

MEET in Oxford – a very low cost trauma focused therapy service

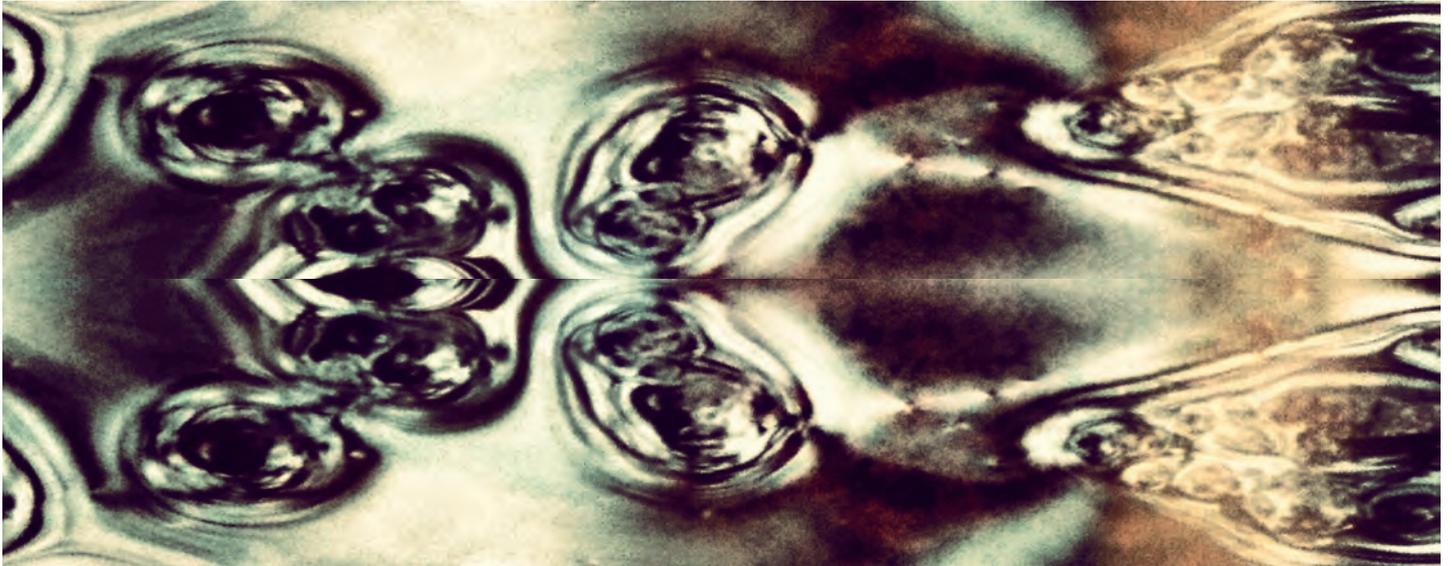
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“MEET in Oxford” is an acronym for Making EMDR and Energy Therapy more accessible in Oxford. Our intention is to make these therapies available to those who most need them as well as making these relatively new and effective trauma focused therapies better known in Oxford.

MEET in Oxford was started by three experienced psychotherapists who are members of Oxford Quaker Meeting and have trainings in Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) and/or

Energy Psychotherapies. Our idea of developing a very small trauma focused therapy service at 43 St Giles on Mondays came to us early in 2013. The push for this came to me at a point where my own private practice was going through a low patch and I felt frustrated at not being able to make use of my training and skills in working with trauma. I was also very aware that those who most need this work are those least likely to be able to afford to pay for it. I approached Janet Toye (who had worked in the NHS as a Cognitive Analytic



Therapist and had more recently trained in an energy psychotherapy modality) and Jane Fisher (a family therapist and EMDR practitioner who has worked extensively with trauma) and found the idea of setting up a low cost service together in Oxford was timely for both of them.

At the time that we started MEET, Oxford Quaker Meeting's room hiring was managed by a resident warden who had a day off on Mondays, so there were no hirers on Mondays and the property was largely unused. The three of us asked the Quaker Meeting to allow us to use three rooms during the daytime on Mondays, rent free, to offer therapy sessions at very low cost. We ourselves were proposing to work pro bono, claiming only minimal expenses as a contribution towards the costs of remaining accredited. The Meeting agreed to support us and has continued to do so even though 43 St Giles is now open to hirers on a Monday. This has allowed us to provide a very low cost therapy service. While we invite small contributions (in the range of £5 – £20) from clients, we do not turn anyone away for inability to pay. Those who can afford to pay more than this we refer to colleagues who offer these therapies in their private practices. We hope that in offering this service we can redress, in a very small way, the terrible injustice created by reduced mental health provision and the high costs of private therapy.

By January 2014 we had a name, a website www.meetinoxford.org, a constitution as a small charity and a bank account. We had advertised our services through local networks and were ready to receive our first clients. Some clients are formally referred to us by another counsellor or organisation, but more often they are signposted to us and complete a self-referral form which asks for details of a professional who can support their application. We offer a free initial assessment session and, if clients meet our criteria, we can offer up to a maximum of twenty six sessions. There can now be a wait of some weeks between assessment and therapy.

Issues that clients have brought include childhood trauma of all kinds, traumatic bereavements, medical trauma, bullying, sexual assaults, road traffic accidents, and a case of an activist imprisoned in an intimidating foreign jail. Sometimes we are able to resolve a simple trauma quite quickly and can often make significant progress with more complex issues within the '26 session frame'. However, we also have to accept that at other times we are offering a contribution to a client's journey of healing but cannot stay with them for the whole course.

