taught. They weren't broad enough in their experience and their knowledge to understand where, what they've been taught, where it sits. And it was almost like being, you know, kind of repetition rather than education.

And what you get from the training is the basics. It's the experience of being with a client that teaches you what no course can. I think students, if they're listening to this, my suggestion to them is get out and get experience. I know there's a whole thing about being paid to do work and volunteering and that kind of stuff. But people turn hobbies into jobs, people do all sorts of voluntary work, because it makes them feel good and because they can gain skills from it. And there's always going to be a bit of that. There are no kind of apprenticeships in this yet. So, I think you have to get out of the boundaries if you like, of the training course, which is useful stuff. But you got to use it, use it real-world examples of real-world events. So that you get the experience. I remember in my training as a supervisor, the biggest, shock is probably too strong a word, was the first time we did a practice. And I sat in the supervisor's chair and thought, 'okay, this is different'. And it's that kind of experience, it's actually getting out there, taking what you've learned, and applying it.

Helen:

Just on the practical side, as well. How did you manage the logistics of training, the kind of time, costs?

Martin:

Well, interestingly enough, I mentioned the NHS, earlier on. The NHS is always going to change and when I joined, he was going through another change. And I kind of, how should I put it, influenced I think is the ethical word. And so, the NHS paid for my initial training and the two levels of NLP training. And I managed to influence them to say 'this will be good for my management' which it was. Then when I realised, I needed to do the next two years, because they were like part-time causes for the year. So, I worked for the training organisation as a way of paying for the course. They needed some website building, they needed some PR work, they needed leaflets writing. And I said, 'well, hey, I'd be happy to do that, in return for going on the course.' And so that's what we did. There are tense times at home, because a lot of these things happened at weekends of course. That's why I disappeared over many weekends. Now, I only go away for a weekend if I'm being paid. And managing the logistics of training, the cost with getting income, I actually used to work until 9pm in the evening in order to work with the clients. And now I finish at five or 6pm. So, it's extending the time, finding someone to fund it. And I guess taking risks, asking, 'is this, okay? I'd love to do this, but I can't afford it. Therefore, can we find another way?' Negotiating. That's what I managed to do.

Helen:

That's brilliant. Thank you. And what advice would you give to someone considering training as a psychotherapist or a psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Martin:

Well, it's intensely rewarding and frustrating, at the same time. I don't believe it's a job you can do well if it isn't an expression of who you are, of your kind of spirit. And you have to be prepared to give something of yourself. It's not really a job you can do, although I have seen people do it kind of mechanically. As in any job, there's a commitment. There's also a commitment to the ethics. These are people, real people, it's their lives that you're engaging with and if you're prepared to take that risk and that responsibility, then you can have the most fabulous responses. And the greatest feeling when someone comes to you with a problem, an issue that's been with them for decades sometimes. And after a few sessions, they say 'actually, you know, that's not there anymore.' 'Actually, I've got my partner back.' 'I've got my child back.' 'I've got my life back.' There is no greater feeling in the world and working with somebody and achieving something, no matter how big or small, just achieving change, achieving difference.

Helen:

Thank you. And final question, how has training changed you?

Martin:

I don't think that it's fundamentally changed me. It's focused me and given me knowledge, given me insights, and plenty of tools. And I tend to call the way I work a philosophy that helps me, that's helped me structure and understand what I want out of the world. Personal life, we probably know people who have been through training, and have either split up from their partners, or had a deeper relationship with their partners. It does, not so much change, but refocus, give you the tools to make the decisions and the courage to make the decisions that help, or help me, create the life that I want. Although I never thought I'd be living in West London with a practice after 25 years, the training has given me that focus, and those skills to be able to do the job that I love and to make an honest living out of it.

Helen:

You know, I think that's the perfect note to end on, Martin, and to hear that it's, you know, the job that you love, and you've been able to make a career out of it, it's brilliant.

Martin:

A bit of a surprise to me, but here we are. It's only when I talk like this and I suddenly think oh, yeah, I think it was Steve Jobs said you can join the dots backwards, you can't join them forwards. And joining them backwards, you think actually yeah, gives me confidence that I can make the right decision.

Helen:

Well, thank you very much, Martin.

Martin:

My pleasure. Good to talk to you, Helen.

Jenna:

That was you UKCP psychotherapist Martin Weaver speaking to Helen Willingham, our Head of Content and Engagement. If you're interested in exploring training, then you can visit our psychotherapy training page where you can find information on psychotherapy as a career, as well as the different training pathways available to you. Just go to [www.psychotherapy.org.uk/psychotherapy-training](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/psychotherapy-training). All episodes of My Psychotherapy Career are available on our website, [psychotherapy.org.uk](http://psychotherapy.org.uk). You can also subscribe to our channel UKCP on your favourite streaming platform. Do you have feedback you'd like to share with us on this episode or any from our series? Get in touch with us at [communications@ukcp.org.uk](mailto:communications@ukcp.org.uk). Join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves