



riverbank PSYCHOLOGY

SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER DURING COVID-19

SKILLS AND RESOURCES FROM
HELPING PROFESSIONALS LIVING
THROUGH THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN



riverbankPSYCHOLOGY

"We recognised that the shared journey of the pandemic with those consulting us was new territory for us"

The story of this document

This project started with a conversation about the negative effects of Covid-19 in our individual practices and the realisation that a solution to that problematic can be found in a collective response. As helping professionals and therapists working in the UK and Europe during the Covid 19 lockdown, we were curious about the universality and the differences of experience that we were observing in our conversations and work with those we were tasked with supporting. While in our work there may sometimes be an element of commonality with those consulting us, such as shared experience of loss or connection in terms of responses to a similar life event, we recognised that the shared journey of the pandemic was new territory for us. Never before had we been collectively experiencing so much at the same time. Alongside the people consulting us, we too found we were noticing a range of effects in response to the pandemic and the resulting societal changes. This led us to question what or whom is supporting and sustaining us during this time and how is this influencing both our own responses and our practice.

With this in mind, we invited our fellow helping professionals to join in a series of online video conversations during April and May 2020, the start of the UK lock-down.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the helping professionals who created the conversations with us that have made up this document. These were people from a range of personal, cultural and professional backgrounds such as nursing, medicine, family therapy, clinical psychology, counselling and psychotherapy who were working in clinical and therapeutic settings within and outside the NHS (National Health Service-UK) at the time of the lockdown. Although we employed a Narrative Therapy perspective in our facilitation of the sessions, we wanted the sessions to be open to all helping professionals whatever their background or preferred way of working, so many of the participants were not trained in Narrative Therapy. We were joined by professionals from across the UK but also beyond, adding voices from people who were experiencing different phases and degree of lockdown within their context.

We hope this document can be a way of continuing the conversation. We would like to invite helping professionals to continue to contribute to this conversation by adding their thoughts and ideas.

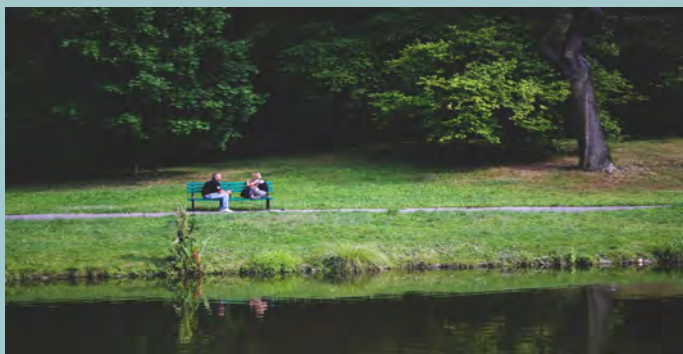
Vicky Eames & Mariangels Ferrer
Riverbank Psychology



Narrative Therapy Principles

We propose that sharing our values and enacting them with others (Denborough, 2008), can open possibilities for responding to difficulties like the pandemic. Getting together to share our responses to the pandemic in ways that represent our values and our preferences, brings into existence a series of ideas and new possibilities. These shared responses are walking side by side the story of despair, but reflect hope, dignity and sense of achievement. The process of sharing our responses aims to facilitate a collective context to accompany each other in responding to the pandemic in accordance with what is important to us.

One of the principles of Narrative Therapy and Collective Narrative Practice, which are an integral part of our work, is the idea of establishing a secure place to stand in conversations about trauma or hardship. To help with this we use the metaphor of the riverbank, where the riverbank represents our stories and the values and principles of our life. Our set of values guides us to respond in moments of difficulty. However, we sometimes forget about them or they feel degraded by confusing circumstances.



Lock-down Conversations

Twenty five helping professionals participated in a series of four hour-long conversations spaced out fortnightly. The first conversation was in week two of the UK lock-down and the final conversation took place in week eight.

