

# Being an **OK** Practitioner

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## Framing questions for the workshop

1) What qualities does the practitioner need to bring to their work?

AND

2) What qualities do they need to encourage in their clients?

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## Pluralism

Different modalities are going to respond to these questions in different ways. *And I think that's OK.*

Individual practitioners within the same modality may respond to them in different ways. *And I think that's OK.*

*I also think it's useful to think explicitly about these questions, even if only for a couple of hours at an online conference.*

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## Person Centred

1. **Congruence:** inner experience and outward expression match
2. **Unconditional positive regard:** acceptance without judgement
3. **Empathy:** demonstrating that they "get" the client's perspective

There is much value here. And... it's not my jumping off point or area of expertise.

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# Transactional Analysis

to bring

to encourage

I'm OK.

You're OK.

I can think.

You can think.

I can decide again.

You can decide again.

## Exercise (in a minute...)

*In a moment we're going to talk about these qualities as part of an exercise.*

*I'm going to ask each of you to pick one of these six qualities and talk about how you as a practitioner either **bring** that quality or **encourage** that quality in your clients.*

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## Exercise A

I'm OK.

I can think.

I can decide again.

You're OK.

You can think.

You can decide again.

*If you're not doing breakouts, think about one or more of the qualities. And perhaps you might share some reflection in the chat.*

In small groups:

- Say "hello"
- Up to three sentences about yourself. Do keep it brief to begin with. We want to make sure everyone gets a turn during this first breakout. You can say/hear more later.
  - e.g. "Hello. I'm from Edinburgh. I work in private practice and have been working with clients since 2005. I see all sorts of people, and couples, and offer a speciality in working with writers and artists."
- Pick on one of the qualities (out of the **three** practitioner ones to bring and the **three** client ones to encourage).
- Talk about how you bring / encourage that quality.

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*I'm exploring emphasising privacy at the moment and de-emphasising confidentiality. I'm curious about how well confidentiality plays with secrets and shame.*

## Privacy

*Just a reminder before we do an exercise.*

- Respect people's privacy. So the deal for the workshop is that it not OK to share other people's personal stories outside of the room unless you've explicitly contracted with them. This makes it possible for us to share more with each other.
- Be mindful of sharing. Don't share if you're not comfortable.

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## Feedback

It'd be great if you can put in the chat some reflections on practitioner and client qualities.

*For example:*

Chat

Matthew to Everyone

"I can decide again" – I was thinking about how I can model this with my clients. I can both be willing to change my mind and also to say, out loud, that I have changed my mind. This might be through some (appropriate) self-disclosure or perhaps just about things that happen in the room.

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## A whole new six-pack

I want to talk about some different qualities, that springboard from the TA qualities we've just been talking about, but are distinct.

These are qualities that I've found myself focusing on as I reflect on my own practice.

I want to introduce them and talk a little about them. And then I'll get you to explore them in another breakout session.

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## I welcome you

- "Vanilla" welcoming - warmth etc.
  - Reflection: rescuing / coddling / suffocation
- But, more critically, welcoming of difficult stories and difficult emotions.
- Case study: Maeve

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## Key Quality #1

I welcome you. You welcome you.

I am curious about you. You are curious about you.

I challenge you. You challenge you.

I hold hope for you. You hold hope for you.

I discuss these key qualities in chapters 4 & 5 of my book *Talking It Better: From Insight to Change in the Therapy Room*

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## Maeve

For example, when Maeve told her best friend about being assaulted, her friend was overwhelmed and started to cry. Maeve then felt compelled to comfort her. But, as she shared with me:

It wasn't her that had been attacked. And then, suddenly, the experience wasn't mine anymore. It was about her.

Another friend badgered Maeve to call the police and shame her assailant on social media. Her brother wanted to turn vigilante. And yet another friend launched on a series of stories about how she had been stalked by an ex-boyfriend and had been uncomfortable on a blind date. Finally, one trusted friend suggested that Maeve was making a mountain out of molehill and recommended that she 'get on with things' and 'put it behind her'. None of this was what Maeve needed. But once these various responses had begun, she didn't know how to turn the conversations around.

