



Just over a year ago, **Juliette Moxham** wrote an article for *BACP Workplace* about why she stepped back from being a headteacher of a primary school in Gloucestershire to retrain as a counsellor. Now a newly qualified counsellor, she is working with the public sector workforce and establishing her private practice. She talks to **Nicola Banning** about finishing her training and starting out in the profession

Juliette Moxham is an affiliate counsellor with Gloucestershire County Council and has her own private practice based in Cheltenham. Prior to training as a counsellor, she worked in education for 28 years as a primary teacher, school advisor, SENCO and latterly, as a headteacher.
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NB: Welcome back to BACP Workplace. How have you found the final year of your counselling training since we were last in touch in October 2022?

JM: My second year of counselling training, much like the first year, continued to be an amazing experience. The workload was intense, and at times overwhelming. I never felt that I wanted to give up, but I often felt exhausted and emotionally drained. Juggling the workload, including the weekly

workshop every Thursday from 4pm to 9.30pm, monthly Sunday workshops, weekly personal therapy, counselling at two different placements, which involved two lots of supervisions on a fortnightly basis, plus writing the weekly learning journals and completing the assignments, I often felt I was on my knees crawling through treacle. I pondered to myself when the tutors talked about the importance of self-care, and found myself thinking; how and when? This was particularly concerning because of my previous health scare, and my consultant's recommendation following my all clear from cancer that I needed to manage my work/life balance.

My workplace

However, I knew that juggling a heavy workload and the pressure of assignment deadlines wasn't going to last forever. Crucially, although I found the counselling training tough, overwhelming and intense, I loved it and there was nothing else I wanted to do. During the second year, I recognised the need to release myself from the jaws of perfectionism. This is something that has plagued me throughout my working life, particularly in my headship role, forcing me to often to stay up too late writing and rewriting reports, school improvement plans, and research projects. During the second year of the counselling diploma, I knew I couldn't complete all of the work required to the standard I wanted to – there just weren't enough hours in the day.

Through my own counselling sessions, I grew to understand myself and learnt to accept myself as someone perfectly imperfect and good enough. Sometimes I handed in weekly learning reviews that were rushed (shock horror!), and I didn't read as much as I would have liked to have done for the assignments (double shock horror!). However, I was content in the knowledge that as long as I did my best, that was all I could ask of myself.

NB: What have been the highs and lows for you as a trainee and adjusting to life after being a headteacher?

JM: The most fulfilling moments have been receiving feedback that clients have found the counselling sessions to be life changing. At first, I struggled to believe that the six-session model could have such a profound impact on people's lives. But it can. When I first started as a trainee counsellor, I believed that clients would need many more sessions. And in some cases, this was true.

However, I've worked with clients who felt that six sessions of counselling have made a profound and positive impact on their lives. I've experienced clients who have found the courage to make important decisions, such as applying for their dream job and being successful, and as a result, their lives have changed exponentially for the better. To share the joy of clients when they tell me of their successes, is a wonderful thing.

Of course, I've had some low moments too. I once forgot to check the counselling room properly before the session began. I was fixated on checking the clock was working properly, (as it had stopped during a previous session), and as a result I didn't realise that there wasn't a box of tissues in the room. When the client started crying, I didn't have any tissues to offer them. I was so angry with myself and very frustrated. In that moment, I realised that I had checked the room from my own frame of reference, rather than the client's. I took this to supervision as I felt I had let my client down badly – I had put myself first, rather than the client, and I considered this to be poor practice on my part.

My supervisor was very understanding. She said it is normal to make mistakes when we are learning

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and that it was a common one that many trainees make. Since then, we developed a room checking system, which I now implement at the start of each day, and I have found this to be really helpful. Reflecting on this occasion, it illustrated how hard I can be on myself, and this is something I continue to work with.

Overall, adjusting to life after headship has been a joy, and since qualifying as a counsellor, I have a much better work/life balance. There's time for my family, friends, trips to the theatre, cooking, holidays in term time (which are both much cheaper and quieter). I have also started running and recently, I completed a 10k run. The time for myself, my family and friends that I once sacrificed in order to ensure that the pupils at my school had the best opportunities, I can now enjoy instead. This doesn't mean that I regret working as hard as I did as a headteacher, because I can look back and know that I did the best that I could for all my pupils. But from now on, I can really focus on what is best for me.

NB: Overall, how was your workplace counselling placement?

JM: I loved my workplace counselling placement at Gloucestershire County Council (GCC). I had a wide variety of clients, supporting people through anxiety and depression, workplace challenges, bereavement, and difficulties in relationships. I found it supportive and I could go to the manager or my supervisor with any problems or concerns I had, and they always found time for me. The administrative team were also great and would help me with printing and photocopying on the occasions when my home equipment wasn't working.

NB: What are you learning from your client work?

JM: Without exception, my clients are good, kind, hardworking people who lead busy lives and have little time just to *be*. Having a confidential, safe space in which they can talk openly, sit quietly, reflect, and just be themselves in the moment, is helpful for them. I am also learning that there are a lot of people pleasers out there (which may

be because I work with a lot of professionals who are helpers or carers), who rarely consider their own needs. There are so many negative outcomes to people pleasing, including loss of identity, relationship problems, and overworking which often leads to further stress.