The main conversations were in groups of 10-12 participants, which were recorded with permission so that we could rescue the words of participants afterwards and share them with others who may have been going through similar experiences.

Each conversation was framed under a theme to explore and discuss collectively. At the start of each hour-long session, we gave a structure by offering a small introduction about a chosen Narrative Therapy idea and some questions to scaffold further discussion:

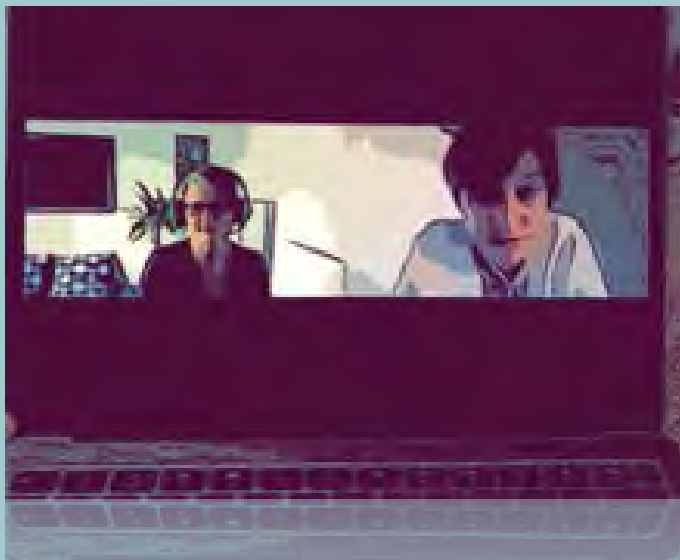
- Hopes for the conversation
- Brief introduction of a Narrative principle
- Large group discussion
- Introduction of questions for small group discussion in rooms of 3-4 participants
- Return to the large group to re-tell stories from the small groups
- Closing the conversation using the last part of the outsider witness responses (White, 2007) as a way of connecting the hopes from the beginning with the end;
- Acknowledging 'transport' - Where has this conversation taken you to that you would not otherwise have gone if you hadn't taken part? How are you different on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have?



Hopes for Conversations

We had some specific hopes for ourselves and for the participants in our groups. Hopes for connection and hopes to feel empowered by the conversations. We thought about the many professionals, including ourselves, that were expected to offer support and help to other professionals, colleagues and clients during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. How could we offer support and go through this situation at the same time? How could we remind ourselves that we had some skills and expertise? How best could we utilise the principles and ideas that Narrative Therapy and Collective Narrative Practice in the context of the pandemic?

We wanted to create a space to support each other in developing a storyline not in relation to the traumatic events of the Covid-19, but in relation to our collective response to it. We wanted to provide an opportunity for us and the participants to reconnect with our skills and abilities that may have been degraded by the pandemic and the lock-down.



We started each conversation by inviting the participants to think about their hopes in coming together. Some of the hopes for these conversations that participants shared included:

“Feeling a bit isolated, hoping for connection with people who might understand what I do”

“Connecting with each other”

“Getting some of our lives back”

“Making some more sense of the domestic because it’s become so small and so maybe we are making it a bit larger again”

“Reflecting on life in these unusual times for ourselves and our clients”

“Highlighting and noticing diversity that is happening in our experience”

“Honouring the small things and the banal”

“Celebrating simplicity”

“hoping for connection with people who might understand what I do”



Week 2 of UK lock-down: Conversation 1

"Nobody is passive in front of a traumatic event"

Bringing the idea from Narrative Therapy and the work done with experiences of trauma (White, 2006) that we are never passive in front of difficult and traumatic circumstances, we aimed to create a forum where it was possible for professionals and therapists to speak about the challenging and complex experiences of their work. This involved observing and sharing our own feelings of distress as an opportunity to name and reflect and noticing what our own and the suffering of those consulting us might say about what is important to us and them.

