

COMPASSIONATE COUNSELLING MELBOURNE MAGAZINE

DEEP DIVE

QUIET THE MIND AND THE SOUL WILL SPEAK



THERAPY

WHY COUNSELLING?

MINDFULNESS

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

NICKI PAULL

THOUGHTS OF AN ACTOR-
COUNSELLOR



editor's note

In 2020, the world has been turned upside down by a global pandemic. The challenges this presents to mental health are many and varied.

For many people, there is still a stigma attached to seeing a therapist or counsellor.

This issue seeks to answer a few questions for the counselling novice.

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COUNSELLOR & AUTHOR



WHY COUNSELLING?

One of the most straightforward reasons people choose to seek counselling from a trained therapist is simply to organise their thinking.

Being 'in two minds' about a big decision, life change or forward step in relationships is a normal and natural place to be when confronted with the likelihood of change.

How professional counselling in this context can differ from seeking advice from friends or mentors is that professionals are trained in 'active listening'.

What this means is that instead of listening so as to relate personally and formulate a solution, or 'waiting' to give an opinion, counsellors are trained to listen in a client-centred way.

I'M ANXIOUS
AND, FRANKLY,
IT'S ABOUT
TIME TO TALK
ABOUT IT.



Is Anyone Listening?

blah blah blah

That is, we allow for silence as you put your words together, focus our full attention on your process instead of drifting off into our own, and offer you unconditional positive regard which allows you to say things without fear of being judged.

This skill is called 'active listening' and it's not something that comes naturally to many people.

Our decisions and feelings are usually mixed up in a complex matrix of experiences and beliefs that are unique to us.

So organising our thoughts can sound a bit like shifting through television or radio stations using an old-fashioned dial!

We can start sentences without finishing them, jump from one thought to another which can seem non-sequiter to the listener.

To use a computer analogy, talking things through can be like searching a database for relevant files.

So, organising our thoughts is a kind of bedrock on which we can utilise counselling to construct goals, recovery plans, or gain an understanding of why we are the way we are.

Counsellors can also offer their clients methods for self-discovery or self-change that fall outside what most friends or mentors offer us

(especially when we reach a point where we feel we have tried everything and nothing is working for us).

Professional counsellors can also challenge clients in a way that others may not do for fear of losing a friendship or creating conflict.

Once a professional rapport has been established between client and counsellor, most counsellors are able to recognise the extent to which a client is willing and able to respond to challenges.

No change can happen if we don't step outside our comfort zones a bit. But on the other hand, being too far out of our comfort zones can leave us feeling overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, abandonment or other uncomfortable emotions.

The best person to challenge us is really ourselves! But this too can be fraught, where we have tendencies to beat ourselves up for 'being a bad person' (shame) or for failing (perfectionism).

So professional counsellors can also serve a purpose as a kind and compassionate witness when we are caught in a loop of self limiting beliefs.

I was recently asked by an eighty-year old white man at a social event for our mutual volunteer organisation why there were so many counsellors around these days when 'in his day' there was no such thing.

My personal belief is that this is because the culturally preferred mechanism for dealing with extremely difficult human challenges was stoicism, and since World War 2, we have been left with little doubt that this model doesn't work to ease the human condition!

Staying silent, stuffing emotions down, denying the reality of grief or loss or life-stage struggle doesn't lead to a peaceful and purposeful life but to all sorts of psychological pain.

Connection

Simply Listening

However, I just answered that life is now so stressful for most people, and many people have fewer social and family supports, that talking to a stranger can be very helpful.

The fact is that simply talking out loud to organise our thoughts in a compassionate confidential environment can be all we need to get back behind the steering wheel of our lives and drive out of the bog.

There are a million possible reasons why a person might decide that now is the time to seek counselling.

As people, we constantly shift and change as we grow older. What worked for us in the past may cease to work now.

Finding a new perspective might be as simple as a couple of sessions with an active listener!





WHY MINDFULNESS?

MINDFULNESS SEEMS TO BE EVERYWHERE THESE DAYS

What is it and where can I get the real thing?

Awareness

Concentration

Mindfulness is a new fad from an ancient technique.

Mindfulness builds our *tolerance and insight*. ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) is regarded as the third wave of cognitive behaviour therapy.

Developed by Steven Hayes, and made popular by Russ Harris, ACT (a mindfulness-based cognitive behaviour therapy) now has a strong body of scientific evidence to support its efficacy as a treatment for a range of 'disorders', particularly depression and anxiety.

Life crises can arrive on our doorstep in many different ways at many different times of our lives.

Crisis can be the death of a loved one, divorce, job loss, financial disaster, family rifts, loss of friendships, or worse.

When we are faced with a life crisis, we can get really pushed around by an emotional cyclone ripping through our mind and body.

Applying the fundamental principles of ACT (or traditional mindfulness) to survive the storm, we'd:



cont...

Slow down and drop anchor: taking note of the breath and body, we learn techniques for grounding and centering ourselves in the present moment. This gives us a feeling of safety. It doesn't stop the storm, but it gives us a safe anchor to cope with the swirling, whirling storm.

Notice: we simply focus our attention of what's happening in our bodies. How does the emotional storm feel inside, where is it, what colour is it, what quality does it have? We notice how we have a body that surrounds this emotion.

