

My Psychotherapy Career: Adapting to a short-term therapeutic setting

With UKCP psychotherapist Lisa Bruton

Jenna:

Hello and welcome to My psychotherapy career, a podcast where we explore the different therapeutic settings our members working 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, Lisa Bruton. Working in private practice and as a guest lecturer at Oxford University, Lisa has experienced working psychotherapeutically in a range of other settings, including the NHS, charities and the Metropolitan Police. With her 13 year's experience, Lisa works with individuals, couples and other people wishing to improve their relationships. In this episode, Helen speaks to Lisa about her work with first responders, and how she learned to adapt and provide meaningful short-term psychotherapy to clients.

Helen:

Thank you very much for joining me today, Lisa. I'm really looking forward to talking to you. I want to open with a big question. Why did you become a psychotherapist?

Lisa:

Yeah, great, great question. And I think probably like many people, one that has many different strands to it. I mean, I think ... so my first degree wasn't in psychology or anything kind of therapy or counselling related. But I noticed that anything I was interested in within the field that I was doing, so I was doing anthropology, did always return to people's interior worlds, their inner lives, their subjectivity. I was very much interested in all of that. And what I decided to do when I finished that degree, was to do an introductory course in therapy, kind of not knowing whether I'd pursue it or not. And I'd also had, probably like many of us, my own experience with therapy, and I found it very useful. And so when the option came up to go on and do an MA, I decided that, that I would, yeah, that I wanted to commit.

Helen:

When you say the opportunity came up, was that through that initial introductory course, you then got introduced to the MA, and that made me think, 'yeah, I want to do this.'

Lisa:

Yeah, absolutely. So, the introduction to therapy course was a standalone one. And then it was kind of a junction, either people would kind of end it there, or they would go on and do the further training. And I decided to do that.

Helen:

That's great. And what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Lisa:

Initially, I didn't quite know what it meant. All I was told is that you have to get accredited, you know, that was made very clear to me. And when I was looking at trainings, I was encouraged to look for trainings that were UKCP accredited. And now in retrospect I realise, when I was then going out and looking for work, you were obviously always asked if you had an accreditation, which I did. But I also know now that being UKCP accredited, it implies a high level of training, a high level of personal therapy, a high level of, in a way sort of professional seriousness, that I really value. And I think it makes it easier to hold the profession in high credibility, really, because we've got those checks in place.

Helen:

Thank you. Just thinking about your work, you started your own private practice. What advice would you give to psychotherapists or psychotherapeutic counsellors who are looking to start their own business?

Lisa:

I guess, yeah, making sure that you still have a sense of being within a community of professionals. How do you ensure that you're not isolated? You know how to you ... and that can depend. So if you're renting a room out in a space where other therapists are, there's more scope for sort of meeting people and creating links and this kind of thing.

The other thing is, I guess, the financial aspect of things. I think, because it takes a while to build up a full practice, it's, I guess, ensuring that financially you can bear that, you know, you can bear say three-months or six-months, or this kind of thing to get you up to full speed. So that's either through savings or kind of an alternative form of income. And sometimes that means offering low-cost sessions at the beginning. If you're linked into an employment assistant programme that can be a really good source of referrals. And I think the sheer practice of working with lots of different people really builds up your sense of confidence and skill set. So, any which way in which you can get a full practice, basically, I would say go for it.

Helen:

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Thank you. Some great advice. And as well as your private practice, you've also worked with the Met Police as well, you did some short-term therapy work. How did you find that short-term work with them?

Lisa:

I've always done a combination of organisational work and private practice. And in fact, now I only do private practice and that is unusual. So, prior to that, I'd always done a combination. And initially, I got the job in the Metropolitan Police because I was looking for a job in London and this job came up, I found it a really, really interesting experience. There's kind of, I guess, a profile of people, so I was working with staff and Metropolitan Police staff and officers, that wouldn't typically - I mean, I'm not a big fan of massive generalisations - but overall wouldn't typically come to therapy. So, there was something very rewarding in doing work, yeah, with a population that normally wouldn't come to therapy. That I really, really enjoyed.