*"There's a discomfort I'm feeling with the way NHS and other key-workers are being described as **heroes** and the sort of impact it has on us/them to go beyond what is best for their health and ignores the political experience of their/our working lives. It makes me both worried and angry."*

"I work as a nurse and also a narrative therapist. Everyone is expecting the nurses and doctors to be heroes here [Romania] and many therapists are offering their support to the nurses and to the doctors"

*"everybody is trying to help and to stretch our knowledge in areas we know what we can offer, rather than be **thrown into the fire** to do something where we may not be able to help as much and maybe rescuing but not even saving ourselves"*

*"In the NHS at the moment there is a big thing about wanting to deploy people as they need help in the NHS but actually you want to help but are we the best people to be doing what they are asking you to do...there is the thing of **running on emotion** and wanting to help but how do you fight with that if you do want to help and work out how to say 'no' when there is the panic of everyone asking you to do things."*

*"I've noticed wrestling with tensions between wanting to be there and do something and jump in and having to balance that with **stepping back** and sometimes doing nothing. It is sometimes helpful to **create that space**."*

*"For me there seems to be a bit of a rush that we need to rush in and help, but psychologically while things are still happening I'm not sure therapeutically what can be done. I feel a pressure to offer something therapeutic where I think at the moment people need more just to **be humane** and support, friendship and handholding because this trauma is still happening."*



Week 2 of UK lock-down: Conversation 1

“Nobody is passive in front of a traumatic event”

Small groups: 15-20 minutes

Participants were asked to provide a short introduction of each other and a word or two that defines your daily life in front of Covid19.

Ideas to explore:

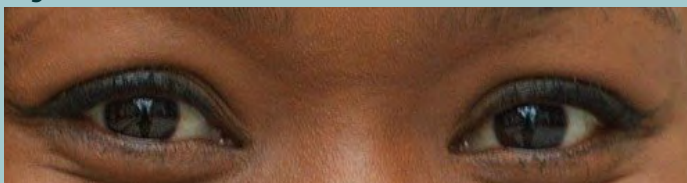
1. A special skill that you have (re)discovered,
2. A small thing that sustains you when working with people that are having a very difficult time because of the Covid-19 or the effects of the Covid-19 in their lives

Collective ideas from the small groups

Small groups were invited to retell some of the important aspects of the conversations they had to the larger group

“Saving ourselves, recognising each of us, we are all going through a similar thing from a slightly different position, so: Who can I sit and share that with?”

*“Nurses have spoken about learning to communicate in a different way, to make sure we are **smiling with our eyes**”*



*“The idea of giving up technology like **using our hands and using our minds** because we are in a moment where all the technology is everywhere and you lose a lot. I think it’s a matter of identity, knowing what we are capable and able to do.”*

“Talking about my clients I had an issue with two of my clients who said they were feeling angry but both said that I can’t use skype because my husband is at home and I don’t have privacy ... so I asked them to write a journal of those small domestic things that they give value to that are not linked to anger or hopelessness”

*“**Use of self** in ways that are sustaining of us . . . sharing something of ourselves to check in with where we are in terms of the lock-down to have a genuine conversation and bringing something of myself into the conversation”*

*“**Regaining our right** to use our skills as we get used to protocols and procedures which don’t allow you to make a decision and I’m saying that from the point of view of a nurse”*



Week 4 of UK lock-down: Conversation 2 "Exoticising the domestic"

We introduced the theme 'exoticising the domestic', which White (2004) spoke about in his book *Narrative Practice and Exotic lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life*. We wanted to explore in the group the idea that it is possible to observe the extraordinary and exotic in our responses to the ordinary and mundane. We aimed to honour with more strength than ever during the pandemic lockdown, the idea that ordinary experiences might have an extra-ordinary meaning to us. We hoped that the sharing of the "domestic" would render visible diverse stories and the beauty in them that are so often neglected, ignored or undervalued by our cultures and ourselves.

