

Talking Therapies: Supporting survivors of sexual violence

With **Erene Hadjiioannou**

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 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 Erene Hadjiioannou. Erene specialises in trauma, working with clients who have struggled with post-traumatic stress as a result of sexual violence. Her experience led her to set up two community-based specialist psychotherapy services in Leeds for women with severe and ongoing mental health needs. This includes women involved in the criminal justice system, as well as women who have been subjected to sexual violence. As sexual violence can affect anyone, Erene utilises her specialist skill set to help people of any gender overcome the trauma they may have experienced. In this episode, Helen talks to Erene about her work within the community, and what drew her to be in training at the age of 20.

Helen:

What prompted you to work with people who have experienced sexual violence?

Erene:

Yes, definitely a good question to start with. That's one of the main focuses of my work. If I look back, it's such a prolific issue that I've, you know, worked with survivors, victims throughout my career. And even if I think back right to my first placement, it was one of those things where one, I was seeing it so often, and two, I couldn't not really respond to it, particularly in terms of its traumatic impact which people carry around for such a long time. So, I took very active steps to work with survivors. And I think over the years that's become more kind of deliberate as I've really tried to focus in on, you know, this particular part of our community as clients.

Helen:

Yeah, thank you. And you work not only with women, but men and people of the LGBTQ+ community. Why is this important to you?

Erene:

It's important because we, I think, are coming more and more to the realisation that firstly, we don't live in a world where people always experienced their gender under that very socialised binary. So, what I mean by that is people can experience and express their gender, their sexuality, the types of relationships that they like to be in, in a really diverse way. So that, to me is just part of the reality of doing this work. We're going to meet different types of people wherever we go in terms of gender. And secondly, unfortunately, sexual violence doesn't discriminate. So that means anybody can experience it, perhaps several times in their life. So, whilst I think traditionally we've thought of sexual violence as quite a gendered issue, and to a large degree it still is, because women tend to be disproportionately affected, there's more and more research coming out and, certainly in the work that I've been doing, of recognising that actually there's members of the LGBTQ+ community that experienced this as well. So again, that's part of my actually responding to, you know, what I'm seeing with the work that I do.

Helen:

Do you think part of that is talking about this a bit more, in that we don't hear more from the LGBTQ+ community about abuse, not only sexual violence, but other abuse? Do you think that's also contributing to that?

Erene:

Yeah. And also, we, I think, really need to take into account the impact of what we think we know about sexual violence. And I think one of the forms that takes is like myths about sexual violence, as in who's a victim, who's a perpetrator, what are the circumstances under which sexual violence takes place. And, you know, I know, women and girls have been pushing back against those myths for years in order to be recognised. And I also think that that's still an ongoing issue, you know, for anyone of any gender. So, I mean, if we take, you know, domestic violence or sexual violence, we might stereotypically imagine, a cisgender heterosexual male being a perpetrator. A cisgender heterosexual woman being a victim and, you know, whatever people imagine sexual violence looks like might take place. But actually, that does a huge disservice to all sorts of different kinds of communities that fall out of the dominant one, including LGBT folks. I mean, even in terms of how different types of sexual violence are qualified in law, actually, you know, makes it seem as though it doesn't happen in the queer community. And it absolutely does, unfortunately. So, I think there's a huge part psychotherapists have to play in making this issue more spoken about, more visible so that we can support anybody that might come into the room to benefit from what we have to offer.

Helen:

That leads me quite onto the next question, actually, which is, should more therapists feel confident to work with trauma and sexual violence in the therapy room?

Erene:

Yeah, I appreciate I'm probably a bit biased, but yes. And the reason for that, if I look outside of my bias, because of the work that I do, is that, as I've mentioned, there are so many different types of people that can experience trauma and sexual violence. And I should say, you know, trauma can be a result of lots of different life experiences, whether sort of a big one-off event or something more cumulative, that, you know, activates those really intense stress responses that we might recognise as trauma or post-traumatic stress. I think it's so ingrained as part of everyday living for so many people. And I think trauma and sexual violence particularly can be quite scary topics, or anxiety-inducing topics for therapists. But I think once we kind of do more work to be of service to any type of survivor of trauma we might experience, there's definitely a confidence that can come from working with that. So, I think whilst there are definitely commonalities between survivors, you know, often it's the differences that mean. We can do our best work, we're really kind of honouring the person that they are, as well as what they've been through in the therapeutic work.

