

# Talking Therapies: Leading change in equality and diversity

With Syed Azmatullah

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My Psychotherapy Career, a podcast where we explore the different therapeutic settings our members working, and how they came into 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 Syed Azmatullah, also known as Azmat. Taking the Chair position at UKCP in 2022, Azmat previously worked in the pharmaceutical industry, where he was quickly promoted into management. Azmat went on to organise and head up clinical trials in the UK, Europe and then across the world. In 2006, Azmat left his career in drug development to engage his fascination with the inner processes of the mind. After training and beginning practice, Azmat was asked to join his colleagues on the Equality, Diversity and Intersectionality working group for the Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy College, also known as HIPC, to develop the EDI training guidance. He went on to become a member of the HIPC steering committee. In this episode, Helen talks to Azmat about his work in equality and diversity, and how he's working with colleagues to create change.

Helen:

Thank you for joining me today, Azmat. It's going to be great speaking to you. So, my first question is that after becoming a UKCP accredited therapist, you were asked to join the Equality, Diversity and Intersectionality working group for the Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy College. Why did you decide to join and what came out of this work?

Azmat:

Yeah, thanks, Helen. Yes, I did join the Equality, Diversity and Intersectionality group in HIPC. I was invited to do so really. And I think the reason was that I particularly think that there's a big need for us to understand differences between people and really value them. So, diversity, equality, and inclusivity is essentially about respecting each other as a human being. And it's about valuing these differences that exist between people on a range of characteristics, so that we can understand them better. And I think why I joined particularly was that in my early life, my skin colour, my ethnic background, and my sexuality were all judged by some people to be inferior to theirs. And that meant that you felt yourself to be different, you were judged to be different, occasionally it led to violence when people tried to sort of put you in what they thought to be your place. And so, you're sort of self-excluded. And I, when I came in psychotherapy, had expected for things to be different and then that psychotherapists would really understand the difference and some of the difficulties you've experienced. But I think when I joined psychotherapy, I found that the profession hadn't actually got that much diversity within its own membership. And I think that is a real limitation, because it means that many psychotherapists didn't have an awareness of cultural matters, or race matters, or matters around sexuality, or class, or neurodiversity, all of these different things were not necessarily trained within psychotherapy training. And that seemed to be a real omission for me and the other members of the committee. And so what we did was put together a training guidance document, which we hoped all training organisations within HIPC would accept as a way of thinking about, and training on matters of EDI.

And that was actually welcomed by the college.

Helen:

That's great. Thank you, Azmat. And that actually leads me to another question because also, with UKCP, you've been involved in a Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion, which involves other organisations as well across the sector. And you touched on this a little bit, but why is it so important that psychotherapists and psychotherapeutic counsellors reflect the community that they serve?

Azmat:

Yes, that's really important. I think that when I have been in psychotherapy meetings, and sort of recently, that's mainly been on Zoom, and you sort of flick across the screens to see who's there. And you sort of form a view as to, you know, what is the diversity within this group of people. And similarly, when I've been to conferences in-person, I noticed that actually, there was quite a difference between the population of people in Zoom meetings or in the in the real meetings and the world I normally inhabit. When a client is looking for a psychotherapist, they really want someone who understands their world. And that's so important, because otherwise, it's very difficult to share your deepest difficulties and fears with someone who seems to be listening, but not necessarily getting it. I think if we come across as a profession, that includes the full range of diversity that we see within the population, we're going to be far more able to welcome people and hold them in a therapeutic relationship, and really hear the depth of what they're bringing. And I think that's really important for the therapeutic relationship.

Helen:

Thank you, and you have a background in pharmaceutical research and management. But how did that inform some of this psychotherapeutic work in equality and diversity?

Azmat:

One of the interesting things when I worked in the pharmaceutical industry was that it's a global industry. And I was responsible for research and development in many different countries across the world, in a particular area, in oncology. And what I found was that I was leading project teams on drugs for cancer treatment and it was so important to bring together people from the United States, from Japan, from China, from different European countries, and have teams work together on really exploring what was possible, and what could be done to come up with treatments for some of these terrible conditions. And so, I found that diversity was really helpful for enabling people to see points of view that their own culture didn't normally consider. And when you see the world with different cultural lenses, new possibilities emerge if the team is working together in a collaborative and constructive way, and I think that's what I really brought with me into UKCP. And if you do that, you really do reach levels of understanding of the problem that you're looking at, in a completely different way and then new solutions emerge. And I think we can do that very effectively in psychotherapy, because it's all about understanding the nature of the human mind. And if we can put our different perspectives around that together, I think the potential is enormous.

Helen:

Yeah, definitely. Is that something that drew you to standing for Chair and now being UKCP Chair?

