

## **Taking the mystery out of psychotherapy**

### **A podcast series with Avigail Abarbanel**

#### **1**

Hello, and thank you for joining me. My name is Avigail Abarbanel and I have been a psychotherapist in private practice for almost twenty-six years.

Does talking help? If it does, how does it help, and what do we even mean by 'help'?

Many people worry—and rightly so—that opening up old traumas and going into painful places in their mind is like opening a can of worms. They fear that it will destabilise them and compromise their functioning. People tell me they're scared that if they start crying they'll never stop.

People are absolutely right to worry about these things, if therapy is done the wrong way.

It is unacceptable to me that people don't understand what therapy is, and I'm sure this stops many people from seeking help. And why would people seek therapy when they don't understand what it is and how it's supposed to help them, and when they're afraid that it will be torturous?

I am here to tell you that psychological defences are normal and healthy for as long as they are needed. If you're holding back from seeking therapy, you probably have a very good reason for this. Everyone needs to be sure that they understand what will happen to them when they go to therapy, and that they understand the process properly.

In this series of podcasts I aim to demystify therapy. I will explain everything about it so that people who decide to seek therapy can go into the process well-informed. I would like people to ask for what they need. I would like people to know when their therapy is working and when it doesn't and understand why. Clients should be in charge of their own therapy. Therapists work for clients, not the other way around.

By the time people reach out to therapists they are in a state of suffering. They want to believe that the professional sitting across from them knows what they're doing, and that they are in good hands. When something feels a bit off or wrong, most people don't feel strong enough to either challenge the therapist or walk away and find someone else. Sometimes there is no good alternative and a lot of people think that something is better than nothing, especially when they're in trouble emotionally and don't know what to do.

Everyone can live perfectly well without understanding quantum physics or how their washing machine, or mobile phone work. But we all have our psychology. Living our whole life without understanding what goes on in our head, why it's like that and what to do about it, impacts on everyone. While some areas can be left to experts, psychology and

psychotherapy are *everyone's business*, especially when there is so much psychological suffering everywhere.

For many years I have been passionate about removing the mystery out of psychotherapy. Therapy used to be a mystery for a long time. The good news is that it isn't anymore.

My clients and I understand how therapy works. My clients know what my role is as a therapist and they also know what they are there to do. In other words, I don't sit there holding some mysterious knowledge that they are not privy to.

Therapy isn't about 'fixing' people. A brain that is genuinely broken cannot be 'fixed' by therapy. The vast majority of people have perfectly healthy brains. Psychological suffering always has a good reason and either way, suffering isn't a sign of mental illness, or craziness. It is usually a sign that there is something in the person's past, present or both, that is not right for them or that is hurting or harming them.

In the vast majority of cases, psychological suffering is a reaction to external circumstances, and lived experience.

Real psychotherapy is a developmental process. It helps us get back on the path to optimal development—the path we would have all been on if from the start of life and throughout, we were offered all the ingredients for healthy growth and development to our full humanness.

Even with the best of intentions most parents don't know how to help their children develop into full humanness, which is why we have therapy. The people who come to see me did not have everything they needed to develop properly. About 50% of people suffer from trauma because of abuse or other adverse childhood experience. Of course the rate of trauma is much higher in places where there is war, economic inequality, political persecution, or crime. But even people who don't have early childhood, or developmental trauma, who were loved and were kept safe in childhood can end up suffering from chronic anxiety. As you will see therapy is for everyone because it's about catching up on our development and not about fixing broken people.

For those who are interested, I will dedicate a few future episodes specifically to trauma.

I've always been passionate about human potential. I am a psychotherapist because this profession uses me and my passion in the best way possible. I want to make myself redundant, because I want to live in a world where everyone can develop to their potential, a world that does not need therapists anymore. A world where everyone is developing, and helping others develop towards their full humanness, will be a peaceful and gentle world where competition will be limited to sport, and cooperation for everyone's benefit, empathy,

sharing and compassion will be the norm. I'll be delighted to live in a world where psychotherapists are not needed...

