

My psychotherapy career: Is group psychotherapy beneficial to homosexual and bisexual men?

With Tim Foscett

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 Tim Foscett. Tim is the director of Loving Men, an organisation providing personal development events and resources for gay and bisexual men to meet each other on a deeper level. He is also the director of North London Group Therapy, and a clinical associate of Pink Therapy. In this episode, Helen speaks to Tim about his career and his involvement setting up psychotherapeutic groups working with gay and bisexual men.

Helen:

Thank you so much for joining me today, Tim. I'd like to start just to ask you, how did you find yourself drawn to working with groups psychotherapeutically?

Tim:

Well, in the late 1980s, I had a job working in social services, training people about HIV and AIDS. And obviously, it was a brand-new epidemic, and it was very distressing, lots of people were dying. And I was a young gay man who knew about HIV and AIDS, and I got this job, and I was working with home helps and social workers, and having to work with them around very difficult issues to do loss, and gayness, and social change, and uncertainty. And A, I really enjoyed it. And B, there was a whole network of people like me doing the same kind of work, and we would meet quite regularly. And I noticed that I really enjoyed these group spaces and trainings that we did together. So, I just noticed that I had a response to being in a group and that was different from other things I did in my life. And from that, I then got a job working for Pace, which was a big LGBT mental health charity in London. And the job was to create a group work program for gay and bisexual men in London about sex, communication, HIV, relationships, self-esteem. And I worked on that program for the next 19 years, so that's really what drew me to working therapeutically. I don't know if I'd call it psychotherapeutically, but from there, I set up psychotherapeutic groups for gay and bi men, and then therapists. So, that was my route in.

Helen:

Amazing, and did you do your psychotherapy training in response to those groups and that work? Or was that something that you wanted to do anyway?

Tim:

I actually did two trainings. I did a counselling training. Actually, interestingly,

it was a counselling and group work training, very rare in the UK, to have such a thing. But it happened to be that that's what I did. And I did do that as a result of those jobs. I went on a training course at the Terrence Higgins Trust, four weekends, about counselling around HIV and AIDS, counselling skills, really. And the feedback out of that was that I had a bit of an affinity for this kind of work. And I agreed. And so, I went on and did a diploma out of that. So that was, when I was doing the first set of things I talked about, the HIV training. And then, about a decade later, I started a psychotherapy training at Spectrum in North London, because I was ready for more basically, I guess, and wanted to go deeper and have a broader understanding of what I was working with.

Helen:

That's great. And what do you find the most challenging, and also the most rewarding about working with groups?

Tim:

Oh, well, I think groups can be a very creative place to work. I mean, I guess all therapy can be a creative endeavor. But there's something about bringing a collection of people together, which is endlessly fascinating and endlessly different. There's an unpredictability to it, that I really enjoy. And I like the creative interplay of, you know, where are we going to go today, and what's here, and how shall we work together. I remember reading a very interesting book by a gestalt group therapist, I can't actually remember what it's called now. But it was all about aliveness. And he modelled a very interesting kind of aliveness in the way that he worked with people in groups. And that was inspiring for me too, and still is. In terms of challenging. I mean, that is challenging, bringing a collection of people together and trying to create something of value for all of them. I guess also, when you're a therapist, you're always susceptible to negative transference and projection. And I think when you're a group therapist, that's probably magnified in some way. You become the authority figure, the teacher, the head teacher, the father, or whatever it is, obviously, in people's unconscious minds. And yeah, sometimes that's difficult to work with in a group, also very valuable to work within a group. So, I rise to it, but it's not always the most fun.

Helen:

It's not just the unpredictability of the individual, but that relationship or what's going to happen with others as well, which is really interesting.