After a while, Maeve just stopped telling her story. Maybe she was telling it wrong, she wondered. Maybe people just couldn't get it. But if that's what happened when she talked about it – and everyone told her it was good to talk about it – then she'd rather pass.

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## "It's good to talk."

I really think that it is good to talk.

And it may not be good to talk if the listener is unable to **welcome** what you have to say.

And, as with Maeve, a repeated experience of your story being unwelcome – being too much, needed to be "got away from" – is a further distressing experience compounding with an already distressing experience.

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## You welcome you

It is common for people who come seeking help to be unwelcoming or even actively hostile towards themselves. They may hold themselves in contempt. They may criticise themselves. They may find themselves morally, physically or intellectually distasteful.

Not being welcoming of yourself is tiring. It means that, even before you get out of bed, you are on the back foot. You're already having to soak up a great deal of negativity, one way or another: perhaps by getting angry and holding tensions; perhaps by getting sad and withdrawing from the world, or in myriad other ways.

And, going even further, to welcome yourself is to be able to bear your own stories without deflecting, diminishing, distorting, shrinking, sweeping under the carpet or running away; without over-dwelling or under-dwelling.

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## Resourcing OK

This is one way of cashing out I'm OK and You're OK.

It's OK for you to tell this story in all its intensity.

You don't need to look after me or be responsible for my OKness. I'm taking responsibility for that, which includes, being resourced.

With help-seekers like Maeve, I make a point of letting them know that I have the resources to take care of myself when I hear difficult stories. The explicit deal is that the help-seeker does not need to look after me or be responsible for me; I commit to making sure I have that covered. And, of course, this can't just be window dressing. The responsibility of the practitioner is to make it a reality. This can be done in various ways, including making sure we have another practitioner we can talk to about what arises in our professional work.

So the rich and far-reaching sense of welcoming, as I am using the term, extends to the practitioner having the resources and resilience to stay available and focused; to be impacted, yes, but not to be overwhelmed. If the practitioner doesn't have such resources and such resilience, then their welcome is only partial, conditional and, as such, not a whole-hearted welcome at all.

Note how it's not BE STRONG going on here. It's not "bravado" or a Parent counter-injunction that says "In order to be OK, you have to act OK." It's choosing to be realistic and getting properly resourced so that it becomes true that, yes, you actually are OK hearing difficult stories. (Not un-impacted, but OK.)

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## You welcome you

Isla was a client who suffered a great deal from shame. She readily found herself distasteful (and worse).

Isla was not welcoming of herself in quite an extreme way.

The framing of the problem in terms of welcome is, in some ways, odd. And the framing is aimed at inviting agency.

I know that, when we start – and for a long time – Isla does not have the quality of welcoming herself. Part of my challenge is how to help her find a way of meeting herself and not being repulsed or disgusted.

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# Safety and Privacy

*Just a reminder before we do an exercise.*

- Respect people's privacy. It's only OK to share specifics outside the group if that's been explicitly contracted.
- The exercise invites you to reflect on practice that you might think of as less than ideal. This can feel exposing. Exercise caution before sharing. And be welcoming of what is shared and who is sharing it.

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## Feedback

Put in the chat reflections on struggles with being whole-hearted in your welcome

*For example:*

Chat

Matthew to Everyone

My client Amrita was worried about failing in her studies. I leant on the idea that she was being 'grandiose', discounting her own abilities. But over time it became clear that I was uncomfortable with the idea of her failing. It stirred things up for me to do with my experiences and fears.

It had been me that had been doing the discounting and not Amrita. When Amrita did indeed fail one her exams, I noticed how disturbed I was – more so than Amrita – and reflected on how I'd been denying / downplaying this possibility. Somewhat anxiously, I then worried about how my lack of welcome for all of Amrita might have been received by her.

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## Exercise B

- Have you ever had experiences where – because you felt scared or threatened or overwhelmed – you've found yourself being less welcoming than you would prefer?

e.g. turning away, changing topic, suppressing curiosity, moving towards advice (to "get away" from discomfort) etc.

- How as a practitioner do you resource yourself so you can be OK when hearing difficult stories?

With 10 - 15 minutes, it's likely that not everyone will get the chance to share. Be mindful of who has and hasn't not shared stories for when we come to the next exercise.

