
The working world of a sex and relationship therapist: Interview with Juliet Grayson

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In *Landscapes of the Heart: The Working World of a Sex and Relationship Therapist*, Juliet Grayson (2016) takes us through the doorway into the hidden world of a psychotherapy session. She shakes our assumptions about how relationships work, and what to expect from our intimate partners, showing us different routes to more satisfying and loving intimacy (Jenner, 2016), and giving us a grounded understanding of what makes relationships successful. The book gives the 'therapist-eye view' of couples' therapy drawing on Juliet's 25 years of clinical experience.

What led you to start working with couples?

It all started through teaching horse riding. I was always fascinated by the psychological aspect of life. When teaching, I noticed that the relationship between horse and rider often mirrored issues in the rider's intimate relationships. For example, if they were too soft with the horse, they often had problems standing up for themselves in the marriage. I decided to train as a one-to-one therapist first of all. That was over 20 years ago.

Then a couple asked for therapy. I saw them for six sessions, but I soon realised that this was very different than one-to-one work, requiring additional skills. [I need more] training. I signed up for two years at the Maudsley Hospital for a Postgraduate Diploma in Relationship and Sexual Therapy. In the morning, we had lectures, and in the afternoon the students would offer therapy in the Maudsley's couples' therapy clinic. All the therapy sessions were watched by a 'team' of up to 15 people, tutors and other students, through a one-way mirror. I remember how intimidating that was for me as the therapist. But I loved working with couples, and exploring the complex dynamics at play.

What led to the book?

I had been a couples' therapist for a few years, and colleagues who were one-to-one therapists were curious. They wanted to expand their practice, and so I designed a Certificate in Couples Therapy (in six modules over 12 days), to teach therapists about how to work with couples. Counsellors could join for just one module, or do all six. On the workshops, one of the things that therapists were always keen to see was a practical demonstration of how I work. They wanted to get the flavour of a couple's session. So, I decided to write a book that would transmit that. I wrote it for both the general public, and therapists. Each chapter has three sections, part one describes an early therapy session, part two looks at a later session with the same couple, and part three covers a piece of theory.

You let your readers 'sit on the therapist's shoulder'. I loved that. Why did you do it?

I wanted both clients and therapists to get a real feel of what it is like in the room. To see what is going on with the clients, and to know what is happening to me. What I am paying attention to, how the client's body is responding, and the non-verbal communications that are passing between us. As I said, I started my professional life riding dressage horses and teaching horse riding. Since horses don't talk, wag their tails or purr to show they are happy, I had learned to read their body language and subtle signals. This stood me in good stead when working with couples. I wanted to transmit something about this to the reader.

In the book you use a body-based psychotherapy that I didn't know, the Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor. What is this? And why is it so effective?

Having experimented with many different kinds of therapy, I came across PBSP in 2001. I immediately saw the power of incorporating body work alongside talking therapy. When I experienced this method as a client it profoundly affected me. I had ten years of high quality talking therapy, but my childhood trauma was still sitting in my body. It was only after doing more therapy, using PBSP that I became quiet on the inside. As one of my clients says, a good PBSP session is the equivalent of six months of talking therapy. What I see again and again, is that often, PBSP reaches areas that talking therapy does not get to. I knew I wanted to become a PBSP therapist. I wanted to be able to offer my clients truly effective healing.

How do you think this book may support a therapist who is already working with couples?

Even experienced couples' therapists tell me the book is valuable. They pick up tips and techniques, and love learning about the Pesso Boyden System. Body-based therapies are effective, and therapists are curious about how to use that with couples. Many therapists have not yet seen a demonstration of PBSP. My book gives them a flavour of what an actual PBSP session would be like – although I always recommend that people come to a PSBP personal development workshop, where they will see four live client sessions run in a day. Or even experience a session themselves.

In the book you refer to the charity StopSO, The Specialist Treatment Organisation for the Prevention of Sexual Offending. What led you to start this charity? Why do you think it's so important?

StopSO has a ground breaking approach to reducing sexual abuse in the UK, by working with the perpetrators. We all know about the huge problem of sexual abuse (Newbury, 2017). But when a man came for therapy who had making obscene phone calls, it made me stop and think. He was terrified of asking for help and afraid that I would judge him. Then I heard stories about other potential sex offenders who had tried to get help, only to be met by a therapist's disapproval or rejection. It made me wonder, how could we let this client group know that they would be safe if they asked for help? Perhaps by setting up a UK-wide network of therapists who were offered training to work with this client group. Maybe this could be a new way of approaching sexual abuse, to work with the perpetrators? The more I thought about it, the more sensible it seemed. At the time, there was no help at all in the UK, for someone who was attracted to children and didn't want to become a child molester. A group of us set up

StopSO, and started seeing clients in 2013. Now StopSO has hundreds of therapists with specialist training all over the UK. We work with sexual offenders of all types, and their families. Our aim is to reduce the levels of sexual abuse. StopSO has already protected many hundreds, maybe thousands of children and adults from the devastating consequences of being molested. In some cases we have stopped the first crime. I am proud of that.

NB: An earlier version of this interview was originally published on Psychreg on 15 August 2017 (<https://www.psychreg.org/sex-and-relationship-therapist>)

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