The insight into policing and how policing operates, I think was really fascinating. It often felt like we're doing useful work, because you're working with people that sometimes are dealing with very sort of distressing incidents, that are kind of carrying a lot. And it felt very rewarding to be able to help people doing that kind of role.

Your point about doing short-term work, I think it's interesting, because typically in training, and I don't know if this has changed over time, but it can be geared towards open-ended work, to longer term work, or that's kind of implicit within it. But actually, if you go out in the world and you want to get a job with an organisation, for the most part they'll be offering short-term work. So, that's anything between four, to six, to eight sessions, and that was a case within the Met. And so, I think when you're offering that kind of short-term work, there's something about you know - and this is possibly quite obvious - but it's kind of trying to decide, okay, what are the sort of most pressing issues? What are your goals? What are your clinical goals in this piece of work? Signposting people to other agencies, other places where they can continue within it.

Often short-term work can be seen, as you know, less valuable or less useful, this kind of thing and I don't think that's the case at all. I think for some people, it can be really, really beneficial. So, those are some things I would say around that.

Helen:

You mentioned about what are your clinical goals. How did you set that up? So, you were saying, right, this is what I want to achieve, and how you got value out of it in a short time, because we know, like you said, a lot of training is geared towards open-ended or long-term work. And a lot of people, especially in private practice, might be considering it as a longer-term piece, but actually thinking about short-term and working with organisations, how did you look at that differently? I guess, is what I'm trying to get.

Lisa:

Yeah. I mean, I think it's a completely different animal. I mean, it isn't, it isn't. I mean, in part, a lot of this is about the therapeutic relationship. And I think what happens in short-term work is that you have to do that

much quicker, you know, you have less sessions to build up a good therapeutic rapport. So, you're utilising those skills, I would say more. And also, you know, for certainly the demographic of the Metropolitan Police, like many people, were incredibly sceptical about therapy and were really coming there as last resort.

I mean, the thing is, with goals is that people can come saying, you know, this is what I'd like to work on, this what I'd like to look at, and in practice other things emerge, you know, as they inevitably do. And I think the skill is to some degree, let that emerging happen, you know, you can follow a few different strands, whilst knowing that you won't be able to look at those in all that much depth.

And so to try to some extent to remain focused on, yeah, what seems most pressing to you and to them. And, you know, at the end of the piece of work, sort of, yeah, checking with them, how is it? How is it that we've done this piece of work? How is it that it's limited? Do you want to take this elsewhere? And then you can be linked into other kind of low-cost therapy services in the area, this kind of thing.

Helen:

What advice would you give to someone who might be thinking about working with organisations or doing organisational therapeutic work?

Lisa:

I'm obviously a big fan. I, you know, did that for over a decade. There's a relief of having a dependable income and you know, and sick leave, and holiday pay and all this kind of stuff, pension, all this kind of thing.

There's also I think, for some people, it takes away the need to get your own referrals, right. So, if you work, you know, in NHS or within a university or in my case, the Metropolitan Police, you know, the referrals come your way.

You also have less agency over who you work with, right. So that's one aspect of it. Ideally, you also have access to kind of trainings that might be on offer, you know, so internal training. So, when I worked for the Met Police, I did some trauma focused CBT training. So, you can tap into sort of CPDs that are on offer.

And you can also have the experience of working with a team, you know, there's a lot of value in that. And also teams, practitioners of different modalities. So, CBT therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational health advisors, this kind of thing. So, you can kind of get a broader sense of other people working within the well-being realm. It's useful, I think.

Helen:

And I want to take you back now to training. Is there anything you wish you knew before you started psychotherapeutic training?

Lisa:

I mean, in part, that it's an ongoing process, right. So, the formal training, you know, my training was six years long and then I was, you know, let out into the world. But I have continued, you know, I would say pretty much on a daily basis I'm learning something new, either through the clients that I'm working with, or stuff that I read, or stuff that I listen to, this kind of thing. So, sort of the training, you know, or kind of yeah, everything that goes into being a therapist kind of happens all the time. And I think that's been quite nice to realise and keep hold of is that its, yeah I guess, it's an ongoing process.

