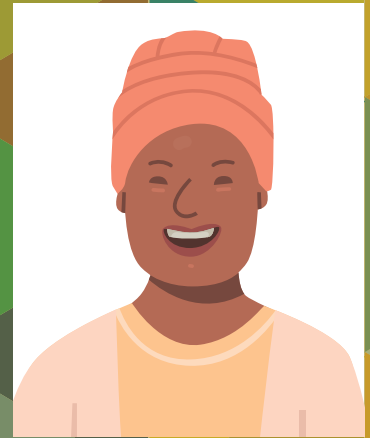


Best practice



Being a good elder

Experienced practitioners hold an imperative role in supporting therapists to make their own mark in the world, says **Anthea Benjamin**



‘In the mouth of an eldest, teeth may be missing but conscious (wise) words will never be lacking’

Kongo proverb

I have been preoccupied for some time with the idea of what it means to be a ‘good elder’. This is partly because of the changes I have seen since I first trained as a therapist, when I was, in most cases, the youngest therapist in the room and the only person of colour. Now I find myself in the middle: not the oldest but certainly not a novice. As part of my practice, I find I’m supporting practitioners of colour who are questioning the current frameworks where they often feel locked in, misunderstood and projected into.

Black people are not a homogenous group - we come in different shapes and sizes. But we elders, those of us in the community who have walked the walk, know the challenges we hold in being black. When I started out, there was an emphasis on black professionals becoming ‘model minorities’, excelling in the use of Eurocentric frameworks. Culturally informed practice is still largely taught as an add-on across clinical trainings, so the mirroring role of the elder is vital for black therapists and therapists of colour having to assimilate into white Eurocentric therapy training and practice. We hold an imperative role in empowering future black therapists to journey through with less harm.

As my practice changes, more of my work has become about supporting talented therapists, black and people of colour, coming through the ranks to define their own way of practising. My role has become that of an elder in supporting therapists to make their own mark in the world. When I reflect on this, I become aware of stepping into an archetypal position as I move forward in my career.

The archetype of the elder is often understood as someone older and wiser. In African tradition, history and wisdom are passed on via the oral wisdom of stories and proverbs, and also using rituals to convey values and beliefs. The importance of passing

on cultural stories from one generation to another means we keep alive intergenerational wisdom, which connects us with our heritage. I have a powerful image of this from watching cultural rituals when young. I was particularly impacted by the TV programme *Roots*, when Kunta Kinte would hold each newborn baby coming into the family up to the heavens, telling them their heritage and that they should not forget where they came from.

As I see it, my role as an elder has much the same intent: to root therapists with important knowledge about the profession, and bring in their own cultural wisdoms and support them to birth their uniqueness to contribute and make their own mark within the profession. I take my position seriously as an elder in the roles of therapist, supervisor, mentor, trainer and writer.

Living library

The elder is considered a ‘living library’. In my roles as a supervisor and trainer, I share stories and lived experience to support those who come after me, hoping to spare them some of the pain and challenges of my own path. Clarissa Pinkola Estés talks about the elder often being ‘the person who wears a scar coat, they have had many run ins throughout their lives which has taught them many things of depth. They have also given much including blood and skin, and much has been taken from them, something they may never be able to recover but also something has been given to them, something in return’.¹

In many ways, we could consider this in African traditions as an initiation rite of passage, in being prepared and seasoned to be of service for your community. The scarring is a signal of the strength and wisdom carried that can be turned into gold and used as a tool for liberation. This process of unravelling the hurts, coming into self and finding a sense of homecoming, is something that we have to

offer as elders to others coming into the field. Our scar tissue as elders can have a potent, significant use to support others on the way to making the next important changes in the field.

I have been thinking about core ways of being with and holding space for each other in being a good elder, and how we develop this as a wider community. Here are some ideas that elders may find echo their own practices and that they may consider incorporating more fully - in naming a thing, it becomes more real.