We thought this could be relevant to us all in the 'groundhog day' like experience of lockdown where a degree of universality of experience is assumed. It can be considered a way of challenging the dominant discourses around us - like being heroes in times of corona virus. Also it is about giving value to the almost invisible things around us ; "exoticising the domestic" requires skills of observing, appreciating and honouring the most banal things that happen in our everyday life and connecting them with our values and principles of life. From this perspective, suddenly with the Covid-19 "the domestic" takes a different and special position for us-and can become exotic - for example the morning coffee - the shower, the hand washing etc. mall groups were invited to retel some of the important aspects of the conversations they had to the larger group.

*"the whole thing is a **huge mixing pot of blessings** that I think and am touched by every single day but also **challenges and losses**. I feel as though I'm feeling things more intensely at the moment... it's made me question all sorts of things about what or who we need in our lives, simple things like cooking or eating a meal together I have valued that much more than I usually would"*

"Stepping between the professional and the personal and I feel a desire to share aspects of the personal"

"There's lots of space for reflection and then there's a lot of domestic stuff, make the tea, switching between the internal world and external world"

*"Being stuck at home and maybe **feeling helpless** with lots of extraordinary stuff going outside that home ... where people may not have homes to go to or be able to have some of the simple domestic experiences that some of us are having"*

*"Recognising we are in quite a **privileged position** in responding to this"*

"I'm conscious that I am swallowing anger and almost explaining it away to myself daily and I do wonder where that will end up for me"



Week 4 of UK lock-down: Conversation 2

“Exoticising the domestic”

Small groups: 15-20 minutes

Participants were asked to provide a short introduction of each other and a word or two that defines your daily life in front of Covid19.

Ideas to explore:

1. What new discoveries have you made in relation to small things that ordinarily might feel domestic and not important but that now are taking another more special meaning for you during lockdown?
2. Choose one of the new discoveries (one of the now exotic action) and share with your small group the history of this action; who introduced you to it? How long have you been practicing this actions? Why is this important? Who knows about this?

Collective ideas from the small groups

Small groups were invited to retell some of the important aspects of the conversations they had to the larger group.

“Daydreaming. I noticed that I’ve allowed myself to do it a bit more than in usual life...it’s wonderful to go into that space and whatever it is that I’m daydreaming like the candle at the dinner table at night or the moonlight and the shadows that it creates with the tree in the garden but through giving myself permission to go there are so many other things I start to notice”

“Dressing for work when you’re home or when I’ve been to a virtual pub and putting shoes on or lipstick which I never usually wear but something to denote a change in mood or a shift in what I was doing otherwise everything seemed to be the same”

*“The elements of our experience that are **soulful** when we clear away some of the clutter, I find it an opportunity to experience things in a soulful way rather than just cooking the tea and scoffing it down vs investing more of yourself into it”*

*“I have **noticed the birds** start singing in the trees, I didn’t notice that before and I have started taking pictures of them”*

*“You notice the things that are the same and the things that are different which can be informative in terms of what you value, what are the things that you want to **re-claim** when you get the chance”*



Week 6 of UK lock-down: Conversation 3

"Betwixt and between: sharing the liminal phase in Covid-19"

The theme for this conversation related to page six of the book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (White & Epston, 1990), in a table where they talk about 'before-and-after', 'betwixt-and-between', the whole 'rites of passage' and the idea from social sciences".

White says that it is useful to think of a particular confusing experience or time as a 'liminal' or 'betwixt-and-between' phase. He poses the question; "Is it possible to break with something without stepping into other ways of being and thinking that are not in some way continuous with something else? Is it possible to step apart from familiar modes of life and of thought and to step into some cultural vacuum, one that is free of contexts of intelligibility?"

We imagined the lock-down time during Covid-19 as a liminal space. As the situation changes and develops we are invited to step into a different journey, a journey that is connected with our historical past but a journey that will be influenced by the time of lock-down and the time of Covid-19 pandemic. We proposed to use our forum to witness and share our wishes and hopes for the moving on from the pandemic. We hoped to create a ritual that would sustain us, each of us, as we get ready for whatever this means next in our lives.