Azmat:

Yes. Having left the pharmaceutical industry, I was sort of drawn into psychotherapy actually to understand my own mind better. But when I started to get involved with the committees and the colleges in UKCP, I felt that one of the things that UKCP could benefit from, if it's not too arrogant to say this, was senior management experience in a large organisation. Because in the pharmaceutical industry, we had a lot more resources to bring in experts in how to bring about change, how to adapt new situations, and how to develop organisations and their people.

And most psychotherapists won't necessarily have had that sort of experience and training, because very often they work with their clients, individually, and not as part of a bigger organisation. So, I just felt that if there was something I could offer, it would be that experience, and bring together my understanding of the human mind with my understanding of organisations and how organisations actually, effectively, develop a mind of their own, and how do you manage that. That's one of the big challenges.

Helen:

What does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Azmat:

When I first qualified, I really had no idea what UKCP was, to be honest. It was an organisation that I seemed to have to join, in order to get a certificate to say that I have achieved a certain standard of training and practice in psychotherapy. And that by having this membership certificate, it would be somehow advantageous to me. That, that was what it meant originally. And I rather suspect that for many members, that's what it does mean. And I'm hoping people will get to see that it can be, and actually is, so much more than that, that it is a community of practitioners who get together in different groups to really inquire into what can we do better, how can we really come up with trainings, which take us further and deeper into the nature of the mind and bring us skills, which will help people to be much more able to manage the challenges they face, and the suffering that they feel. And part of that is that collectively we can share ideas, but we can do more than that, we can do some research. For years, people have said 'well, research in psychotherapy is rather difficult,' because I think people think research has to be some sort of controlled clinical trial type model. But there are many people now who have developed ways of doing psychotherapeutic research. There's quite a number of books on how to do psychotherapeutic research. And people who are doing this are really improving our credibility and understanding of the nature of the human mind. And this really brings to the UKCP, the possibility of being a centre of excellence in understanding the human mind, and how to really be with it in its different ways of expressing itself.

Helen:

Yeah, thank you. You mentioned training quite a bit there. So, I want to think back to your training now. Is there anything you wish you knew before you started your training?

Azmat:

Yeah, I remember on the training thinking, 'God, this is actually proving to be a longer process and the more expensive process than I had imagined, for when I started'. There's many things that you don't necessarily factor in, which can be for example, the cost of your own therapy that you have to have during training and it's really important that you do. When you start seeing clients, you have to have supervision, and that's expensive. As well as books and all sorts of other things. So, the training certainly is expensive. One of the things I would have liked to have known is more of the landscape of the different types of psychotherapy. When you start to look even within UKCP at the different colleges and the different trainings that are available, I mean it can be bewildering to see all of these different ways of practising psychotherapy. At the time, I sort of approached it thinking, 'well, which one's the right one?' And of course, now, I think, well, there isn't the right one, there's just many, many different lenses to look through to see different facets of the human mind. And we actually need them all. But we can only do that as a collective. So, there is no right one to find, but there is the right one for you, and what really pulls you. So, for anyone thinking of doing the training, I would say, what is pulling you towards psychotherapy? And ideally, it would be something that you should explore with your own psychotherapist, what's pulling you? What's the motivation for going into psychotherapy? And what can you expect in terms of how the training is going to change you as a person? All of these things are really big topics. But I think many people don't necessarily know about them until it's halfway through the training or later.

So, it's good to have some sort of sense of what you're getting yourself into and why. And where's it going to take you? I mean, for me, it was, at least in part, a psycho-spiritual journey. And the pull was that more spiritual aspect of developing myself, rather than more down to earth things, but for some, it's going to be a combination of both.

Helen:

And you mentioned there about cost and supervision. How did you manage the logistics of that, and also the time to train and balancing that with other things?

Azmat:

I was very fortunate in that it was in my early 50s and I decided it was time to move out to the pharmaceutical industry. And I had the opportunity to take a redundancy, which was very convenient in that I no longer had a sort of full-time job. And I also had had sort of a redundancy package that would be rather helpful for supporting with the costs. So that helped a lot. What also helped was just getting to know what the practice of psychotherapy means in your local area. In my local area, which is Brighton, we have a co-operative of psychotherapists, who I think grew out of the university psychotherapy and counselling service. And they set up this co-operative, so that people who were training in psychotherapy could find a placement there, and work together with qualified psychotherapists in a supported way, where you got a certain amount of extra tuition, and supervision, and rooms, and other trainees to talk to. So, co-operatives like that are fantastic parts of the psychotherapy network, which often get overlooked, but play an enormous part in actually helping psychotherapists to become full practitioners. And, in so doing also offer a service which enables a certain amount of low-cost psychotherapy to be offered.

Helen:

That sounds brilliant, and it's something that has come up time and again in this podcast is the peer support and having a network, not just through the courses that you're doing, but in your area or in your modality that helps support as you move forward with your career.

