

We are not in this together: Psychotherapy and pandemic emotions

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to waves of publicly expressed feelings of fear, grief, rage, pride and powerlessness. Psychotherapists in Australia have seen an increase in their client numbers during this time when many others have lost their jobs amidst a public health response that has further entrenched divisions between rich and poor. These public feelings have been very present in the therapy room as people try to make sense of their experiences of the global pandemic and their responses to restriction and exposure. This article asks how psychotherapists can engage with these pandemic emotions in a way that facilitates social change and interrogates psychotherapy's historically apolitical stance on the role of emotion and emotional expression.

KEYWORDS

feelings and psychotherapy, pandemic emotions, politics of emotion, psychotherapy and social change, public feelings and COVID-19, public feelings and human rights, public feelings and lockdown

Family therapist John Weakland, once wrote that 'Before successful therapy, it's the same damn thing over and over. After successful therapy, it's one damn thing after another' (Littrell, 1998, p. 10). I used to be comforted by this quote and its Buddhist echoes of fetching wood and carrying water, its reconciliation with the givens of existence and quiet call for therapeutic humility. I come from a family where anxiety ran high and appliance breakdown registered as seismic disaster, and I still long for the peace of this kind of acceptance of troubles.

Now I look at this quote through sore eyes that sit above a mask and wonder about what it is I am doing with my working life, as one Groundhog Day in Melbourne's extended COVID-19 lockdown leads into another. Now I see its hubris and its smug positioning of psychotherapy as both apart from and innocent of the conditions of living. I read this quote that used to comfort and I see it differently, I feel it differently. Times have changed and my internal time has changed too. Pandemic stress alters our perception of time—What day is it? How long has this

been going on? It is not simply the lack of familiar anchors for my daily timekeeping that have been hoisted onto an unsteady boat by locked-down living; it feels like the same day every day because these threats to life that have always been real and ongoing for some, have now become real and ongoing for many. The number of deaths is now at a million, now over a million. Like the early days of grief that all run together in a gluey fog, the reality of this global disaster and the pre-existing inequity and despair it has further deepened and exposed, returns to me both new and the same over and over every day.

The best evidence out there tells us that psychotherapy works. So well in fact, that its effectiveness is greater than many common pain relievers and antibiotics. Like the majority of psychotherapists, I have witnessed transformational change in my clients and in the small worlds around them. But it would be hard to argue that psychotherapy has made the world a better place. Any of the measures currently in use to establish quality of life cannot attest to our profession's contribution here. This failure to change the world exposes a crevasse between the therapeutic relationship and the wider, uneven world. The challenge of contributing to lasting social change through psychotherapy is one of the big questions for our profession and the advent of a worldwide pandemic offers another opportunity to engage with it at the coalface. These are of course not new thoughts or new questions, but rarely have psychotherapists been offered such an international opportunity to experience the convergence of capitalism, disease and climate change so directly in our now often virtual consulting rooms.

As the pandemic hit and people lost their jobs in an instant, I wondered what would happen with my work. Would I eventually lose my lecturing job as students became harder to find due to border closures, job losses and the targeted decimation of the higher education sector? Would my therapy practice collapse as people struggled to survive or their priorities shifted in the face of great and unpredictable threat? While these were not welcome fears, they were in some way existentially grounding. It seemed reasonable that individual psychotherapy would, at least briefly, decline in the face of such a crisis. Surely our attention was needed elsewhere. Much of my attention was definitely elsewhere. I looked over my meagre savings, worried about adult children, researched masks and hand washing, cancelled plans again and again, and cleaned the bathroom as if my life depended on it.

But instead of working less, like many psychotherapists here in Australia, I am busier than I have ever been. Student applicants for the counselling and psychotherapy master's I lecture in have more than doubled. Old clients have returned, new clients are referred, struggling with increased anxieties and the terrible pressures of a zoo like existence, crammed into too small spaces with others or suffering breathtaking isolation. I sit in my home for long hours in front of my computer, while the world outside walks at distance—masked, fearful and increasingly policed. My back hurts despite long walks and Zoom yoga. I then hurt it even more by over-zealous gardening. I cry for no reason and for many reasons all at once. I miss my grown-up kid like crazy. I look at myself more than ever before as my relationships almost all move online and I wonder who that old woman looking back at me could be. My cats become badly behaved, yowling outside my office door, not used to being shut out and missing their afternoon worship from the returning school children who are now locked in their homes like me, in front of their backlit screens. In other words, I am white, lucky, rich and safe.