Helen:

That's a really good point as well. And whilst sexual violence might be one aspect that can lead to trauma, there may be other elements as well. So, it might be that that's not the first thing that comes out in the therapy room, but is underlying.

Erene

Yeah, definitely. And especially if we consider that often what makes trauma traumatic is the fact that somebody has been harmed at the hands of somebody else, or, you know, maybe more than one person. You know, as therapists, we're trying to offer a space to actually kind of sit and be with somebody, usually from a relational perspective.

We need to establish that trust and safety before somebody can actually really, you know, even say, 'actually, I've been through this'. So, you're absolutely right. There's a lot that we can do to facilitate those conversations and to assist people to, I think, push back against the internalised blame, shame and guilt for what they've been through by, you know, being available in a non-judgmental way where we really collaborate with them, rather than potentially being yet another person that might judge them for what they've been through. Yeah, I mean, there's a lot to say on this topic, but I'll pause for now.

Helen:

I'm sure you have got a lot to say on it. And in terms of that relationship, as well, you do some community-based work. Can you tell us a bit more about that and why it's important to you?

Erene:

Yes, definitely. I've held the idea for a long time that psychotherapy really has its limits on being effective if the only work we do with survivors is in the rooms where we work. And what I mean by that is that all of us, whether we've been directly affected or not, live in a world where sexual violence happens. That means we also live in a world where disempowerment, oppression, sexism, misogyny happens, you know, all of the isms that contribute to people being marginalised, treated violently, treated badly, etc. So, in terms of community-based work, I kind of really feel like we have a social responsibility as therapists to not only work with people that have been able to navigate the mental health system to access what we offer, which I think is, we know, it's not straightforward for everybody. But to actually say, you know, 'how about I use my power, my resources, you know, my skills and experience to step out of the room into communities, to invite people into, you know, what I have to offer?' Whether that's traditional psychotherapy appointments or community-based work. Like for example, I've done workshops on how to understand and manage traumatic stress. I've been a guest speaker at various community groups. I've also actually been a part of an independent steering group since 2019 with two other therapists to respond formally to the Crown Prosecution Service public consultation on their pretrial therapy guidelines. So, you know, part of the way that we do our best work is not just by being in the rooms where we offer appointments. We've actually got to get out, be visible, do work with and for survivors for psychotherapy, I think, to be truly effective.

Helen:

And you recently published a book. In that you cover the inaccessibility of mental health services, the societal issue of sexual violence, and the problems surrounding pretrial therapy. Can you dig a little more into those and why were they important for you to explore in your book?

Erene:

Yeah, definitely. We've definitely evolved in terms of kind of theory that we've used, I think our positions in society as psychotherapists. Part of what I wanted to do with the book was to actually say, look this is the context that we're working in with survivors. And, you know, as I said, a little bit earlier, we live in the same world as survivors. And you know, there will be many psychotherapists that also have lived experience of trauma and sexual violence as well. So, there's lots of different ways that we, as professionals, really know the reality of the issue, which is, of course, well beyond the therapeutic hour and the rooms in which we see clients. So, I wanted to provide a little bit of the context of accessing mental health services, how prolific sexual violence is as a societal issue, the myths around it. And you've mentioned pretrial, or we've both mentioned pretrial therapy, because in terms of working with survivors of sexual violence, some people might think about reporting to the

police, they might feel pressured to do so because I think societally there is a myth of you know, that's the right thing to do. Whereas there's actually quite a lot at the moment to really dig into the fact that the criminal justice system isn't a safe or viable option for everybody. Conviction rates for rape are extremely low, it's about 1% at the moment, it's the lowest it's ever been. And you know whether or not a client of ours is actually going through the criminal justice process when we're working with, it is a part of reality of kind of really feeling the impact of what they've been through and trying to figure out, what do I do next. So, you know, in terms of the book, I really wanted to make psychotherapists more conscious, and I guess, more proactive in responding to all of these contextual factors, because, of course, they impact survivors' mental health. So, that's something else we have to work with. As we've mentioned, a huge part of the book is to encourage therapists to take on that social responsibility. What can we do outside of appointments for and with survivors? And it's also, you know, information on actually what are the realities of thinking about reporting to the police or doing that. And how might that show up in therapeutic work if a client's navigating both the mental health and the criminal justice system at the same time.