In this series of podcasts I will share everything I know with the hope that many people will put this knowledge into practice. Those who choose to see therapists will know enough to ask for an approach to therapy that leads them towards growth and recovery, rather than lead them astray, or keep them stuck.

Most therapists are good, ethical people who go into the profession because they want to help. But the way therapists have been trained has traditionally been quite vague and abstract. There were good reasons for this in the past. But given what we know now this is no longer justified. Imagine a group of firefighters who have at their disposal state of the art firefighting gear, high powered hoses, modern fire engines and computers to regulate everything. But the next time there's a fire, the firefighters ignore their modern equipment, and use buckets. Sadly, lot of psychotherapy these days still uses metaphorical buckets...

I remember reading somewhere about the idea of a 'therapy hangover'. Some of my clients tell me about people they know who say that their therapy is draining, that they dread going to sessions, and that sometimes they need days or even weeks to recover from sessions.

No one, including therapists should feel drained, or retraumatised at the end of a session. If that's how people feel regularly, then something may not be right with the therapy process.

No one grows, changes or develops well when they feel tense, stressed, tortured, or frightened. That's why therapy has to be transparent and safe. But it should also be inspiring, uplifting and joyful. Development and growth are always inspiring and joyful.

I was trained at the wonderful Jansen Newman Institute in Sydney under Dr David Jansen and Margaret Newman. It was a brilliant, demanding and rigorous programme and we learned a wide range of approaches and therapy modalities. I loved my time at JNI and still feel inspired by my experience there, almost thirty years later. But when I first started in private practice in Canberra, Australia, it became very clear to me that I didn't really know how therapy was supposed to work.

I was charging a fee from clients, but without really understanding what I was doing. What really happened when things worked, and what was going on when they didn't? The way I was taught to think and speak about therapy was abstract. It wasn't particularly wrong, it was just vague. Fortunately, around the same time that I started to practice, we began to benefit from Dr Dan Siegel's revolutionary work. Dr Siegel is the developer of the framework of Interpersonal Neurobiology or IPNB, the framework that guides and informs my work.

Once I started to learn IPNB, I began to clean up my act. I started removing techniques or ideas that were a waste of time, and worked to create a coherent way of working that both I and my clients could understand, that was clear, grounded, practical and efficient. I didn't

need to base my work on 'faith', and my clients were no longer expected to just 'believe'.

The reason the profession has traditionally been so vague and abstract is because we didn't have proper science behind it. We talked about human psychology, but ignored the human brain completely. When brain imaging started to develop, it became possible to bring neuroscience into psychotherapy. Interpersonal Neurobiology brought the brain into therapy in a useful way for the first time in the history of my profession.

I don't believe we are a brain. I am not religious, but I do believe that there is more to us than just a body and a brain. But our brain enables and regulates everything about us, including our psychology.

Change doesn't happen in the ether, in some unspecified space. There is no change to our psychology without changes to the brain, and specifically, to *brain connectivity*. If a person started in therapy very anxious, and after a while their anxiety is permanently gone, it means their brain has changed.

Psychotherapy is a process of changing our brain, more specifically changing the architecture of our brain, or its connectivity. You don't have to be a neuroscientist to understand just enough about how your brain works, to be able to make the changes that you need in order to develop robust psychology, and open the way to also finish your unfinished business that might be holding you back. Words like 'growth', or 'healing' now have concrete meanings.

Interpersonal neurobiology suggests that therapists explain everything to clients about the therapy process. Clients are not passive recipients of some magical wisdom that therapists offer. They are active participants in their own process of therapy, and they know exactly what they are doing and why they are doing it.

We have always known that therapists can't change clients directly, and that clients needed to do the 'work'. But what that work was, was never clear. Now we know why therapists cannot change clients directly and we also know what 'work' clients need to do and why.

Adult brains do not wire robustly from the outside as do the brains of children. In the developing brains of children and young people everything is wired from the outside in. The human brain responds to the environment by wiring everything in. It is how we adapt to our environment so we can survive in it, and hopefully grow if the conditions allow.

