

Episode 12: The power of safe self-disclosure for therapeutic relationship-building

Shabnam 0:05

Welcome to the Psychology of Case Management podcast: the show that helps you use psychological ideas to strengthen your relationship with your catastrophically injured clients and their professional networks, so you can achieve more for your clients and feel more fulfilled in your role.

0:20 Hello, and welcome to today's episode with me, Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan. I want to talk today about the tricky matter of self-disclosure. As you probably all know, I grew up professionally in clinical psychology, believing the Yalom quote, "I remain convinced that a therapist's judicious self-disclosure facilitates the course of therapy," and I use self-disclosure often in my practice as a clinical psychologist and a case manager. So, every so often when I have a conversation with a professional peer – and a client, on occasion – in that obligatory internal chatter that goes on as I do a post-mortem analysis of the interaction, I asked myself that question, did I over-share today?

Now I have to stress that this has not always been a consciously asked question to myself, but it came from reflections of a time in my life where I found myself fairly preoccupied with work. At that time, PsychWorks Associates, my psychology service, had truly come into its own and the case management branch was taking off really well. And there were some really interesting projects on the horizon, as well.

During this time, I was working long hours, but my husband and I maintained our day each with our gorgeous pre-school daughter each week, so she could be with us more than she would have been at nursery across any given week. Before things got busy, on my day off with her we used to go out a lot to children's centres, 'stay and play' sessions, trampolining, playdates, swimming... It was just a lot of fun for us both.

But as work got busier, my phone featured more and more in our downtimes. And soon enough – yep, you guessed it – our days were intruded upon with phone calls, emails and lots of solo time where she was required to play by herself a lot. Mother's guilt didn't half kick in after a few weeks of this sort of separating. And I felt really worried about this being a taste of the life that I was unwittingly creating for our little family. And as much as I could see this change happening, it was really hard to stop it from happening.

So I made a concerted effort to protect the mornings with her. I would do this by putting my phone on silent, and by following my imaginative little girl into a world of tea parties and teddy bears' picnics. Okay, sure, I did bring my phone into the room. But I didn't read any emails or, or answer any phone calls. And I was actually quite proud of this. I seem to have developed a sort of temporary OCD of simply glancing across at my phone to see if the backlight had lit up and if I was receiving messages, and I thought I was doing a great job, and had been doing a great job for a couple of weeks, when my wonderfully observant and vocal daughter asked me in her innocence, whether I loved her or my phone more.

Of course, she had actually noticed all my nonverbal behaviours that implied that my phone was actually really quite important to me. And there were no words at all that could describe that feeling I had of complete parent fail. It sent me reeling for a few days actually, so much so that when I was back at my desk – in a planned way, I might add – one of my first phone calls came from a friendly personal injury solicitor who I knew had a similar age child. And when she asked how Aila was, I basically shared my experience truthfully to her.

And for a few moments I wasn't Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan, psychologist and case manager running a thriving company that she refers clients to: I was just a regular mum talking to another regular mum about the juggling act that is parenting and how mothers' guilt should be laughed at and not feared. To my relief, she went on to say that it was reassuring, actually, that even psychologists struggle with their children from

time to time, as she often did. And we both of vehemently agreed that behind our professional labels and CVS, we are still only human. Myth busted, in a moment of vulnerability.

4:22 As Yalom encouraged in psychotherapy, especially for those who use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (if you want to know more about this, by the way, check out our episode on it), self-disclosure is a really effective and encouraged tool to help people develop that crucial relationship with their clients – and indeed their professional colleagues. Many a psychologist will be able to recall the moment in which a client accepts that they, too, are not dysfunctional for struggling with the challenges that is life. Offering real-life personal examples of our own moments of challenge can be hugely normalizing for those seeking help. And it can have the added benefit of encouraging self-compassion and self-acceptance.