⚠ Take care to welcome other participants. I'm asking you not to offer advice, or evaluations of their work. I'm asking you only to be interested and welcoming of their stories.

✅ Do say: Tell me more.

✅ Do say: What was that like?

❌ Do not say: WTF?!!

❌ Do not say: That was fine!

*If you're not doing breakouts, think about these questions and consider sharing some reflection in the chat.*

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## Key Quality #2a and #2b

I welcome you. You welcome you.

I am curious about you. You are curious about you.

I challenge you. You challenge you.

I hold hope for you. You hold hope for you.

I discuss these key qualities in chapters 4 & 5 of my book *Talking It Better: From Insight to Change in the Therapy Room*

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## Isla

Isla first presented with a story about how she felt she was over-reacting to the way her boss treated her at work. And it was making things difficult for her.

She wanted me to help her with her goal of “rising above it” and with her goal of recognising that “after all, it wasn’t so bad”.

On the one hand it was important for me to welcome Isla’s story and her goals.

And, on the other, I wanted to offer curiosity and challenge. Because something felt off.

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## Isla

I offered a different perspective, letting her know that her story was impacting me, but not asking her to look after me. ‘As you talk about this, I find myself imagining what it might have been like to have been that little girl. And I find myself feeling scared and nervous – like I’m always walking on eggshells – and also so very, very tired. And then,’ I added, ‘another part of me is feeling angry. How can this little girl be treated in this way? It’s not right.’

These self-observations were not shared with the intent of correcting Isla’s take on past events. Nor was I seeking Isla’s sympathy for my discomfort. If she had said, ‘I didn’t mean to upset you,’ then I might have concluded that I’d been clumsy and needed to follow up.

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## Isla

I was curious to know more about Isla and her background. And through this I heard more stories about her “over-reacting” and being “over-sensitive”. As I heard the stories, she was treated harshly – bullied – by her mother, by friends, by partners, and by bosses.

I shared my wondering about a gap between what she was saying and the tone (light, ironic, comedic) with which she was saying.

What, I wondered, did she make of that? Isla’s initial response was to help me understand that, in fact, it was ‘not so bad’, that ‘others have it much worse’ and that ‘my mother never actually hit me. Well, not often. And there was always food on the table and a roof over our heads’.

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## Isla

It’s not enough for me to be curious and for me to challenge Isla. She has to be open to these things too. (Otherwise, I’m just a bully / she’s just reacting-wrong.)

With Isla getting into the details definitely helped.

- What was it like when your mother locked you in that room?
- Can you do a slow-motion rewind of that for me?
- What do you make of my response to this? Maybe I’m over-reacting? What do you think?

*We can be **very curious** and **interestingly challenging** when we actively step away from the “expert” position.*

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## Isla

Being **interestingly challenging** when we actively step away from the “expert” position.

“Challenging” – it’s such an interesting word.

There’s a great scene in the TV Show

“In Treatment” where Dianne Wiest’s character exclaims something like: “I’m trying to figure out what role you want me to take in this conversation... and I’m failing.”

Her declaration “I’m failing” lets the client know that she is challenged, that there is a challenge in the room. But by “owning” the failure she invites the client to assist.



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## Conversation stoppers

Isla’s phrase ‘It wasn’t so bad’ stopped an internal conversation she might have had with herself about what her childhood was like. In the external conversation I had with her, we flagged up and then were able to set aside various conversation stoppers so we could go on to find out more.

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## Listening with judgement?

Being able to hear a story and remain curious about what it means is important. People often talk about listening without judgement. For me, this isn’t about being neutral towards what someone has done or what has been done to someone. Indeed, in that sense of judgement, I often take a view and will sometimes express it. Rather, what is critical is to recognise that expressing judgements – ‘That’s terrible’, ‘That’s wrong’, ‘That’s brilliant’, ‘That must make you so happy’, ‘That must make you so sad’ – can be a way of closing down a conversation, boxing a person in and terminating further exploration.

The judgement made by a judge in court is final. No more arguments will be heard. Finality can be problematic. Adopting a moral position need not be.

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## Exercise C

- What in your practice has worked to assist a client beyond a familiar and well-rehearsed “conversation stopper”?

How did you help to create space for them to be curious?

How did you help to create space for them to challenge an old story?