By the time we are proper adults, around age twenty-five, we no longer learn by 'osmosis'. If we want to learn something, we first have to have the intent to learn it, and then we have to be prepared to practice a lot. Unlike children who tend to be wired just from being exposed to their environment, adults actually feel the effort of the learning process, or more accurately, they feel the effort of their neural connectivity changing and developing.

Wiring the brain is tiring for children too. That's why babies, small children and teenagers need to sleep so much.

Wiring is tiring...

But while children are not conscious of the process of learning, adults are. It's harder for adults to wire the brain not because we can't, but probably because we are more conscious of what we are doing. As adults we also have many more demands on us and cannot just sleep our days away, while we are wiring our brain.

In my short book on grief and adjustment to change I describe how exhausting adjustment to a big life change is and recommend that people reduce the demands on them while they're adjusting and rest as much as they need to. That's because change and grief lead to a massive wave of rewiring. Adults don't, or can't give themselves the time to rest and sleep that most children are allowed to have, so it feels harder.

If we decide to master a new skill, learn a new language or when we study or learn anything new we need intention, attention, and practice. Practice allows neurones to connect and stay together. You might have heard the phrase that neurons that fire together wire together. Practice ensures that they also stay together. Practice, repetition, enables neurons to fire together and stay together to form clusters of neurones, networks that fire reliably. This is the process that enables us to develop mastery, so we recall knowledge and skills effortlessly. It makes us good at what we do. All learning depends on this.

Psychological change requires exactly the same. In the same way that a language teacher cannot just shove a new language into your adult brain, therapists can only facilitate the right environment and support clients to change their own brains. What those changes are, what they mean and how to achieve them will be the topic of the next few episodes.

The principles that guide my work have always been humanistic, more specifically, the work of Carl Rogers. Alongside Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers was one of the forces behind the 1940s humanistic revolution in mental health, which was a reaction to the dominant behaviourist and psychoanalytic schools.

Rogers and his colleagues who worked in psychiatric wards, understood that most people's psychological problems were not a result of an internal 'malfunction', but are caused by their environment. They came to realise that mental health difficulties were a direct result of people's inability to develop to their potential, because their environment harmed them, or otherwise failed to offer them the conditions they needed to develop to their full potential. Nature has conditioned us to put our developmental needs on hold, if we are under threat. The more threat there is in a person's environment, the more unsafe they feel, the harder it is for them to grow towards their potential. This isn't a conscious choice. It's nature.

Everything in nature wants to do two things: survive and develop to become everything it has the potential to become. Humans are no different. We need to survive so that we can develop to our full humanness. Survival isn't the goal in itself, it really is a means to an end.

Just surviving is not enough for human beings, and no one does well when all that life has to offer them is survival. Sadly, we live in a world driven by fear, and survivalism and it does not encourage or support people to develop towards their potential. It is hardly surprising that there is so much psychological suffering.

Rogers developed person-centred therapy, which some of you might have heard about, or even experienced. The purpose of person-centred therapy is to help clients grow to their potential. The idea is that when people start to grow, their psychological symptoms gradually disappear.

Rogers believed that therapists should offer three conditions to clients: empathy, unconditional positive regard—which means clients should feel that they are not judged—and congruence. A congruent therapist is a therapist who is genuine, a real person not someone who is acting a part of hiding who they are.

Rogers believed that these three conditions were necessary *and sufficient* for clients to grow towards their potential. He was absolutely right that these conditions are necessary. Every client should feel safe in the therapy room, and no one feels safe when they do not encounter empathy, when they feel judged, or when the therapist is just acting a part and is not genuine. He was also right that when people start to grow, their symptoms begin to disappear.

But Rogers' three conditions are *not sufficient* for therapy to be effective. I have seen so many examples of this. Many clients see me after having seen person-centred therapists, and what they usually say is that the therapist was really warm, understanding and supportive, but that after a few sessions they ran out of stories to tell, and I didn't know where it was all going...

