

‘We all benefit when the roaring two-year-old grows into a roaring, assertive young adult’



I'm not a darling, I'm a lion.'

This was the response I received from a two-year-old child recently, when I called her 'darling'. And how ruddy fabulous. Such a clear statement of identity. So strong and assertive. So healthy, in my view. I'd love to hear more like this from my (adult) clients.

Then I reflect. Would my two-year-old friend still roar regardless of who she was with or the context in which she was roaring? Or was it that she felt safe enough to do so with me? I'm beginning to think the latter, and that I had better start being more cognisant of my responsibility as a listener to what is communicated.

I think of Meghan Markle's words: 'Women don't need to find a voice; they have a voice'.¹ She argues that what stops women from speaking out, from occupying their potential, is not their individual failings but that the rest of us - society, social structures and systems - aren't hearing them. Similarly, Zoë Krupka notes the framing of 'difficult experiences of therapists as deficits',² rather than seeing them as organisational and systemic challenges. A recent article in the *Guardian* illustrated the ubiquity of this individualisation of responsibility when it criticised the assumption that mobile phone addiction is all about the inability of users to take care of their own wellbeing. It argued that placing the responsibility for wellbeing solely with the individual masks 'deeper structural issues within the tech industry'.³

So often, in the Western world, this is how it goes.

This isn't just about my role in relation to my counselling clients or supervisees. Taking a systemic view means accepting we all benefit when people are able to assert themselves - it doesn't just benefit the individual. One such advantage is clear communication; another is that it is generally easier to be direct with someone else who is direct, supporting a virtuous circle of communication. So, responsibility for nurturing this rests with all of us.

But to bring it back to the counselling room, I want my clients to feel free to express themselves clearly and decisively - fiercely even - if that is

how they feel. A starting point for nurturing this mode of expression is - as ever - unpacking my own unconscious prejudice. For instance, do I unconsciously welcome assertive communication from some individuals more than from others? Answering such questions stretches far beyond supervision; it reaches to my everyday experiencing, including films, books and conversations.

This heightened appreciation of shared responsibility for communication sharpens my empathy too. Working solely on a client's assertiveness, for example, may 'miss' the kernel of their experience: the resolution for an overworked client may not be to stand up to their employer. If we were to focus in therapy on that, it could be damaging, implying that the client is responsible for their distress.

Acknowledgement that the client may not have been listened to establishes empathy with the client's world. It recognises power structures and their impacts. It demands that we as counsellors are alert to catching their communications sensitively and accurately. Not to do so risks colluding with oppression and disempowerment.

For me, this means getting comfortable with sitting with my clients' sense of powerlessness; respecting the limits of what they can work on, and acknowledging the influence of institutions, systems, cultures and technologies, however subtle. This is the most respectful and authentic stance I can offer, and I strongly believe that this itself is an empowering experience for clients.

Given the growing pervasiveness of systemic power imbalances, it seems likely to me that some clients aren't roaring to their heart's content. And we all lose in that scenario. I may be adding to the problem by not consistently honouring my share - the listener's share - of the responsibility for what is communicated. I'm primed to think more in individual rather than collective terms; I have my unconscious biases. Being alert to all of this edifies my respect and empathy in the counselling room. Roar. ■

REFERENCES

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