

NWRPA Newsletter February 2023

TherapistsConnect: Building a Therapeutic Community in a Pandemic

Caz Binstead and Dr Peter Blundell

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Summary by Frank Kelley

Caz and Peter are organisers of #TherapistsConnect, an open community of therapists from across the world who are passionate about therapy and discussing therapy. Their main aim is to broaden conversations around therapy as well as build greater connections between therapists. The community began in the pandemic from a single Tweet – hence the use of the hashtag in their name. Their website is at <http://www.therapists-connect.com/>

In this seminar Caz and Peter considered some of the challenges of their journey and the perils of social media spaces for therapists.

Caz and Peter had previous experiences of online communities of psychotherapists and counsellors. As the name suggests this community began with a single tweet from Peter.

He sent a tweet out on 6th January 2020 asking other therapists to tell him who they were, where they are and what they do. He included the hashtag #TherapistsConnect and promised to retweet them all, not anticipating how many therapists wanted to join an online community.

In developing this online community they read the 2011 work of Étienne Wenger on *Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction*. Wenger gives a simple definition: *Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.*

Initially the community was particularly popular with private practitioners as this overcame their professional isolation. This already strong initial growth was followed by a huge increase in therapists coming online in the pandemic.

#TherapistsConnect became a larger and more complex organisation having a home on both Twitter, with 13,000 followers, and Instagram. They have support from UK counselling and psychotherapy organisations. There is a thriving student community. They began with online discussions, including political debate, and added podcasts and online videos on various topics.

What began as a UK organisation spread. There are communities in the USA, Malaysia, Australia, Denmark and Sweden. Most voluntary organisations of psychotherapists and counsellors have short lives. By contrast #TherapistsConnect has been long lived.

The nature of the community is very important to Peter and Caz. They are a firmly non-profit organisation. Their platform is there to give therapists a voice which respects difference. It connects therapists to each other and is a place for support and compassionate and empathic interaction. It is a good place to be exposed to other world views. It is OK to say you are having a bad day as a therapist. While it is an interactive community many therapists prefer to listen and watch podcasts and online videos.

The open and public nature of the community means that your clients may be joining in. You have to carefully think through your boundaries and anticipate your clients may have a different view about boundaries. Therapists in the USA community are more open about this.

Students love the *Trainee Talk* and talk about their difficulties in training and practice. They do not shy away from pertinent topics. Student access to experts often acts as a myth buster. The ideas they gain go back to their courses and have influenced changes in the curriculums in their training bodies.

The public nature of the community can lead it to being an unsafe safe. It has been criticised as too political or not political enough. The core team has increased over the years. However it is a voluntary organisation and the demands have led to facilitator fatigue. The open nature means a lot of feedback but the sprawling nature of the community means outcomes are immeasurable.

Caz and Peter gave one final advantage of therapists being online. If we are not on social media then it is other peoples views about therapy which will shape the conversation.

Thank you to **Caz Binstead and Dr Peter Blundell and TherapistsConnect**. In this seminar we had the compassionate and empathic interaction that they value in their community. I hope the NWRPA has some of these qualities. As we are a small organisation I was amazed at how many therapists TherapistsConnect is able to reach.