Helen

Yeah, thank you for that. I'm going to go to a slightly different angle and talk about how you became a therapist. So, going back to the beginning. So, why did you become a psychotherapist? You know, what were you doing before and what prompted you to begin training?

Erene

I mean, psychotherapy is my very first career. In terms of the why, I think knowing the person that I am, and what I'm interested in, I was probably always going to end up in a career that was very involved with people, probably in a support or care role. It's just what I enjoy, really, and generally find people pretty fascinating. But I was about 20, I think, and I'd just done my undergraduate exams at university and was sort of going on interviews for psychotherapy training courses. So, I started off quite early, really.

Helen:

You say started quite early, because it is quite unusual that people come straight out of their undergraduate. If you don't mind me asking what your degree was in, and then did that influence your decision?

Erene:

Yeah, that's absolutely fine to ask. I did a joint degree in psychology and philosophy. Looking back, the philosophy element was more because I was really interested in it, it was It wasn't sort of a career move. And, you know, probably a good thing that I was better at the psychology element than the philosophy so. So yeah, that's what I did. And I will say that I was accepted onto my training course not long after I did my interview, but I was advised, you know, because of my age and lack of working experience that they would defer my place for a year. So, how I spent that year was kind of working to obviously, gain an income to fund the training, as well as doing various bits of volunteering, say, with the Samaritans, for example, just to sort of get a bit used to that more sort of people facing work in that support role.

Helen:

And did you find that that did help having that year and those support roles in when you then started training?

Erene:

To be honest, I'm the kind of person where if I'm, you know, signing up to something, I'm ready to go. So, even if I hadn't had that sort of year in between, I, you know, would have gone straight into it as I did do.

Helen:

Yeah. And then do you have a psychotherapy or counselling hero? And who are they?

Erene:

I feel a bit cheeky, because I wouldn't sort of actually look to, I guess, the big hitters in our field necessarily. You know, obviously, I've learned a lot from, you know, a lot of the theorists out there and the ones that have really paved the way for us now. But actually, in my experience, particularly with trying to do more community-based work, and actually really witnessing how much good work can be done on the ground. You know, I think in seemingly small ways, but when we're all doing it collectively, it adds up to huge things. You know, I would actually kind of look to a lot of my colleagues. When I was writing my book, I took on a colleague of mine, who's a psychoanalyst, to interview a couple of survivors on their experiences of accessing psychotherapy and reporting to the police. And, you know, she did those interviews with me, and she does really exceptional work. She's an activist as well. I've got colleagues that work specifically, for example, in a really faith-based way. So, I have a colleague in mind who's a member of the steering group I'm a part of that works a lot with the Muslim, South Asian community, doing incredible things like, you know, therapeutic retreats, which are sort of freely available. I could name names and go on, but honestly, I do look around on the ground in terms of the city where I am, and the people that I've worked with, and there's so many of us really doing what we do. So yes, to be a little bit cheesy, I think I'm working amongst my heroes sometimes. But I feel really privileged to be able to do that.

Helen:

I ask this of everybody, but what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Erene:

Yeah, definitely a good question. I think it's important to be part of an organisational, like regulatory, body. I think, to be honest, for me to continue to maintain a set standard of my work, and my professional career. So, I think it's important for us, of course, to have an ethical framework. I think it also means that the public are assured that you know, anybody that they might approach who is registered with UKCP is, you know, of that certain standard and continues to train, you know, whether it's their core training or CPD. But I've done various bits of work with UKCP myself in terms of other podcasts or writing and I think from that perspective, for me, what's really great about being a member is the ability to contribute, in dialogue, with the wider field. It's a really great channel by which to do that. So, I've been really grateful for that.

Helen:

Thank you. That's great. And going back to your training, reflecting back now, is there anything you wish you knew before you started your psychotherapeutic training?