In many cases people have said that when they faced the next crisis in their life, they were exactly where they were before and that they haven't really changed. I studied person-centred therapy extensively, and in the early days of my practice I could see clearly that while clients did feel better from talking to me, they weren't necessarily changing in any significant way. This left me feeling helpless, because I was taught that Rogers' three conditions were sufficient for therapeutic change.

Rogers hoped or believed that growth would just happen spontaneously if people are given the right conditions. But what works for children and young people in the right environment

does not work for most adults. As I mentioned above in order to change, our brain needs to change and we can't change the brains of adults directly from outside. We can only change the brains of children and young people directly.

I work in a person-centred way but within the framework of Interpersonal Neurobiology. I have no doubt in my mind that if Rogers was alive today, he would adopt IPNB in a heartbeat.

In the next episode I will give you what I call 'the brain lecture', and I will tell you everything I tell my clients in the first session.

My plan is for each episode to build on one another, so that they fit into a coherent framework that makes sense, and that people can put into practice. The advantage of podcasts is that you can access them whenever you like. You can rewind and listen to things again, and you can do it all in your own time.

I have written a series of short books that I call: 'The fully human psychotherapy tools for life series'. The book that covers what I will discuss in the first few podcasts is called *Therapy Without a Therapy* <hold the book up>. It covers the entire framework I use in therapy, and it can serve as a reference for everything I share with you.

A couple of important points before I finish for today.

I make no secret of the fact that I'm a political activist. Psychotherapy is political and always has been. The great figures of therapy, especially in the humanistic and existential schools were all political activists in their time. And it's not particularly strange.

No matter what genetic potential we are born with, how we turn out depends on our environment. We are not a product of our genes, but of the way our genes interact with our environment. People who do not get the right ingredients early in life struggle psychologically. People who live in bad conditions, who are oppressed or threatened will suffer psychologically. Mental health is not something that resides inside each one of us. We are inseparable from our environment, and our brain will naturally react to what is going on around us and what is happening to us. Therapists do not work with sick people, but with people who are suffering because of a problematic society.

It is self-evident that everything that we do as individuals and as societies is a product of our psychology. The way we allocate resources, the way we organise ourselves, whether we are inclusive or tribal, fear-based or growth-focused, selfish or generous, all the choices we make and the politics we invent to reflect and promote our agendas are all driven by our psychology.

Therapy is as much about us as individuals, as it is about the society that shapes us. So

anyone who thinks therapists should stay away from politics or ignore it, perpetuates a compartmentalised view of life that is unscientific and that has little to do with reality.

It is not only appropriate, but also necessary for therapists to speak up about social and political injustices that cause harm to people. Therapists encounter firsthand the damage society causes. Our job is not to keep the world the way it is so we continue to have a constant supply of clients, but to make the world better so we become unnecessary.

Imagine what our world could be if everyone was enabled to grow towards their potential. In the first few podcasts I will share everything that I do in my work with my clients, so that we can move closer not just to individual wellbeing, but to a better world. Everyone who grows and develops has a profound impact on their environment. They are also capable of making a difference to the world in a sustainable way, without burning out.

Therapy is no longer a faith-based profession. I don't expect you to 'believe' anything I say. If you put what I suggest into practice, you will be able to assess the evidence for yourself, and decide whether what I am proposing has merit or not. What I will teach you is completely harmless.

The reason I feel confident enough to share what I know is because I have the privilege of witnessing the results of therapy every day. I think everyone needs to know what I and my clients know.

These podcasts will always remain free for all to watch.

One final word for today is about alcohol. I require complete abstinence from alcohol and I have made this a condition for seeing me. Even in small amounts, alcohol disables the most important brain equipment that we need in order to integrate and change our psychology. Any consumption of alcohol, even small or irregular is going to slow people's progress, and why would anyone want to prolong their suffering?...

I recommend to all viewers of this podcast to abstain from alcohol if you want to enjoy the impact of the integration work I share in this series.

Thank you so much for watching, and until next time, take very good care of yourself and others, and keep your brain clean and ready to integrate.

**(This is, Taking the mystery out of psychotherapy – A podcast series with Avigail Abarbanel)**