

How I became a therapist

Eugene Ellis

Eugene Ellis describes how his journey to become a therapist put him back in touch with his whole self

What made you decide to become a therapist?

In the mid 80s and early 90s I spent a lot of time thinking about what had shaped me as a person. In therapy, and in other self-development contexts, I developed a realisation that it was possible to make contact with forgotten parts of myself and bring them more to life. Slowly I turned what felt like my grey world into a world of colour.

I was working in the music industry as a sound engineer at the time, which was a mesmerising place for a young man. After a while, however, I became aware of how narrow my life had become. I thought I would take a six-month break, which turned into a two-year break. In that time I began the process of training to become an integrative arts psychotherapist.

My strongest recollection of my own therapy was the feeling of being attended to, of being seen, of internalising this as my human right and recognising the simple notion that validation is an essential part of attaining self-worth.

What were your hopes when you became a therapist?

I have always been fascinated with the power of personal and cultural stories. The stories we tell each other and ourselves are the genesis of all our actions, our reference point for prioritising how we use our resources. My cultural heritage is from the Caribbean and as a colonised people we have absorbed many stories of being seen as less than. My hope as a therapist was to create a reflective space for new stories, especially stories of our culture; stories that move us from blame, shame



and denial to understanding, empathy and wisdom.

What do you think makes a good therapist?

For me, the most important parts of being a therapist are keeping contact with ourselves as therapists through self-reflection of our thoughts and behaviours and keeping at the contact boundary with our clients. For me this means taking time away from ordinary life to slow down, meditate and become mindful of myself and my patterns with others.

What is the best advice you have received?

It was while I was stressing with getting to the end of my psychotherapy training; I was told that it wasn't really the end I was working towards but the beginning – the beginning of the real journey to becoming a therapist.

What do you enjoy about being a therapist?

I really honour being a witness to that moment when clients begin to process, make sense of and integrate aspects of their personal or cultural stories – when their perception of themselves changes and I know their life will be changed.

What do you find most challenging?

That the general therapeutic community does not yet have enough practitioners who feel confident in working with the interpersonal dynamics of

cultural or race issues, which can make therapy a bit hit or miss for some black and minority ethnic clients. Fortunately my first encounter with therapy was a positive one, but there are many for whom this is not the case.

What values do you hold dear?

Respectfulness – being open to seeing people in new ways and integrity, where my actions are in harmony with my conscience.

Which books have inspired you?

Currently I'm reading a lot around the neurological impact of trauma and working with trauma and the body. This has opened up many possibilities for treating the many traumatised children that I work with in adoptive/foster homes or in residential care. Authors like Pat Ogden and Brian Post really inspire me. A book that still sits with me, however, is Ben Okri's *A Way of Being Free*.

Has becoming a therapist changed you?

I feel my work has aligned me to my values and as a result I feel less conflicted and able to put myself in roles of leadership that do not come easily to me. I set up the Black and Asian Therapist Network shortly after I registered with the UKCP in 2004. I wanted therapy to play more of a part in the lives of Black and Asian people in the UK and to create a community that would make this more of a reality. That is still my aim. ■

Eugene Ellis is an integrative arts psychotherapist and founder of the Black and Asian Therapists Network (BAATN). He has a special interest in body-orientated therapies, including mindfulness, and facilitating dialogue around race and culture.