"A friend dropped something off at a distance in the front garden but after he'd gone I crashed, I felt gutted to not have been able to hug him"

*"I get told off a lot going to shops for not knowing how to do things, it's like going to a different country and culture and **not knowing the rules**"*

"I do have lived experience of negotiating different cultures and I've done it with a smile but I can't use my smile as I'm wearing a mask when I go out and so no-one can see me and know that I'm not a threat"

*"Yesterday I had this **immense longing** to go for a cup of coffee at the café . . . I think it's the idea of just being with someone in the presence of someone else".*

"A period of realisation that life may actually never quite be the same again."

"How different it is to connect in this situation . . . the underlying sense of threat that doesn't go away . . . to be in the company of a friend and still have a threat mindset"

*"This **strange dance** where you can't do the usual thing of hugging and you have to 'stay alert' in the presence of your mum"*

"One of the simplest things is being with someone without speaking and on these platforms you have to interact, you can't just be, you have to speak"



Week 6 of UK lock-down: Conversation 3

"Betwixt and between: sharing the liminal phase in Covid-19"

Small groups: 15-20 minutes

Participants were asked to provide a short introduction of each other and a word or two that defines your daily life in front of Covid19.

Ideas to explore:

1. Share what or whom have sustained you during this covid-19 lock-down time-your circle of support.
2. Along the journey of this lock-down time, what are some of the key things that you have discovered?

Collective ideas from the small groups

Small groups were invited to retell some of the important aspects of the conversations they had to the larger group.

*"In the first week I was paralysed, overwhelmed and stuck but as soon as I go more words it is like food, as soon as I can do something about it I can hope something. The idea of **being compassionate**, to have a flexible plan, to take one day at a time but not be too boxed in my your expectations know things are going to change so take one day at a time"*

*"The situation has enabled to **appreciate connection** and to prioritise that more"*

*"The idea that if you change your mind or decide it's not a priority to me you can say that's okay to yourself. . . such as **intentionally choosing** to take one day at a time"*

*"It's interesting to experience what or who you can do without. Out of choice I wouldn't have done that, some things are simpler and I think I've enjoyed some of that ...**the simplicity of relating**, the way life feels more paired back, not so many options ...I went for a walk with a friend for the first time in ages but I felt that could have sustained me for a really long time".*

"Even though we might be isolated, we are never alone and to be appreciative that this happened at a time of technology so you can still be connected"



Week 8 of the UK lock-down: Conversation 4

"Sharing Stories that feature hope"

We referred to two concepts at the start of this conversation, first the idea from White (2007) that narrative practice is an intentional state therapy and not an internal one. Secondly, we based the introduction to the understanding that hope cannot be

reduced to an emotional experience but rather can be considered a meaning unit of living. We were referring to, as Hedtke (2014) says, stories that we live that feature hope.

For this last session we chose to remain together as a larger group and explored the following questions:

1. What new discoveries have you made in relation to your hopes and aspirations during lock-down?
2. What actions (however small) have you taken in relation to this?
3. What is the history of these hopes and aspirations in your life before lock-down?

Collective ideas from the group

"I've learned to hang out with my kids more... before Covid we spent a lot of time doing our own things and this has got us to live together again, to eat together and being brave for them has helped sustain me. Prior to this we were all working at full pelt, we all were, modelled by me. I don't know what that will look like after this, maybe more family walks?"

"Living with my partner and in this context I am discovering things about my partner I didn't know existed"

"I have a lot of friends so I was always out doing things with them and I thought I was very connected with them but now I realise I was losing connection with the closest, my family my older friends... realised I was losing a lot and how lucky I was to have them even if I couldn't see them in front of me"

"It's not that we discovered something new, it's always been there but we let life take over"

"I do miss a bit of excitement, that buzzy life . . . how can you keep both, the techy world and the natural world?"