Tim:

Exactly. And it's why it's such a valuable therapeutic medium, I wish there was a lot more of it in the UK. They get the feedback, and they get to interact with others and you as a therapist, get to see that and reflect back to them what's going on. Whereas in one-to-one work, you hear those stories, but you don't have the system in the room in order to be able to illuminate what you're talking about, or really show them the evidence of what you're talking about. I guess the other thing that's worth mentioning about groups is intimacy because there is something very special, I think, about people being in a space relatively undefended, open, vulnerable, honest, authentic. There is a quality of intimacy that, I think it's what I found in those early groups that I was in for HIV trainers, was a kind of intimacy that I hadn't really experienced before.

Helen:

What advice would you give to someone looking to start working with groups?

Tim:

I fall back on what I sometimes call the holy trinity. And this question gets asked to me quite often, in one way or another. So, the holy trinity is training, because although it's connected to individual therapy, it's a different animal and it requires a different skill set and a different understanding of things.

So, training, practice, like to actually get on and do it, even if it's really scary to start with. To find a placement, or a job, or voluntary group that need something like this. And to practice is really the only way we can grow the skill set, the muscles that we need. And then to have supervision with someone who knows about working with groups, which is worth seeking out, in my view. And when you put those three things together, then I think it's really a manageable task. I do see people trying to do it without one or two of those things often, or doing the training, but not actually then finding somewhere to actually practice, for example. And I think that's more difficult and more distressing for them and the outcome may not be as productive for their clients as well.

Helen:

And do you have any tips, I guess, on people looking for how to find that ability to practice, or actually the other point you mentioned as well about supervision, you know, looking for someone who's got that experience?

Tim:

Well, in terms of practice, I think if you've done a bit of training in group facilitation or group therapy, then I think you probably could find an organisation that would welcome something to do with groups. If you haven't done any training, I think I can see why organisations would be wary of you. But I mean, my background is in lots of different community organisations, mainly to do with the LGBT community. And there are opportunities in some of those organisations to run groups, if you've got energy to do it. And I imagine other community organisations would want that, bereavement organisations, well of all kinds. And I guess if you show up, having got some qualification or some training behind you, then that's going to help with that. In terms of finding experienced supervisors, not so easy. I mean, we exist. There are group of practitioners in the UK, and I guess going to some of the organisations that run groups and train people in group. So, in the humanistic realm, there's the Gestalt Centre in London and other gestalt trainings, I think, for example, where there is an emphasis on group training. There's the Institute for Group Analysis in the more psychodynamic realm. And word of mouth, asking around, finding people who have experience and who other people have had good group experiences with, probably is the best way to find them.

Helen:

You mentioned that you work particularly with the LGBT+ community, and you run groups for gay and bisexual men. Is a community-based setting particularly beneficial for this client group, have you found?

Tim:

I don't know if I would have said that. But on the whole, I've always run groups, those groups, either through an LGBT voluntary organisation like Pace, which is where I learned my craft. And that suited people very well and they trusted a voluntary organisation that was part of the community. If an NHS group had been set up, often we would see that people would come to us rather than go to that. Something about being part of the LGBT community made it much more accessible, I think, to people. And now I run my groups as part of my own private practice. So, I guess that's a community setting still. One of the things Irvin Yalom said, who's obviously one of the grandfathers of group therapy, or even the great-grandfather of group therapy, is that you need some degree of homogeneity in a group. So, you need something, whether it's something to do with their identity, or whether it's something to do with the experiences they've had, like bereavement, for example, or war veterans, or something. He also says you need some heterogeneity, you need some differences in the group as well. But I think it's quite a good rule of thumb. So, it's a roundabout way of answering your question, but I can see why bringing gay and bi men together to talk in a different way than they probably do in their normal lives is of value to them. And I've seen that over and over again.

Helen:

Yeah, and that brings that homogeneity, as you mentioned. Another type of group that you set up and you run is for psychotherapists and counsellors. How beneficial is having this kind of therapy and support around you when you work as a psychotherapist?

