

'I use a cushion exercise to reveal internalised shame and anger'

I am a BACP accredited counsellor with more than 20 years' clinical practice. I have worked for LGBTQ+ affirmative agencies for many years, providing therapy for those with HIV and other medical conditions. I also have my own private practice.

I use an integrated approach and have developed my own variation of the classic Gestalt two-chair exercise that has become a particularly powerful tool when working with clients who have a medical condition. It can also be used for internalised homophobia and clients living with HIV who are struggling with their diagnosis.

After some preparation, we introduce an 'experiment'. I place a cushion on the client's lap and name their medical condition, or an emotion the client is struggling with, and we explore how it feels and what comes up for the client. I might then remove the cushion to see what else transpires, working with thoughts, ideas and emotions.

This can also be used for clients who are in a relationship with someone who has a medical condition. I place a cushion on an empty chair that represents the other person, naming the cushion as their condition. This separation of the condition and the person often has a profound effect on the client - it will often result in them seeing the other person differently and a change in their relationship with that person.

We can explore further how it might feel to remove the cushion (the condition) from the other person. If I ask the client to hold the cushion (the other's medical condition), clients often report feeling greater awareness and understanding towards the other person. I used this technique recently with a client who was struggling with her sister's dementia. The

client became aware of the need to separate the condition of her sister from their relationship.

The same technique can be used to explore strong emotions, such as anger. I recently worked with a client who held two cushions on his lap. One represented anger, and the cushion beneath this we identified as sadness. We explored how the client might feel holding just one emotion, rather than the two. This resulted in a very powerful emotional response from the client - he became aware that it was the sadness he was finding hard to let go. By becoming aware of what emotions they are holding onto, clients can explore what happens to their sense of self when the cushion (their emotion) is removed. For the angry/sad client, it meant the client found a new awareness of themselves, some relief and better understanding.

In Gestalt, we often explore the projection and introjection of emotions from one person to another. This can sometimes be a difficult idea to accept, and I have found it helps to introduce the cushion as an emotion held by the other. We can explore where the emotion (cushion) sits by moving the cushion between the client and the chair that represents the other person. This can be a very powerful way of revealing to clients when they have internalised another's emotion, including shame or anger.

The cushions I use when I do agency work are plain, but in my private practice room, they are colourful. The type of cushion doesn't matter, although cushions of different sizes and colours, if available, might be helpful.

I have found using cushion techniques has further developed my practice and gives clients visual insights into their struggles. I have learned to trust my instincts and take the 'risk' to work differently, resulting in rewarding and powerful therapeutic interactions. ■



About the author

Lawrence Capon MBACP (Accred) is an LGBTQ+ affirmative counsellor working in Surrey and London, in private practice and in a voluntary agency.

If you would like to share how you work in the 'My practice' column, email therapytoday@thinkpublishing.co.uk