To be able to witness such transformations as a professional is an absolute privilege and a reminder of why we do what we do. So in that sense, self-disclosure is a really useful tool, when done in a considered, thoughtful, judicious way. It is deliberate and beneficial to the therapeutic bond. But why is that? And what do we need to consider when self-disclosing in meetings with our clients, and professional peers? How can we balance on that fine line of ‘human’ which is arguably that bond-making space between being a professional and oversharing?

6:05 So let's first have a think about how to define self-disclosure. Because for me, this sets the scene for today's episode. Have a little think yourself about your own examples or observations of others self-disclosing. How would you define it? Or perhaps you have had some clear examples of over-disclosing, yourself, where you or someone else has felt uncomfortable by what was being said.

So, for me, I'm going to define self-disclosure simply as the process in which one reveals confidential and personal information about oneself to other people, in a manner that maintains appropriate boundaries for the professional, as much as the peer or the client. So, for example, saying I'm a woman, that I'm Brown, that I'm a psychologist or a case manager is not self-disclosure. However, perhaps sharing my religion, perhaps any political party or idea that I subscribe to, or where I live, is in fact self-disclosure. The fact remains that there is no way someone could know these things about me unless they could, I don't know, read my mind, or be part of my inner social circle, or frankly, stalk me, I guess. Or, of course, they could have simply been revealed by me on different occasions, for different reasons, in the course of my relationship with that person or those people.

7:37 In psychology, we talk about four main types of self-disclosure: *accidental*, *unavoidable*, *client-initiated* and *deliberate*. *Accidental* self-disclosures are unplanned moments outside of a scheduled meeting or session: spontaneous responses in sessions or other moments that happen to reveal personal information from you to your client or your peer. So, for example, bumping into someone while out shopping for food or reacting emotionally to, say, snakes, if you had a phobia of snakes.

Unavoidable self-disclosures are client revelations about a therapist or the professional's personal life that occurs through ostensible features such as someone's race, their gender, the clothing they wear, the jewellery that they're wearing...

Client-initiated disclosures occur when clients seek and find information about us, the professional, which usually these days would exist online. So they might find out information about, I don't know, families or where we live, professional achievements, political, religious stances, etc.

And *deliberate* self-disclosure, as revealed earlier is self-disclosure of personal information that is used as a therapy tool. Research says that the use of deliberate clinician self-disclosure in the therapy process has actually got some real benefits. But it also carries some risks.

9:12 In catastrophic personal injury, we anticipate working with our clients and colleagues for quite a long time and we learn a lot about them and their families. In fact, one could argue that they actually, over time,

learn a lot about us in return. For example, they might know when and where we have holidayed, who our family members are, what condition our health is in, whether we have moved house or having building works, that kind of thing. Fairly intimate stuff in some ways. Yet this information has, I guess, just accumulated over time.

But the accumulation of this information is because we have deliberately self-disclosed, because we know it helps build a rapport with other people – with our clients, specifically, which is essential to the working relationship. We often choose to disclose details about ourselves and our lives to aid the development of trust that is necessary for the work we do to be effective. For clients specifically, we also know that anyone would feel uneasy telling a stranger about their thoughts, their feelings and experiences. Getting to know us better through our sharing of information on a personal level can help reduce this uneasy feeling and help us be seen less like a constant stranger coming into their lives.

In addition, clients and professional colleagues might think they are alone in their struggles. And self-disclosure actually can help convey a sense of empathy to clients and our peers, and can help them feel that they are seen in their struggles, and that their emotions and experiences are being heard and validated. When we enter long-term client relationships like that afforded to us by the litigation process, the therapeutic process can often feel one-sided for clients where their needs are the primary focus. Research has shown that this imbalance can make some clients feel quite uncomfortable. And by offering thoughtful personal sharing of our own, it can lessen that discomfort. And perhaps we might even ourselves have noticed that it's a bit unusual, after all this time, that very little is known about us. And so we may in fact feel uncomfortable. So it just redresses that balance somewhat.

