



Being in therapy is the most normal thing

While stigma around mental health issues remains an issue, there is an increasing willingness to talk about mental health issues both in the media and in society as a whole. Even if much of that talk centres around the woefully inadequate state provisions for mental health support and treatment, to some extent, the debate is being had. This can only be a good thing. For counselling and psychotherapy, the knock-on effect is that more people are willing to enter into therapy, prompted often by some crisis in their inner or outer world. Again, this is a good thing. However, to limit thinking about counselling and specifically therapy to a support or treatment for mental health problems or as something that is to be accessed only during times of crises misses much of the point.

Recently, a client of mine told me about a trip to the cinema at the weekend. As he was sitting in his comfy chair enjoying the prelude to the main feature, the screen flashed with three words: 'Amazing. Awesome. Astounding.' What transpired next was not God revealing himself/herself from the heavens (or insert whatever experience that would, quite literally, bowl you over with awe.) What came next was a preview of the films being released this summer. My client relayed this story, remarking on how nowadays everything seems to have to be somehow awe-inspiring. It no longer seems to be enough to simply state, albeit with a small degree of marketing spin, 'Here are our new releases this summer, which we really think you will enjoy.'

This brings me back to psychotherapy and how being in therapy is the most normal thing in the world when the world seems to propel us to feeling and expecting a life of extremes. Therapy is not extreme. It is a weekly dialogue, often on the same day and time, that continues. It is a space and within that, a relationship where we can learn to be 'normal,' if normal means becoming curious about the subtle nuances of experience, understanding why we may react a certain way and how our past subtly but continuously influences our present until we shine the light of consciousness upon it. And it is about how a relationship develops over time without needing the extreme highs and lows of excitement and chaos to make it meaningful; the relationship to our psychotherapist and to ourselves.

So, paradoxically, if being in therapy is about being normal and finding a way to be normal in the world outside of therapy, this is then perhaps exactly what makes it if not abnormal, then quite unique in a world where nothing ever seems enough. Being in therapy during a crisis can be very holding, supportive and important, but it is not really psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is the very normal process of being in a contained, meaningful, ongoing dialogue with another human being through whom we can get to know ourselves and recognise that we are simply normal after all, and that that is a good thing.