Workloads in the public sector are very high, and people will never get to the end of their to-do list. So, if you are a people pleaser, you need to have firm boundaries or your wellbeing is very likely to suffer. This resonates with me because I struggled to maintain boundaries in my professional life. As a headteacher, I worked late into the evenings, would often go to school at the weekend in order to catch up on work when it was quiet, and I would use the holidays to oversee school onsite projects, such as the installation of new playground equipment. Therefore, I can offer this insight with congruence and empathy for myself and others.

NB: What are the challenges of the workplace setting as opposed to other settings in which you work?

JM: Previously, as a trainee counsellor on a placement with GCC, and now having made the transition to work as an affiliate counsellor, I've found the organisation a fantastic place to work because of the supportive team and the interesting client work. However, as with all large organisations, established processes and systems are essential to get the work done, and this means change takes time. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, because slow change is more likely to lead to lasting change. However, it is the management that make all the big decisions, and I'm aware that as a counsellor, my capacity to facilitate change is limited. I had a second placement at Hereford Mind which is a much smaller organisation and as a result, it is easier to be heard, voice your opinion and influence change within the organisation.

NB: Is there anything that you draw on from your experience as a headteacher which supports you in your new role as a counsellor?

JM: A big part of headship was about building strong, positive relationships with pupils, staff, parents and the community. The skills of communication, active listening, empathy, self-awareness, and respect are vital in order to do that successfully – and also fundamental to the counselling work. I understand the demands on the public sector, the culture of the organisation and the vocational nature of some of the work. I think this can be a helpful insight in my client work.

NB: I know that it was ill health that led to your decision to step back from headship, so how is your health now?

JM: My health is much better than it was towards the end of my headship career. A recent blood

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test showed that I continue to be completely cancer free and this is fantastic. My own health and wellbeing are a priority for me now. I understand the importance of looking after myself; using the aeroplane analogy – I make sure my own oxygen mask is snugly on and fitting comfortably before I help others put theirs on.

Also, I have Solly, my dog, who is fantastic at making sure I do two good walks each day. I have learnt that counselling involves a lot of sitting down inside, so it is important for me to get out in the fresh air regularly. Solly has her quirks as I think all rescue dogs do. In particular, she doesn't like men in hats or beanies. At first, this bothered me

Below: Juliette and her dog, Solly



because I wanted her to like everyone she met, which I now realise was the old people pleaser in me. I now understand this is not going to happen and that it's OK. Men just have to take off their headwear if they want to stroke her!

NB: As you increase your experience and counselling hours, do you have a sense of the direction you'd like to take as you establish yourself as a newly qualified counsellor?

JM: I am very much enjoy working for GCC using their six-session model approach. It has given me a wealth of experience in many different areas of counselling. However, since I qualified, and even as a trainee, I was aware that I am drawn to relationship counselling. All my learning has shown me that healthy relationships are fundamental to a person having a good life. So many of my clients struggle in relationships with themselves, family or work colleagues. It is well evidenced that unhealthy relationships lead to unhappy lives and health issues.

Improving relationships has a significant positive impact on the client, and so I am delighted to have been accepted onto the Level 5 Post-Qualifying Certificate in Relational Counselling with Relate which begins in February 2024. I know it will be a lot of work, but I believe learning to counsel couples rather than individuals will be fascinating, and challenging. Honestly, I can't wait and I am itching to get started.

NB: How supported do you feel by your professional body, BACP?

JM: I find BACP's website to be a useful and supportive tool that holds such a wealth of material, and I enjoy reading the journals, particularly *BACP Workplace* because of my links with supporting the public sector workforce. Personally, I would find it helpful if BACP had a co-ordinator for new members and student members, whose role it was to encourage new members to engage with the organisation. It could be rather like a member of the school Parents, Teachers and Friends Association (PTFA) who helps provide support and encouragement to new parents who may feel daunted by the school processes and expectations. I would like to engage more with BACP, but it is about knowing where to start, and when life and work get in the way, I don't prioritise this.

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NB: Well, you're contributing to *BACP Workplace* about your journey to become a newly qualified counsellor and that's valuable. I wonder, is there anything you miss about your old life as a headteacher?

JM: The build up to Christmas is a wonderful time at primary school. There is a real buzz around the school as children rehearse, and then perform productions and concerts. Decorations are strewn everywhere, it is such a joyful time, and that is what I miss most as my build up to Christmas is much quieter now.

NB: How are you approaching the next phase of your professional life?

JM: Whatever I do professionally, I need to make sure that I have a work/life balance, and that I don't develop old habits of always putting work first at the expense of my wellbeing. I know that, as a counsellor, it is essential that we look after ourselves, because we serve our clients best when we are feeling our best. So, since qualifying, I do take time each week to reflect on how the week has gone, my workload, areas of challenge and whether tweaks need to be made. I'm also continuing with my own private counselling as part of my self-care, and I find this really helpful.

NB: Do you have any advice for other professionals who might be thinking about retraining as a counsellor?

JM: I would say that the training to be a counsellor is not for the faint-hearted. Be prepared for a roller coaster journey, where at times you will feel you are overwhelmed, fearful, frustrated and broken. However, this will be coupled with feelings of joy, elation, pride and success. It is a tough road to take, training to be a counsellor, but so worth it. ●

Tell us about your workplace

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this interview or would like to talk to the editor about your workplace, we would like to hear from you. Please email Nicola Banning: workplaceeditor@bacp.co.uk