

# A year in the life of a newly trained counsellor

In this new series, **Nicola Banning** spends the next four journal issues chronicling her journey as a newly qualified workplace counsellor. She starts with the transition into counselling

Just over 10 years ago I achieved a long held dream of mine. I got a job at the BBC and began what was to be my lifelong career in radio/television programme making, or so I thought. But as spring beckons, so too does a life outside the BBC as I am one of the 420 who make their exit, having volunteered for redundancy. There is a synchronicity to the timing, because as 2005 ended, so too did my two-year diploma in counselling in organisational settings at the University of Bristol.

My nurturing parent assures me that taking redundancy from the BBC will offer me the space in my life to develop my counselling roles within a variety of work contexts, allow me to work towards BACP accreditation, and give me time to write freelance. My critical parent reminds me that I will have no pay cheque, pension or life assurance, and no free weekly copy of the *Radio Times*.

I am left, not for the first time, pondering the significance of my working identity. What does it mean for me to give up my BBC identity? Generally when asked the inevitable 'and what do you do?' question, I know that just uttering those three magic letters – BBC – is going to generate some level of interest. Put bluntly, my employer makes me interesting. And honestly, hand on heart, there is a just a little bit inside me that finds it hard to give up on that. I learned early on in my career to try and treat life's challenges as if I were making a programme. What's the story? What do I need to know? Who can tell me what it is I do not know? And somehow I find this discipline helps. It will be interesting to see how my enthusiasm for enquiry transfers into my new counselling world.

In my final weeks at the BBC, I know that I have done my research. I have made contacts, written letters, produced several versions of my CV – one for my 'counselling self', another for my 'writing self' – set up meetings, established peer groups and, significantly, sent out the invitations to my leaving party in two week's time. I am not after a carriage clock and I do not want speeches, but I do want to say goodbye to some old friends. Counselling training has ensured that I will resist

the temptation to slip out of the door quietly, and that I will mark my own ending in a way that feels appropriate. Our tutors managed our course ending with an extraordinary amount of thought, love and care. I am something of a lady of letters, but it took me over a month before I could even begin to find the words to say thank you, because I needed the space to absorb the enormity of what it meant for me. When I did, I wrote telling them that I felt rather how I imagined the bride must feel after her wedding day: joyful, tearful, moved, emotional and exhausted. One of my tutors responded that in her experience, the post-diploma period was an important time for processing, and I am realising that this is certainly the case for me.

Now, no longer a student, and describing myself in my many phone calls as a newly-qualified counsellor, I feel the absence of the unwavering support I received while training and am exposed to the possibilities of the wider world; feelings both unfamiliar and exciting. Perhaps this is the reminder I need, that change is challenging and can engender feelings of fear and loss, even when it is a welcome change.

With so much change in my life, every Monday has come to represent certainty for me. It is the one day a week that I spend counselling in the occupational health unit of a county council and I feel grounded in the knowledge that I am doing what I want to do, and what I trained to do. I secured this student placement over a year ago, following my decision to end my client work as a bereavement counsellor with Cruse, and to make what felt like a natural shift into workplace counselling. I see a broad range of clients from all walks of life, and I have grown from the experience, feeling myself mature into my counselling practice as my own personal and professional growth allows me to help my clients more fully.

One of my clients returns to our next session, still struggling with the reality of looming retirement after 30 years in the same job. Now I empathise more deeply, so too with the other

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clients managing their way through their own life transitions. My colleagues and friends ask me: 'Have you got a job lined up?' I hear myself talking about 'developing my counselling practice organically' and 'having some time and space'. Why can't I just say 'No'? I am irritated to discover that there is a bit of me that does not want to admit that I don't actually have a job to go to. And the job that I do get up for at 6.30am each Monday and which involves a 70 mile round trip, and which I love doing, I don't actually get paid for. Such is the life of this newly trained counsellor.

One evening, feeling somewhat dejected from too many phone calls with people who are not all that interested in hearing from another newly trained counsellor, I end up listening to my demons and berating my inability to so far have secured myself a fantastic job to walk straight into. My partner pours me a glass of wine and reassures me that my 'be perfect driver' has just gone into overdrive, and that what I am experiencing is 'normal'. He reminds me that I have a plan, and that we had agreed that this transition was one where I could take my time. He reminds me that my redundancy money is there to help with the process. And he reminds me that we have each other. Thank God for him.

My real interest is in workplace counselling and EAP work. I am interested in people, identity, organisational cultures and how we experience ourselves within them. My research quickly reveals

that I probably need to be accredited before any EAP will take me on. It is the ultimate Catch 22 situation. How does one get accredited without having the opportunity to accumulate the necessary number of hours to become accredited – and still pay the mortgage? I heard some of my fellow students talk about stopping their unpaid counselling placements when their training ended, and I admit I toyed with the idea.

Then I looked at where it left me. No paid work at the BBC. And with no counselling work either. The prospect of ending my counselling placement left me feeling miserable. I have a sense of belonging there, I feel valued, and am challenged in my client work, supported by my supervisor, and am developing and consolidating my practice.

And so I made a decision that I did not need another ending, particular one that felt so premature. My compromise was to continue counselling unpaid in the short term one day a week, with a view to paid possibilities in the not too distant future. For the next year, my goal is to develop my counselling work within organisations in a paid capacity. To get there I need to keep consolidating, broadening my experience, building my hours towards accreditation, and work in a counselling context that feels supportive. All of that is offered by my current placement. So if that means undertaking unpaid counselling work for a bit longer, then so be it. Some compromise is needed right now and I know that it won't be for ever. ■

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