Erene:

Yeah, I think for me, it's that the process of being a psychotherapist, evolving as a psychotherapist continues well beyond the training. So, I think it's really great to be in a profession where you can shape your career on an ongoing basis and really lean into the things that you really care about and have particular skills in. Part of the work that I've done over the last two-three years is supporting other therapists to set up their private practice. And I think what's helpful for people to know before they enter their psychotherapeutic training is making yourself as employable as possible or learning the skills to be self-employed as early on as possible. Because I've seen some therapists really struggle once they've got that qualification to actually take the next step without the security of like a cohort or their peers necessarily. So, I think actually really thinking about where do I want to place myself? What's the work I want to do? As well as maybe some of the practical skills is helpful to pick up as early as you can.

Helen:

Yeah, that's a really good point about thinking what you want to get to. Yeah, and working out those steps in-between. And then how did you manage the logistics of training, how did you manage the training alongside other priorities?

Erene:

Yeah, I think, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, you know, once I've committed to doing something, it really is a priority. So, I trained for six years to get the qualifications that I have to practice. And it was a part-time training, which, to be honest, was beneficial because I could then work to, you know, fund the training. As training as a psychotherapist goes, I don't really know anybody that doesn't have a mix of a couple of paid and unpaid things on the go in order to meet all the course requirements, you know, make sure that you're funding it all. But I think I would also add the as an experience holding on to the, you know, why am I fulfilling this commitment, is really important, especially if it does feel stressful at times. So, you know, why am I going for this career? Why am I taking these steps is important, as well as you know, finding like-minded people to be honest. So, yeah, there's a little bit of just going yeah, practically I've got to meet all these commitments, but equally, yeah just trying to make the experience a little bit easier if I needed to.

Helen:

And I just want to touch on, you said about like-minded people, do you mean on your course and kind of the peer support?

Erene:

Yeah, definitely. And also just, you know, in doing like volunteer placements or any sort of paid work. I was in the mental health sector working as an administrator in terms of doing paid work for a good number of years. So yeah, even just working in sort of mental health organisations and being around other people that, you know, really wanted to deliver really good services for people that needed them was really great in helping me along.

Helen:

Thank you, and what advice would you give to someone considering training as a psychotherapist or psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Erene

I mean, to be honest, I'm completely acknowledging the fact that I'm a millennial. Because I think there's a lot of discourse, quite rightly, about how do we work to unlearn any biases that we have. How do we handle power effectively? This profession isn't just about helping people and actually, you know, to take it further, like properly helping people, rather than just their symptoms, is about unlearning your biases, handling power effectively to adequately support people in their sense of self, their personal identity, as well as their mental health. So, being prepared to learn, evolve, assess yourself as a person and a professional in service of the clients you work with is super, super important. And I, you know, would add to that, that one of our responsibilities, of course, is to offer spaces for clients that are affirming, empowering, and responds to their mental health as a part of who they are. So again, coming from that two-person relational approach is that, you know, we are mutually working together, there is a back and forth that goes on and we impact each other. It's not just about me being the expert, and telling you what to think or just focusing on symptoms. It's about actually really meeting the person as they are amongst what they're experiencing.

Because, you know, we can't leave the person out of the equation when they work with them. So yeah, I would say placing an emphasis on your personal development is just as important as your professional development.

Helen:

And then, in a similar vein, this question, but how is training changed you?

Erene:

Yeah, to be honest, the more I've done this work in terms of survivors that I've met, clients with different, you know, challenges and mental health issues that I've met, working within the mental health system, having a bit of a crossover with the criminal justice system and working with people pretrial. For me, it's just made me more determined to do better for colleagues and clients, for sure. It's about constantly evolving and meeting all sorts of needs to be effective as a professional. And it's been a good couple of years since I qualified as a psychotherapist, but I've done training ever since. And I think that's the message I always take wherever I go.

Helen:

Yeah, thank you, because that's actually something that has come up throughout this podcast as well, is that training doesn't stop when you stop your original training, if you like. There's continued development, both professionally and personally. And it is why the psychotherapists that we talked to love what they do and continue to be able to support because we're in a world that's changing, and we have to move with that.

Erene:

Yeah, definitely. I think that's really well put.

Helen

That's it for my questions. So, just want to say thank you very much for joining me today, Erere. It's been really, really great to talk to you.

Erene

Yeah, you too. Thanks so much.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Erere Hadjiioannou 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. All episodes of My Psychotherapy Career are available on our website, 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. Join us again next month. Till then, thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.