Holding each other

‘Why, I felt so tall
within – I felt as if
the power of a nation
was with me’

Sojourner Truth, 1878

I have long been in love with the greeting *sawubona*, an ancient Zulu greeting that means ‘We see you’. It is equivalent to hello and *namaste*. But *sawubona* is more than just a greeting; it also means, ‘We see each other, we acknowledge each other, we recognise each other.’ For me, this is the basis of how I hold space as a therapist, supervisor, mentor and trainer - nurturing a shared vision of a practitioner’s own growth, rather than them having to fit into a shape that may not meet their developmental needs. This means expanding the typical frame to include different ways of holding space.

Richardson and Wade comment that ‘people of all races operate on the basis of a belief system made up of familial, cultural and personal messages, as well as those that can be traced back to specific historical events’.² So it makes sense that part of this holding of space will be about making space for grief for all that is not as we want or wish it to be, and then dreaming of what we choose to create that is not here.

One of the themes I have been discussing with therapists has been about how we welcome people into therapy and reflective spaces. Many have fed back to me that they felt their own introduction was a shock and filled

with confusion. Therapy was a mystery they had to work out alone, and this had also been reflected in their experience of training as a therapist. Proctor writes about the importance of 'deconstructing therapy and that a deconstructing therapist needs to be both modern and postmodern as this requires the therapist to be both an insider and outsider'.³ This tight line of insider/outsider is also key for the elder to hold as it enables new things to be born. It also allows the elder to be maverick, and for revisioning and dreaming a new dream. To dream big, we need to be held, seen and felt - the sacred ground of the elder.

We are all interconnected

In Zulu tradition, the 'I' is connected to an ancient lineage of ancestors where my ancestors are always with me. Therefore the 'I' is always really a 'we'. This is linked to the principle of *ubuntu*, which means 'I am only because we are'. This speaks to the interconnected reality of us all being connected, and the artificiality of things being split apart as if they don't coexist. COVID-19 has confirmed the known truth that we are hardwired for connection and that we all need a sense of community. Communal support and learning are important needs, just as much as supporting our sense of belonging and ongoing healing. In African culture, we do not think of interconnectedness as being just between human beings - it extends to our connectedness to the land and cosmos. The climate crisis has brought a challenge to us as a global community to take responsibility for our shared neglect of the land we occupy and the long-standing impact of our disregard for mother earth.

Spirituality has always been an important part of black life and living, in understanding our deep connection to all things and the consequences of not living in harmony with each other and our environment. I like to invite the people I work with to bring in different ways of tapping into the wisdom of spirituality in our work and their practices.

Libation is a well-known African tradition where, before you start working, you honour those who have gone before you and call in ancestors for support. For example, I might open with reflective practice and naming professional and personal 'ancestors', the people whose shoulders we stand on or who inspire or support our work, creating

'Ubuntu speaks to the interconnected reality of us all being connected and the artificiality of things being split apart as if they don't coexist'



a reflective space where wisdom and insight for clinical work can enter. This can be as simple as making space for inspiration before we start our work or using the arts to give us an image or metaphor that will help us to consider the deeper working at play within the clinical work. I believe we do this in many other ways in the West, sometimes using meditations or mindfulness.

These practices are all forms of opening to something else emerging in the space in between. I often use rituals as a way of consciously naming and creating safe space, such as lighting a candle to mark sacred space or music to cross the threshold into the reflective space. These co-created rituals help create an authentic place to reflect on work and clinical practice, giving permission for people to connect with their own voices and identities as therapists, which reflects their cultural identity. This also leads to empowerment in bringing more creativity and not feeling shrivelled by Eurocentric ways of being, which often leaves their identity outside the door.

I see my role as an elder in this as helping to hold the often-forgotten parts of their psyche and bringing them into the forefront as important parts of themselves and the clients they serve, allowing the self to be seen in all its fullness. Complexity is important and my role is to both allow complexity and respect it, while enabling therapists to hold this as sacred work and work we all need to practise. As an

elder, I feel it's my duty to encourage this in all the spaces I occupy across all the work I do.