Some clients and indeed some professionals can feel intimidated by another professional's status and credentials which in their personal injury world, we have to be honest and say that there can be a bit of a power differential between clients and professionals, and within professionals. On a basic level, we are highly-trained and skilled individuals. And as much as our impostor syndrome may not want to accept this, our status might trigger a sense of insecurity for our clients, and indeed some of our colleagues. Personal disclosure by professionals may serve to humanize the professional in the client's eyes, or in their peers' eyes, and diminish the impact of this perceived power differential as the rapport builds.

12:11 But it's not as easy as all that, of course, as my own little story that I shared earlier revealed: what one discloses needs to be carefully considered. I mean, can you imagine how differently it could have gone if I shared my phone story to a client or a peer who maybe yearned for a child themselves? Or if they were perhaps struggling to get enough work? I like to think I would have been more sensitive to my audience, but you don't know what you don't know. So we need to acknowledge the pitfalls and risks associated with self-disclosure that make it feel somewhat unsafe, at times.

One of the biggest risks is a shift away from the client's needs and goals. The sharing of too much information by a professional about his or her own personal struggles may be perceived by the client as a sign that the professional not able to responsibly manage their own needs. So there's a question: for whom am I saying this; for whom am I disclosing this information – them, or me? Or excessive personal sharing may be seen by the client as self-serving; it may convey disinterest in the client's issues, and thus may be damaging to the relationship we work so hard to build over time.

Equally, it might ignite a sort of curiosity from the client that encourages questions that you simply do not want to answer, therefore making a rupture in the relationship more likely. Self-disclosure can be detrimental if it is provided without consideration of the client's presenting problem. For example, if a clinician shares his or her struggles, a client who perhaps takes on easily the caretaking role may be triggered to engage towards the professional in that very caretaking behaviour that they are entering the relationship with to try and correct. Or, in the case of case management and litigation, perhaps it's something that is going to get in the way of the real work that needs to be done for the client themselves.

I suppose if we are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, will that inhibit the client's ability to bring their own needs to the table, so to speak? Self-disclosure can also be detrimental if it is provided without consideration of the client's value system: sharing personal experiences or views that violate a client's value

system may threaten the trust that the client has in us, as an appropriate source of help. We also run the risk of alienating clients by sharing stories that emphasize our difference, or perhaps our privilege.

Too much professional self-disclosure can blur the boundaries in the working relationship too. The client can come to view us more as a friend than a professional helper. And that's actually the case between professionals as well. So encouraging a sense of friendship rather than a professional relationship that is supportive, and that exists for the benefit of the client, or peer, could leave the client (or peer) feeling that they need to support us as individuals, repeating the client's usual patterns of behaviours that tend to blur the boundaries across the board, really. And like I say, that's also the same for our professional colleagues, too.

15:42 So how can we navigate safely through this minefield of building relationships versus oversharing, versus appearing human, versus balancing power and maintaining boundaries? Tricky, right? Well, I'm not professing to getting it right all the time. Absolutely not. But I am aware that it is a particularly hard juggling act when we are working with such injured clients and their families, for such a long time. All the while trying to be congruent in our professional lives, while living our personal lives with our families and friends in whichever way we choose to. So here is my checklist to ensure helpful self-disclosure occurs with our personal injury clients:

So, the first thing is: be clear about the benefits and whom the benefits are for. Ask yourself in advance of using self-disclosure, just how the self-disclosure will help the client. Unless a clear benefit to the client can be identified, self-disclosure should really not be used. Someone once suggested considering a story as a 'scab', or a 'scar'. And I think I find this really helpful. So if it's a scab, it might inadvertently reveal your vulnerabilities, changing the emphasis of need to yourself, which is not what we're trying to achieve. A scar, on the other hand, is a sufficiently-healed example of a true life experience that is less likely to be reliant on current emotions, and therefore less likely to reveal vulnerabilities. It's a really good way to conceptualize it, in my opinion: go for the scars, not the scabs!

The second suggestion on the checklist is: be clear about the risks and whether they are worth taking. Consider the potential detriments that self-disclosure might have on the client. The use of self-disclosure should be reconsidered if any potential risk to the client can be identified, possibly even in the face of potential benefits. So, good questions to ask yourself here are: Would I be okay with saying this with my most boundaried client? Will it benefit the client to hear this? How will it benefit the client? Is it relatable for my client, or might I risk alienating them?