Tim:

Well, I don't want to speak for other people in my group, because in a way it's for them to say. I guess I set them up because of my own experience of being part of a cohort of people. We trained together at Spectrum, we did our kind of five, six years and then there was the facility to carry on meeting a few times a year in that cohort. And I really enjoyed that and got a great deal from it, and it added to my practice as a therapist, because there was a space for me as a human being somewhere, with people who knew me well, and well trained and experienced facilitators. And one of the things that surprised me was that other colleagues that has trained other places, they didn't have that facility, and often they finish their training, and we're suddenly in quite an isolated situation. And yeah, it was a strong contrast. So, I set a group up and it filled quite quickly, and then I set a different one up. So yeah, that was my experience. And not every trainee enjoys the intensity of training and of the group aspects of it. But many of us do, and many of us enjoy the relationships that are formed through that process. So, I think there's a lot of value in it. I'd add one other thing, which is the value of working on yourself. I mean, different modalities have different ideas about that. But I think in the humanistic, integrative realm, and probably in other ones too, it's good practice to have a space to talk about your own world, life, dilemmas, questions, dreams, and that if you're doing that, you're feeding yourself at some level. So, I really subscribe to the idea that if I'm practising, I want to have a space for myself, as well as a supervision space, which is different in my book.

Helen:

That is something that's come up on the podcast before, is that kind of peer support as well, which can often be still slightly different.

Tim:

Yeah.

Helen:

You also set up an organisation called Loving Men, what inspired you to run workshops that focus on intimacy between men?

Tim:

Well, this came out of the work that we were doing at Pace. Which I mentioned, we started that in the mid 90s and it ran for about 20 years. And that work was a sort of holistic programme around sexual health relationships, self-esteem, funded by the NHS as it happens, with money that was HIV prevention money. So, as part of the work to minimise HIV transmission in London. And we persuaded commissioners over many years that there was a case for a holistic program rather than 'this is had to put a condom on,' which most gay men knew and still significant numbers of us weren't doing. And underneath all of that was clearly a lot of men struggling with intimacy. Which isn't really surprising given the ways in which men are socialised in our culture, to hide everything vulnerable and emotional from everybody else rather than to talk, share, be open, struggle with, be with each other in that space. So, it came out of that work, we saw the need for it, and we set it up there. We used to run weeklong workshops in Scotland in a wonderful venue called Laurieston Hall. Unfortunately, that venue is no longer running events, and our diaries are busier. So, we don't do them that extensive anymore, but we still do different retreats around different aspects of intimacy.

Helen:

And we talked about a few of the groups that you've set up, but I want to go back a little further and think about why did you become a psychotherapist? And what inspired you to start training?

Tim:

Well, I touched on this earlier in terms of going to this four-weekend course at the Terrence Higgins Trust. So yeah, so then I went on to train at City University and really enjoyed that. And it wasn't until a couple of years into my training that I realised I was actually following in my father's footsteps, because he was a number of things, but he was a counsellor, and he also was a group facilitator.

Helen:

Interesting.

Tim:

Yeah. Because my routine was so different from his, his was through the church, he was a priest. Mine was through HIV, social services, being gay and so on. So, it unfolded really. And then later, I went and trained at Spectrum and got accredited as a psychotherapist through the AHPP, Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners.

Helen:

Who is your psychotherapy or counselling hero?

Tim:

Well, I think I could name many, many heroes. The very first one that came to mind is a woman called Petruska Clarkson, who was one of the people that set up Metanoia, a long, long time ago. Quite a character and controversial in a number of ways. I loved the book she wrote, which was *The Therapeutic Relationship*, which for me, is one of the best books about a kind of integrative approach to psychotherapy. I just took it on holiday, and I didn't put it down, it had so much life in it. And she was also very supportive of me around groups. And I had a sort of feeling that I should be focusing on one-to-one work, because that's what everybody did, and that this interesting group was a bit weird or something. It sounds even strange to say that now, but I remember saying that to her. And she looked me straight in the eye and she said, 'well, perhaps you really enjoy running groups. What's wrong with that? Maybe that's something that you should do more of.'