New skin old skin

Recently, I was asked to offer group supervision within an organisation to a team of young therapists who identified as black and as people of colour. As soon as I arrived, I picked up energetically that they were wary of me. I took time to introduce myself and to hear from them. They expressed their concern about what kind of supervisor I was going to be and were clear they did not want an experience of being indoctrinated into further white Eurocentric 'boxing in', which they found both retraumatising and deskilling. I breathed in their assertive declarations and felt it deeply, as I have had the same past hurts of having to fit into frameworks that never fully enabled me to be me in the room in real relationships with clients. I held their concerns and tuned into what I could offer them that would be useful.

My sense was that I needed to hold the hurts and disappointments of 'ideological misattunements' and honour the wisdom being communicated.⁴ Weller would call attunement a particular quality of attention, wedded with affection, offered by someone we love and trust.⁵ Although I was a stranger, I had a strong sense of connection and commitment to them. My role was to see that they had significant wisdom, to honour this and, more importantly, to empower them to see this as wisdom that could be an important contribution to the field.

So, we contracted to build a new model - a model that includes them and reflects the clients and communities they work in. My role was to support them in bringing this together in a way that felt authentic for them. I saw a deep breath of relief that not only were they believed and acknowledged but they were also being seen as important carriers of truths. In being an elder, my role is to make the path smoother, so it is more possible for new ideas,

creativity and ways of being to come through. It's my privilege to do so, and also to learn as much from them as they do from me.

Kaleidoscope

One of the things I often work through with therapists is making sense of the cultural and structural power dynamics that play out in their places of work. This is often about the experiences of racism, macro and microaggressions, which are not news to many of us, particularly after the past two years. These experiences of racial gaslighting can be painful and disturbing and have a significant impact on self-esteem. A safe space to unpack these wounds and consider self-care is often key to enabling therapists and clients to continue with some sense of safety. Ongoing reflections about self-care and community support are often revisited here, as these hurts cannot be addressed alone. Many healing traditions within the African diaspora take place within the community. It is very much in community where we both find ourselves and can receive the important mirroring required to restore self-esteem.

One of the reasons I really enjoy holding group supervision is that it empowers members to see they all hold wisdom, and it moves away from the idea that only one person has the right answers. It's a model that I find very close to working as a community. In groups, I like to bring in African proverbs and healing modalities to enable the group to reflect on and explore ideas in their clinical work. I also invite members to bring in wisdom from their own traditions to incorporate within their clinical work. In this practice, we can become a work group to reflect on the importance of these ancient wisdoms and their important place within their practice, as well as client narratives and lived experience.

In this way, we can create different archetypes that reflect the cultures of both therapists and clients. One therapist often

shares wisdom through storytelling, and then the client will work with archetypes from this and connect it to their own life experience and the family intergenerational narratives. This is a creative and powerful way of working and one very much outside the frame of most therapeutic practices.

But supporting someone to find their own voice and style in their work, while working within ethical guidelines, leads to innovation, and for any profession to continue to be relevant, we need new and revolutionary ideas to be tried and tested. Sadly, often this is not seen as legitimate therapy. Again, I see it as the role of the elder to champion this and to support therapists to see value in their practice, to contextualise the current barriers and place the difficulties where they belong, in the traumatised histories still in place structurally, and to celebrate their creativity.

The need for elders never ends, and I am clear that my ability to step into eldership is directly related to the elders who support me on my own path. I have elders who have seen me and empowered me to become a writer, a teacher and a speaker. They have supported me to go on to do a doctorate, something which felt impossible for many years. There are few black people, particularly black women, taking up doctoral studies, and I am taking the leap in being the change I want to see – and, like many of my elders who enable me to see, I can be so much more than I imagine.

The archetype of being an elder is not so much focused on age as on passing on wisdom and knowledge to those who can benefit from it. In this way, we can all take up our roles as elders, making the path easier for those coming behind, alongside us and, at times, in front of us. Rather than a typically hierarchical way of thinking, this is about ensuring collective knowledge keeps being thought about and shared. I still have so much to learn and always get as much back as I give. ■

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About the author

Anthea Benjamin is a BACP and UKCP registered integrative arts psychotherapist, adolescent therapeutic counsellor, group analyst, trainer and supervisor. She is also a researcher and writer, currently studying for a doctorate at Surrey University researching the culture of psychotherapy training that leads to the replication of the marginalisation of black people and people of colour.