I really, really, really loved my training, I found it professionally, really interesting, intellectually stimulating, and personally, yeah very, very useful for me, honestly. But it's incredibly intense. You know, it's intense, because of the nature of the training, but also you're, you know, you're doing often like a placement, and you're having supervision, and you're having your own therapy, you know, it's a lot. And I guess there's something about just being aware of that, holding that in mind, and doing anything you can to, I guess, look after yourself.

Helen:

And when you were training, how did you manage the logistics? We know that training comes with costs and the time you have to commit, but also like you said, six years is quite a long time and you have to put in a lot, and it is intensive.

Lisa:

Yeah, so I was working alongside it. I think I worked sort of four and a half days a week, and I did you know condense, and then I did the training. I think one of the nice things about my training, and I would say most training, is it's a nice mixture of kind of academic learning and experiential stuff. So, even though you might have a full training day, part of that would be kind of learning, sitting down, presentations, discussions. And part of it might be skills practice or doing an experiential group or this kind of thing. You do have to manage your finances quite carefully, obviously. And I know now there's more in place to kind of help students. And I think for me, I mean, one of the reasons that I went so quickly into work once I accredited is I just needed to earn money. I guess that's the case for a lot of students.

Helen:

And what advice would you give to someone who might be thinking about training?

Lisa:

I mean, I'm the worst person to ask because I'm so biased, I think it's such a great profession, that I'm always like: do it, do it.

Often, we're drawn to training because of our own material. Either it's been very useful for us, but also there's something about ourselves, our experience of the world, or something that we're trying to make sense of. And I think that's all fair and good, you know, whilst you're doing the training, and most trainings allow for a lot of personal development, really. But it's really different to doing it as a job. It's trying to have a sense of am I drawn to this because actually, there's stuff about myself, about my experience of the world, that I want to figure out, or do the nuts and bolts of working as a therapist appealed to me. And in that case, I guess it's doing things like listening to this podcast, but also having conversations with people around them that they know who are therapists, or contacting therapists, or trying to get a better sense of what the job may look like, bearing in mind that I think one of the perks of this job is that you can really ... there's so much you can do. There's so many different areas of work that you can, you know, ... different client groups, or presentations, or themes that you can look into. You can do supervision, you can do teaching, you can do clinical work, you can write books, you know, I think there's a lot of variety within that. So, I guess trying to get a sense of okay, what ideally, what the makeup of my week and of my work look like?

Helen:

Yeah, and I think that's what we try and do with this podcast as well, is look at all of those different areas. Because like you said, there are ... the perks are that there is so much that you can do and you can tailor it to your interests, as well as what you're good at.

Lisa:

The other thing I would say about that is that you know, one of the big changes that has kind of come about since I trained is really the prevalence of anything virtual, digital, right. So delivering online therapy, but also having a social media presence. There's been a lot of discussions about AI recently. So, I think all that area of, I guess of kind of modern life and how that can impact therapy, how it can hinder therapy, how it can help therapy, your place within that, you know, it's also worth thinking about.

Helen:

I guess how much you want to embrace that or keep away from it?

Lisa:

Yeah, completely. Yeah.

Helen:

And my final question, how has training changed you?

Lisa:

When I think back – it makes me quite emotional, actually – when I think back at my training, I have very, very warm memories of the group, of the cohort I was within on what we went through together. You know, it's a very unique experience. And, you know, the training, I feel personally, was incredibly valuable. And because UKCP trainings tend to be quite thorough, I think, I really feel like it held me in good stead for kind of working with, you know, all these weird and wonderful things that can happen within a therapy setting. I think it can take a while with this job to kind of get it more or less right. To be doing more or less, the hours that you want to do, be working with more or less the type of presentations you want to work with. I think that takes some tweaking, certainly it did for me, but if it feels more or less, right as a job, I think it's a job that's enormously rewarding. Now, if I think about my training, I think it's what enabled me to go out and do this job, which I really, I adore it. I really love it.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist, Lisa Bruton, speaking to Helen Willingham, our head of content and engagement.

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