Helen:

And we asked, well, I asked this of everybody, but what does being a UKCP member mean to you?

Tim:

I think first and foremost, I really like being a member of the AHPP and AHPP is a member organisation of UKCP. I like the ethos of AHPP and we're unusual in that we're not a college, or a school, we're a member organisation of practitioners that work in a particular way to do with humanistic psychology. And I think it's led some of the initiatives in UKCP. I know that when UKCP were revising their complaints procedure, they were very interested in some of the things that we had developed in UK AHPP, around mediation, around a win-win, around constructive solutions. Because obviously, complaints can become very adversarial and litigious, rather than actually try and find what's the underlying issue here that needs to be addressed and solved. So, I like being part of an organisation that responds to all of that and thinks about all of that.

I think it's quite interesting being part of such a broad church, you know, UKCP, covers so many different modalities of psychotherapy. There's a collaboration here, and I guess the group worker in me likes that, likes that there's a homogeneity of psychotherapy and the heterogeneity of all the different approaches that are held within UKCP.

Helen:

It's that collaborative environment, but also acknowledging that there are so many different approaches and modalities, but we are all one and we do face similar challenges and benefits and everything else. That's great. Is there anything you wish you knew before you entered your training?

Tim:

I was thinking about this earlier and I remember that piece of advice that someone did actually give me when I was training, which is don't give up your day job too early. Because it is a difficult thing to go straight into earning a good living from being self-employed, or even from getting a job as a therapist. I worked part-time for Pace for many years, while I also cultivated my private practice. And I think that kind of mixed economy is sensible, and I think probably it's even more difficult these days, given how many therapists there are out there. So, that was a piece of advice that someone did give me that served me well.

Helen:

Do you have any advice that you would pass on to someone considering training as a psychotherapist or a psychotherapeutic counsellor?

Tim:

I think for me, I've seen a variety of trainings, I've done a variety of trainings and had a variety of supervisors and mentors and so on. And some of them have really inspired me and some of them have been less inspirational. And I have always benefited from ending something that was just sort of okay and going in search of something more inspiring, more enlivening. I did that with a supervisor in my early days, and they were perfectly fine supervisor, but I wasn't looking forward to going. And something in me said to myself, 'you should enjoy going to supervision, you should look forward to this.' So, we ended, and I went in search of other supervisors, and found them, and found inspiration.

Helen:

Would you say that training has changed you? And if so, how?

Tim:

Oh, yeah. I mean, these days, obviously, it was a while ago that I did my original trainings, but they were formative processes, you know. And I like that psychotherapy training takes, you know, however many years it takes, because that's how long it takes to really form yourself differently. And even CPD, I was doing online CPD around trauma recently, and it gave me a broader understanding of certain phenomena, and some ideas for how to work with it. But it also just energised me in terms of feeling excited to go and work with those kinds of issues in a way that maybe before had felt a bit more cumbersome or burdensome, or even a bit anxiety provoking. So, I find these days training doesn't quite change me to the extent it did in the early days, but it still adds in richness, and layers, and breadth, and depth in many ways. And I think that the culture has changed a bit within the profession. When I first trained there was a sense, you know, you do your three years, you do your five years, and then off you go. And obviously, the requirements of doing 250 hours of CPD over five years, that's a significant amount of training to do, you know. I actually saved up some of my training over a couple of years and then I did a big course in group facilitation, for example, a few years ago. And over the course of my career, I'll do that a few times. I still do small training courses here and there. But also, like that there's the encouragement to really develop ourselves as practitioners.

Helen:

Whilst people might be thinking about that initial training, it's that long term vision and the support through that.

Tim:

Yeah.

Helen:

Thank you very much for speaking with me today, Tim. That's been really fascinating.

Tim:

Oh, you're welcome.

Jenna:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Tim Foskett speaking to Helen Willingham, or 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 any 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.