

'My hearing impairment has only ever enhanced the therapeutic relationship'

As my 30s approached, the fizzle, hiss and humming of electricity became a constant companion to my hearing. It preceded a diagnosis of tinnitus and a 40% high-frequency hearing loss in both ears. High-frequency hearing loss causes difficulty in distinguishing groups of consonants, which are what give clarity to words. It is impossible to treat without a cochlear implant. As we grow older, we might naturally lose some low-frequency sound, which can be supported quite well with hearing aids, but in my case, these devices exacerbate my hearing loss by increasing the sounds I hear well and cancelling out almost everything else.

I struggled for many years to even acknowledge my hearing loss, let alone accept my condition, masking it from others while seeking out private medical opinions from Western to Eastern thinking, in the hope that a more favourable prognosis and solution would be revealed. Acupuncture was the most successful of these in helping to alleviate some of the stresses and tension I experienced from tinnitus, but mostly from my fixed mindset. Little did I notice that I had begun to withdraw from friends and family, avoiding social gatherings where more than a few people would be present and phone conversations, which had become a source of anxiety.

It was during a career change to train as a child and adolescent psychotherapist and the need for self-awareness, congruence and transparency that my journey of acceptance of my condition began. I studied alongside peers with challenges that appeared far greater than mine, who were openly sharing their experiences. Through them, I cautiously began trying out what it might feel like to say 'hearing impaired' and to prepare for the different responses this might elicit. Many would forget, some would show curiosity and interest, and a select few consciously adapted how they communicated with me. These were often the people who had family or friends with a disability, or had a disability of their own. Their responses allowed me to feel prepared

to better manage how to share my condition with others and to ask for what I needed to support me with communication. Their responses helped me find the confidence to navigate ways to go deeper into communicating with clients rather than relying solely on words, so that, by the time I had completed my MA, it felt second nature to share with clients that I am hearing impaired, alongside my job title.

In the clinical space, I inform my client that I will be gazing quite intently at them, which might feel disconcerting but this helps me to hear fully what they wish to communicate. It is easy for a client to forget that I am hearing impaired, so I sometimes give reminders if a pitch is too low or words are missed. I tend to share my observations and seek feedback, which helps develop a good rapport. Sessions can be quite intense, so I try to have sensory objects and an essential oil spray at hand for clients. I am often exhausted at the end of sessions, having had to work quite hard to hear what needs to be heard.

I recently learned that only seven per cent of what we communicate is through words; so much is non-verbal. Learning this, I felt able to be kinder to myself when I miss certain words and to lean in more deeply to what I have instinctively been doing. Beyond the actual words a client uses, by being alert to any change in their vocal pitch, tone, volume and speed of words, as well as their body language, we can choose to shed light on the unconscious feelings behind difficult experiences. I would say that I am becoming more and more sensitive to these minute shifts and alterations in a client's energy.

In my work, the greatest barrier related to my hearing impairment is myself and any limitations I might set. Working with a young client group, I would say that my hearing impairment has only ever enhanced the therapeutic relationship, as I bring greater vulnerability to it, bridging the power imbalance and ensuring I never become complacent. It provides me with a golden nugget to see beyond words and be fully present with clients' lived experience, breathing and thinking with them. ■



About the author

Billie-Claire Wright MBACP (Accred) is a child and adolescent psychotherapist for a CAMHS service in London.

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