Open up: we open up to our feelings and thoughts and just allow them to be there. There are techniques for doing this that will help build resilience and expand our window of tolerance for uncomfortable thoughts and emotions.

There are techniques for defusing and accepting the uncomfortable thoughts and emotions. We all have the capacity to find our observer self and gain a bit of distance between the uncomfortable thought or emotion.

Things to think about:

- Do you need help, support or advice? If so, what friends, professional support or emergency contact do you need?
- Have you experienced a similar crisis before? If so, what did you do then that turned out to be a really valuable long-term solution to the problem and what did you do that you wish you hadn't in hindsight?
- What tiny steps could you take to improve your situation right now?
 - In the next hour
 - In the next day
 - In the next few weeks
- Write an action plan.

We don't get to choose the hand we are dealt in life, but we do get to choose what we do with it.

Ask yourself, given this traumatic situation, what can I possibly take from this?

How can I learn and grow from this experience? What kind of help am I going to need to get through this ordeal?

Trained in both ACT and Buddhist Psychology (both based in mindfulness), I can teach you some techniques that effectively train your brain to handle your thoughts and emotions differently.

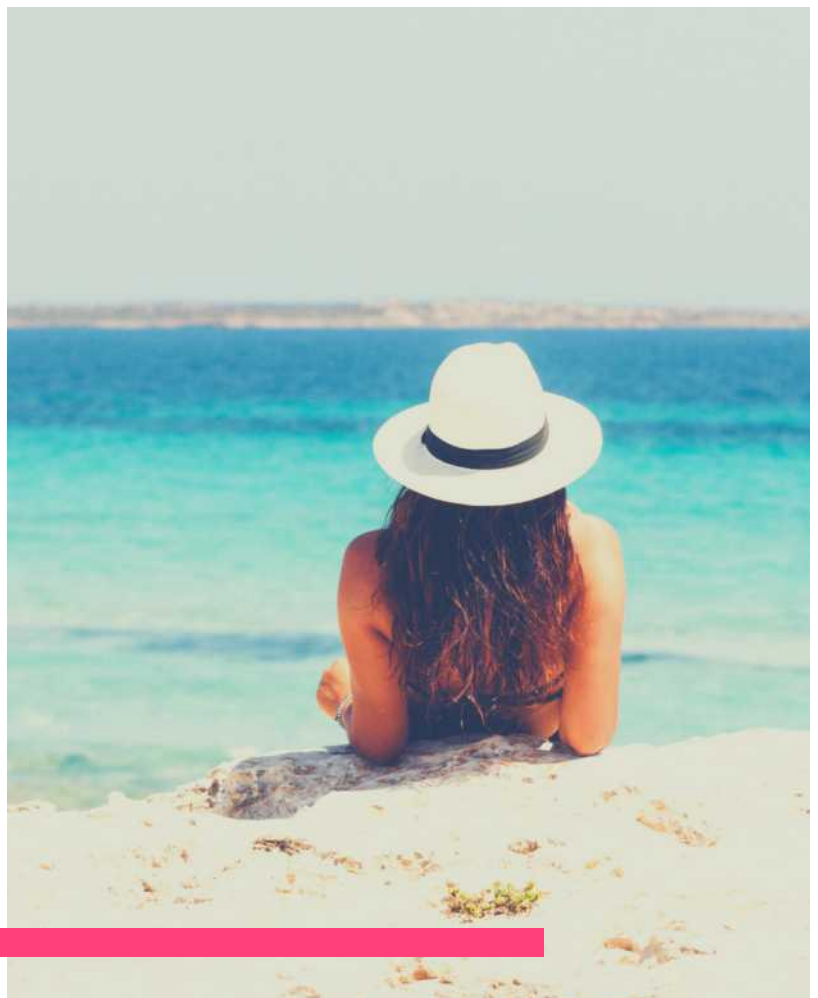
Instead of being pushed around by your thoughts, you can take back some control over where they take you emotionally.

You can learn to steer a safe course when life's circumstances are seriously rocking your boat.

One of the many evidence-based by-products of ACT training is happiness.

And who wouldn't like to experience more of that?

Attention ...to the present moment





Important

...to remember

Training in ACT techniques doesn't mean that we'll never experience uncomfortable emotions again.

It doesn't mean that we'll never feel anger or sadness or jealousy or fear. Our life-long stories around "not good enough" or "nobody loves me" are not going to disappear from our psyches forever.

What it changes is our *attitude* to difficult thoughts and emotions.

Mindfulness builds our tolerance and insight. Mindful Self-Compassion teaches us to be kind to ourselves during difficult circumstances and mind states.

Gradually, our habitual reaction of speaking to ourselves in a harsh, critical, bullying way is challenged by a new, gentle internal voice. The ways in which we beat ourselves up when we fail or take a misstep hook us less often.

And as we include the practices in our daily lives, most of us find that our outer circumstances shift too. We might free ourselves from external critics (critical, bullying family and friends). We might start to see a way forward that is closely aligned with our value system, and take action that gives us hope, purpose and meaning. The practices help us get behind the steering wheel of our own lives and head in a direction that fulfils us.

ACT is not a miracle cure that works for everybody. But only if we take it as our working hypothesis for a while will we ever know if it works for us.

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BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Wishing you every success on your mental wellbeing journey