*"How can we retain and how can we **resist** as well . . . the pressure of consuming?"*

*"Whether simplicity is one of the ways of resisting this **culture of consumption** but how do we have excitement without consumption?"*



"Will we be satisfied with less?"

"A walk in the park"

"The joy of the picnic"

"The beauty of a caravan!?"



'Identifying Transport'

What we appreciated that has moved us

At the end of each session we explored the idea of 'transport'; Where has this left you? How have you been moved? What will you do on account of having participated in this conversation, that you would not have done otherwise? How are you different on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have?

"The more voices I hear, the more I have to think about. And that is quite sustaining and exciting and connecting."

"It has helped me remember the power of connecting and we are never alone"

"I like that we are from very different places and can use this platform to share what we have in common as well as what is different"

"Thank you all for your generosity in giving your stories. I will take away the idea of generosity"

"Understanding what our anger connects to in terms of values"

"Being compassionate to yourself and holding onto peace and how you can make each day peaceful"

"I will remember how lovely it is to connect with people that I hardly know at all and yet who have enriched my life by these beautiful conversations which have been really uplifting"

"Appreciating simplicity and appreciating slowness"

"Reconnecting and hope"

"Asking myself to look for the hope in my body, where it might be?"

"Helped me to remember where there is life there's hope. Connections between people are hopeful"

"We've co-created hope today listening to everyone else has chimed in some way"

"The idea of a 'daily hope' just a small thing that you hope to achieve that day"

"I've experienced this as a soulful experience in a bodily way like a warm feeling in my stomach"

"Reminds me that sharing language, words, things to come away with, things to promote daydreams, I feel like I've been given food"



Poems shared in the groups

Keep walking

by Rumi

*Keep walking, though there's no place to get to
Don't try to see through the distances
That's not for human beings
Move within, but don't move the way fear makes you move
Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading
Take down a musical instrument
Let the beauty we love be what we do
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground*



Poems shared in the groups

Ão Do list

by Kathi Wolfe

Make coffee.

Sort socks.

Walk

around the universe and back.

meet and greet

the human condition.

Pack picnic lunch

for your ghost.

Reshape the moonlight Sonata.

Go to therapy –

play monopoly

with sorrow,

musical chairs

with grief.

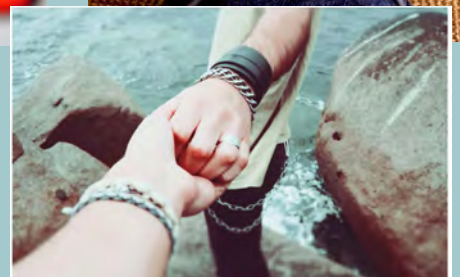
Write a poem

that sends

all the other poems to the

nearest bar for a drink.

As an afterthought –eat fire.





*riverbank*PSYCHOLOGY

Bibliography

Denborough, D. (2008). Collective Narrative Practice. Responding to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced trauma. Dulwich Centre Publications.

Hedke, L. (2014). Creating Stories of Hope: A narrative approach to illness, death and grief. The international Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 4, 27-45

Reynolds, V. (2011). Supervision of solidarity practices: Solidarity team sand people-ing-the-room. Context. Association for Family and Systemic Therapy, UK, 4-7.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends. New York: Norton

White, M. (2004). Narrative Practice and Exotic Lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2006). Responding to children who have experienced significant trauma: A narrative perspective. In M. White & A. Morgan, Narrative therapy with children and their families (pp. 85–97). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications. White, M.

(2007). Maps of narrative practice. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Please send us your responses

If you would like to send any responses to this document please send to:

admin@riverbankpsychology.co.uk



@riverbankpsychology



@riverbankpsych



www.linkedin.com/in/riverbankpsychology



<http://riverbankpsychology.co.uk>