Azmat:

If you practice on your own, and you don't have peer support and other support systems, you are potentially carrying lots of distress, and trauma, and all sorts of energetic disturbance that you're going to face with some of the clients. And you can't do that on your own without the risk of detrimental consequences. So, it should not be actually seen as a profession where you are a lone practitioner. I think it has to be seen in a context of a wider holding field, which includes peers, it includes co-operatives, it includes UKCP. And all of these offer understanding and a place where you can go for peer-to-peer support. And that's critical. So yeah, I think you're right, Helen, it's a very important aspect.

Helen:

You have particular interest in culture and trauma, what drew you to those specialisms?

Azmat:

The instant word is violence, actually. I say that fairly lightly now. I think when I was in my teenage years, actually even earlier than that. There were times when you got beaten up, basically, because of your culture, because of your colour. And on occasions that went quite far. I then was aware that as a result of my culture, and these traumatic experiences, that there were aspects of my mind, which had been affected by that, on the longer-term. So, you know, you get flashbacks, you get typical PTSD-type responses. And, at the time, I just thought, well, they're just defects in a way, limitations that I've got, and I can't do much about them. But over time, I realised that in fact, you can do something about it.

And my pull, if you like, into psychotherapy was to see if I could fix these things within myself. And certainly, trauma therapy training was extremely helpful in me understanding some of the processes, not just that affected me, but also transgenerationally. So, affecting my parents and their parents, and how trauma can sort of bring about psychological consequences for generation after generation. And that's what really pulled me into the whole inquiry into the nature of myself and cultural violence, intercultural violence.

Helen:

And just moving on from that a little, but also related, what prompted you to begin training and go down the route of training in psychotherapy. So, why did you become a psychotherapist?

Azmat:

There was over many years, a real sort of sense that I was aware that deep inside of me that there were things I wanted to understand much better. And I remember thinking a long time ago, that my mind contained many mysteries. And so, in my early 50s, having studied sort of neurobiology as a way of trying to understand the mind, I thought, 'actually, that hasn't really given me the answers that I need, I need to approach it differently, and approach it from a point of view of psychotherapy'. So, it sort of was, 'wouldn't it be a good idea to actually study in training in this, so that you can gain the skills necessary to look inside your own mind?' In a way my entry in psychotherapy was a bit motivated selfishly. To some extent, there was a sense that there is something greater than myself as an individual, that there's a sense of actually there's a sort of transpersonal world out there. And I wanted to understand something more about the transpersonal world and the way in which we as human beings are part of something better. So, there was almost a psycho-spiritual aspect that was drawing me in psychotherapy as well.

Helen:

And what advice would you give to someone who is considering training as a psychotherapist or a psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Azmat:

Yeah, I think just, if you can, get to know a psychotherapist, actually sign up for some psychotherapy, and explore your motivations, explore what you feel you're going to get out of it. Because you might find as you explore that it sort of strengthens your interests, or you might find that 'oh, actually, now I come to explore it at a deeper level. Maybe it's not quite what I'm wanting.' So, I think psychotherapy itself can be useful for people thinking about going into the profession of psychotherapy. So, that you get a sense of what it's like personally, you can see how professional practices, although actually, there are many, many different ways of practising. So, let's just go for lots of individuality. So that would be one thing, but also do a reading around it. As I say, there are so many different ways of practising. Find if something really pulls you, and try to understand what that actually is. That would be a great starting point. And the more you can sort of get to know what psychotherapy goes on in the place that you live, and how does it work, the more your eyes will be open to possibilities and greater understanding of what goes on in the psychotherapy world.

Helen:

You mentioned earlier, actually, I think you said, 'it's worth considering how training might change you'. But how has training changed you?

Azmat:

Yeah, that's great question, isn't it? I think I'm going to answer it like this. The training itself enabled me to get to deeper parts of my own mind and understand them better. Not necessarily find that an easy process and not

necessarily finding, you know, the idea of it curing a problem doesn't really fit. It's more like how do you understand the situation differently. And how do you be with that, how do you come to work with that? So, all of those things changed for me. Some of my fears disappeared, particularly fears around sort of looking at parts of myself, parts of my own personality. I think I did a training which emphasised how important it is for psychotherapists to practice in a non-judgmental way. And this is something that really changed me, that when you look through a lens of psychotherapy, that helps you to delve beyond the surface level of what's going on, to the processes that are going on beneath that, you come to understand that what happens, happens for good reasons, reasons that you can begin to understand. And when you actually start to understand these reasons, one of the biggest things that changes is you become less judgmental about yourself. But you also become less judgmental about others, because they've got processes that how formed as a result of their past experiences and their generational heritage, if you like. And so, with every client you see, with a non-judgmental perspective, you're able to form a connection, which really shows you how interconnected we are as a human race.

Helen:

And I think that's just a brilliant note to end on. So, thank you very much for speaking to me today Azmat.

Azmat:

My pleasure, Helen. Thank you very much.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Syed Azmatullah, also known as Azmat, 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.