With 10 - 15 minutes, it’s likely that not everyone will get the chance to share. Be mindful of who did and didn’t share stories in the previous exercise.

*If you’re not doing breakouts, think about these questions and consider sharing some reflection in the chat.*

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## Key Quality #3

I welcome you. You welcome you.

I am curious about you. You are curious about you.

I challenge you. You challenge you.

I hold hope for you. You hold hope for you.

I discuss these key qualities in chapters 4 & 5 of my book  
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## Holding hope: the client

Donald felt worthless and told himself many times a day and in different ways that he was worthless.

But, when I gently fanned the flame of the hope that he carried, Donald could quickly become overwhelmed. For him, to be hopeful was a terrifying burden. He knew some of what having hope – and, indeed, worth – implied. For Donald, there were at least two things:

- To allow hope in would be to admit that all the time he had shunned hope was somehow wasted time. When I explored this idea with Donald, he told me he thought it was both ‘credible’ but also that it ‘sounds crazy when you think about it’.
- To allow hope in would require Donald to become more active, more responsible for his own life; to ‘get a grip’. But he was sure that he did not know how to go about this. So he was afraid that to let hope in would only lead to a more disappointment.

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## Holding hope: the practitioner

- We can appeal to our experience
  - If a person feels hopeless and we simply insist that they are not, we might end up squashing them.
  - If we set ourselves up as the expert we may diminish their expertise and insight. This may get in the way of them fostering hope for themselves.
  - Or they do trust us and accept the holding of hope as a challenge they can manage: they feel empowered - they find hope.
- We can appeal to theory
  - We explain how it works – or how we think it works. This can, on occasion, be empowering and hugely helpful. (Sometimes people have very unhelpful ideas about change that are easily disrupted.)
  - Often it does next to nothing at all. (Ideas about change are often hard to disrupt.)

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## Holding hope: the client

For Donald, holding hope was problematic. And holding hope can be problematic not just in the way that the driver of a car that’s out of fuel is facing a problem. For the driver, adding fuel is a solution and the solution will be welcomed. Donald’s case was more like being a person in a car that is out of fuel but who also has a morbid fear of driving. Offering to provide fuel to fill the tank would be terrifying to that driver. And yet, at the same time, a part of the driver might want to drive, but without fuel, no driving is going to be done.

This is challenging work. I do want to encourage hope, but I have to work with where Donald is at, and not get organised around where I’d like him to be.

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## Exercise D

- Think of an example of a way in which you have held hope for a client and share it with your group.
- Think what it can be like when there is a mismatch of hope, i.e. when the client has less hope than the practitioner (or vice versa).
  - How as a practitioner can you spot and pay attention to a mismatch of hope?
  - How as a practitioner can you encourage hope (without squashing) or temper hope (without squashing)?

With 10 - 15 minutes, not everyone will get the chance to share. Be mindful of who did and didn't share stories in the previous exercises.

*If you're not doing breakouts, think about these questions and consider sharing some reflection in the chat.*

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## Feedback

Put in the chat any reflections on holding hope:

*For example:*

Chat

Matthew to Everyone

Sometimes a client asks very explicitly "Do you think I can change?" I don't always say a straight "yes". I might ask if they want to change. Or I might ask what they think might get in the way of a change. Or I might push the question back "Do you think you can change or do you think it's flat out impossible?" I sometimes say "Well, I'm in the change business, so I'm pretty biased, but, yes. I think you can. If that's something you're interested in."

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## Thank You

I welcome you.

You welcome you.

I am curious about you.  
I challenge you.

You are curious about you.  
You challenge you.

I hold hope for you.

You hold hope for you.

### Advertisement

I've written a book and it came out earlier this month.

Normal price is £15.99 but it's cheaper if you get direct from PCCS (£14.00).

[www.pccs-books.co.uk](http://www.pccs-books.co.uk)

Workshop participants can get an extra discount code and get to book for £12.60 including UK P&P. If you missed code in the workshop email [matthew\\_elton@mac.com](mailto:matthew_elton@mac.com)



Please do give me feedback via [matthew\\_elton@mac.com](mailto:matthew_elton@mac.com). I welcome your curiosity and your challenge. And I do hope you got something useful from the workshop.

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