In my room on the screen, we talk a lot about the Premier of the Australian state of Victoria, Daniel Andrews. Lots of feelings are expressed about the man in charge of locking down a city and a state with rising rates of infection. For some, he is a kind of saviour father, not afraid to make the hard calls to protect our lives and we must forgive him his significant transgressions against the poor and the vulnerable. Hashtags and tote bags bear his name. Compassion is offered up to him—*What a bloody job, how does he do it day after day?*—and anger is directed at his critics. This anger seems to mask the fear that his critics will lead to his downfall and his downfall will lead to openings and openings will lead to contagion. And contagion will lead to more death and more lockdown. These feelings of fear are a kind of thought free internal lockdown where there is no room for nuance, difference or a balancing of competing disasters. I feel both silenced and bewildered by them.

For others, #DanAndrews is a symbol of tyranny, a literal fascist, provoking feelings of rage, humiliation, powerlessness and a desire for rebellion. The father who patronised, dominated and controlled. I pull down my mask to sip my coffee and a white man on bicycle congratulates me for *Not being a bloody sheep!* as if suspending my protection of others from the airborne transmission of a virus is an expression of freedom. Some people complain

about their masks; their uselessness, oppressiveness and the terrible obligation of seeing the reality of contagion and vulnerability in the masked faces of passers-by. But when I hear these angry and fearful protests in my work, do I ask, *please wear it, I am worried about the people that I love?* Do I say, *your anger scares me and it hurts people far more vulnerable than you?* I do not. I could, but I do not. This is not how I was trained. It is not currently in my job description. I was trained to co-wonder about what is happening to you and to trust pan-theoretically that feelings have a purpose and that exploring, expressing and witnessing them allow us to decipher adaptive action and response together. I was taught, like many group meditators, that somehow this would change the world.

Yet of course none of these feelings is helping to contain the spread of the virus or the unprecedented harm it has already left in its wake. In therapy, I do not observe these expressions leading anywhere but in circles; however well facilitated, empathically reflected or insightfully connected. There is a mindlessness about their expression that does my head in. The rising numbers of those dead, dying and disabled; the homeless; jobless; and soon to be stateless. Women, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour are suffering at far greater rates and will continue to do so long into the future. The racial and gender pay gaps are widening as the time frame for their closure disappears further and further into the future. Despite the wild animals that have returned to our quieter cities, the pandemic has barely made a blip in the climate crisis. I feel despair and struggle to make more than a tiny pixel for it on the Zoom screen.

Feelings have a politic too. There is a kind of deadly contagion in these emotions of anger, fear, humiliation and rage. The suspicion I see in eyes above masks looking into the eyes of the mask-less. The shock and outrage among those privileged enough to have previously been protected from the sufferings of globalisation. These are shared and public feelings that both arise from and are created in a social crucible. I can feel them bubble up in my virtual rooms almost fully formed, pre-packaged and smooth. I want to ask more questions about the aetiology of the feelings of my clients and about my own. Who is given a right to their feelings, to express them? Who can be emotionally loud and who must tread softly? Who is afraid, who is angry and who is resigned? How am I working politically with this pandemic of emotions in my psychotherapy space? I believe I need to ask questions like these more deeply of myself, my work and of my profession. To more specifically interrogate the politics of emotional expression and not simply the politics of psychotherapy. Because through all this, I really do still believe that feelings are important in changing the world. But feelings and their expression have largely been neglected in the discussions of the politics of psychotherapy. I wonder in the dreadful maelstrom of this pandemic, if I can find a way to be with them so that their extraction can be challenged in order to form a more solid bridge between my working relationships and the larger dehumanised world.

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