18:03 My third point is: be brief and minimal. In self-disclosing, say what you need to say in the most concise manner possible. And I know that's rich, coming from me, because conciseness and brevity is not my strength. But the point I'm trying to make is: limit the detail of your disclosure, so what is most likely to benefit the client is there, and everything else is unnecessary packaging, really.

Self-disclosure is less likely to cause upset when it's thoughtfully planned in advance of any meeting in which it might be used. I don't know about you, but sharing off-the-cuff stories isn't that easy, and sometimes, if I'm so driven to say it, to say something, it might actually reveal more of a sign of the story benefiting myself rather than my client. Some good questions here might be: What is the minimum detail I can include to make my point? And have I thought through this story and, if not, can I not just use it when I *have* thought it through a bit more? Also, why is it that I want to share an unplanned story about myself? What's the driver there, what's the motivation? A lot of these things might be unconscious and quite difficult to get a sense of, but I suppose if you're able to stand back, a slight distance from the desire, it could be incredibly helpful and minimize the risk, really, of a poorly-judged story.

My fourth point is subjective versus expert opinion: making it clear that you are giving your opinion, based on your personal, subjective experiences only. Otherwise, it can be easy for a client or perhaps even our peers to assume that you are conveying an academic or professional opinion, or an expertise that actually, possibly, is basically misleading. A good model to use here is thinking about 'if' statements to convey a story that is about your own views.

And my fifth and final point is: consider your client's values. Making self-disclosures that are not aligned with your client's values can be potentially harmful, so try to refrain from using self-disclosure until you have had time to acquire an accurate sense of your client's value system. So, again, good questions to ask yourself here are: How well do I know my client? Or, indeed, the same thing for my professional peer. Have I been judicious enough of their experience and values to reveal this personal story? And how would I feel if it went a bit wrong? And what would happen to the relationship if I misjudged this? How detrimental will it be, basically?

21:02 So those are my five tips or checklist points. You know, I kind of want to end this episode by saying that it can be really difficult to predict exactly how a client will respond to each and every disclosure that you might make. But careful monitoring and frequent checking-in are really important to gauge how the client is feeling, and thinking about all the different aspects of the relationship that you're trying to build. Given that each client is different, and each peer is different, as is all of us individually, a rigid view is less likely to be helpful when it comes to the practice of self-disclosure. Instead, each choice perhaps, to use self-disclosure should be made according to careful consideration of its potential benefits and pitfalls to each individual client or professional colleague.

And I suppose we have to remember there's no rush to use self-disclosure. And it's better to use safe disclosure a bit later down the line, than unsafe self-disclosure earlier on in the relationship, in our desperation to build a good rapport with our clients. It's just not worth the speed and, I guess, the inaccuracy of getting it wrong. After all, we have to protect the relationships we have built, or are building with our clients and our professional peers, including protecting it from ourselves sometimes, perhaps. Gandhi once said: "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." Perhaps safe self-disclosure is then a good opportunity to be reflective about and with our clients and our professional peers. And, I suppose, ultimately with ourselves.

So I think that brings us to the end of today's episode. Thank you so much for listening. And if anyone is actually interested in reading more about how I dealt with the work overwhelm, having been told by my daughter that I might actually love my phone more than her (ouch, still incredibly painful!) but I did write a blog about it, and it's on the PsychWorks Associates website: www.psychworks.org.uk/blog. And if you do fancy having a little read, by all means do. All right, well, thank you again for listening, and I will see you next time. Take care for now. Bye!

23:39 Before you go: if you enjoyed the episode today, I'd really appreciate it if you could rate it on whatever platform you're listening on, and share and like on your social media profiles. Word of mouth is the best way for us to grow and to be a continuous resource for all. And if there's any topic you wish for us to cover, please drop us a line on our website. Thank you so much for all your support.

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