As MEET gets better known in Oxford we are getting more clients than we can manage on our own and we do not have the capacity to expand our service at 43 St Giles. However, we are gradually developing a group of "MEET associates" who will accept one or two clients at a time at low cost from us on the same terms as MEET offers. Some of these are interested in doing pro bono work for its own sake and others are also interested in practicing newly acquired skills in EMDR or Energy Psychotherapy with clients who are referred specifically for these therapies.

In addition to its primary aim of providing EMDR and Energy Psychotherapy at very low cost to those who most need these interventions, MEET in Oxford also has a second aim of making these methods better known in Oxford. We have worked toward this by establishing a peer support group for therapists who have recently completed their EMDR training and also by providing those who have recently trained with clients with whom they can practice their new skills. We are also now supporting Energy Psychotherapy training in Oxford in association with the Energy Psychotherapy Network. And this article provides an opportunity to tell you a little about the therapies that we use.

EMDR has been demonstrated by extensive research to be particularly effective for the relief of post-traumatic stress. It is recommended by NICE (National Institute

for Clinical Excellence) as one of the treatments of choice for PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). It is also recognised to be effective in treating more chronic problems such as anxiety, phobias and poor self confidence. EMDR works with eye movements but a variety of other ways of providing right/left alternating stimulation have also been found to be effective. Common alternatives to eye movements are earphones with right/left sound or small pads held in the hands which vibrate alternately right and left.

During an EMDR session the therapist helps the client to identify a specific problem or event as the focus of the treatment session. The client calls to mind the disturbing event, recalling what was seen, felt and thought at the time as well as the feelings and sensations that are currently felt on recalling the event. The therapist then facilitates the directional movement of the eyes or other dual attention stimulation of the brain while the client focuses on the disturbing material and is told to just notice what comes to mind without making any effort to control direction or content. Each person will process information in their own unique way – sometimes focused on the detail of what happened and sometimes more focused on body sensations or symbolic associations. Sets of eye movements are continued until the memory becomes less disturbing and is associated with more positive thoughts and beliefs such as “I did the best I could”. Intense emotions and powerful physical sensations may be experienced during an EMDR session, but by the end of the session most people report a great reduction in the level of disturbance.

The alternating left-right stimulation of the brain with eye movements, sounds or taps during EMDR, seems to stimulate the brain’s frozen or blocked information processing system. This may be by helping to connect the cognitive/thinking areas of the brain with the more primitive emotional/feeling areas. As this processing takes place, the distressing memories seem to lose their intensity, so that they are less disturbing and seem more like ‘ordinary’ memories. The effect is believed to be similar to that which occurs naturally during REM sleep (Rapid Eye Movement) when your eyes rapidly move from side to side. EMDR helps reduce the distress of all the different kinds of memories, whether it was what you saw, heard, smelt, tasted, felt or thought.

A client who received eight sessions of EMDR from MEET wrote:

“I had a traumatic birth experience ...which had led to post-natal depression. Despite treatment for depression, I was still experiencing flashbacks and other PTSD symptoms that simply talking about the experience could not eradicate. The EMDR has

helped me to get over these symptoms, change my attitude to the whole experience and stop blaming myself, and I have been able to write to the hospital to complain about my treatment and raise concerns for others. I now feel I can put the experience behind me and move forward and enjoy my family without anxiety....

I also have a better understanding of how some of my assumptions about myself as a mother and a person have been shaped by the trauma and by aspects of my life and upbringing before that, and so I have been able to reassess those beliefs and move forward with a more positive self-image.”

There are a number of London based organisations which provide EMDR Europe approved training in EMDR.

Energy Psychotherapy is a synthesis of psychotherapy with Energy Psychology (EP) methods and tools. There is now a network of psychotherapists and others with mental health qualifications who have integrated EP skills into their practice in a way which is consistent with their own existing therapeutic approach. EP has its roots in ancient knowledge about the ways in which energy operates within the body, but is now supported by a substantial evidence base. There are currently over sixty research studies, including multiple Randomized Controlled Trials published in professional and refereed journals, confirming the treatment value of EP. Taken as a body of knowledge, these findings suggest that EP meets the criteria for evidenced-based treatment.

The basic principle underpinning EP methods is that trauma is encoded within the body’s energy field. Simple procedures are used to guide the client to gently stimulate his or her own energy system while focusing the mind upon the target problem. Often this will rapidly release the underlying psycho-energetic structure that is generating or maintaining the current problem.

Four specific skills drawn from Energy Psychology are used in most forms of energy psychotherapy. The first skill is the use of ‘muscle testing’, sometimes known as ‘energy-testing’, which is derived from Applied Kinesiology, and is used to make enquiries of the energy system. It is implicit in the use of muscle testing that there is an inherent knowledge and intelligence in the energy system. If the right question is asked, phrased in a manner that permits a yes-no answer, the system will provide the information. Muscle testing is more art than science and can be distorted, like any form of communication by error and misunderstanding and by lack of skill in the tester. However, used sensitively and respectfully it can help to guide the work by providing working hypotheses on how to proceed and to track progress. Muscle testing can be seen as a route to the

unconscious mind and even to access information that is inherently beyond consciousness.

The second skill is the ability to name and temporarily release self-sabotaging beliefs or reversals which are the energetic equivalent of psychodynamic resistances. These are beliefs such as “I don’t deserve to heal”, “I won’t be me if I get over this”, “I am too angry to heal” which are also understood to be held in the energy system, and can be addressed there, using simple energy methods.

The third skill is to identify the issue to be treated and to use words that that will focus the client on that ‘thought field’. This involves picking up on the client’s own language and combining this with the therapist’s understanding to create a brief formulation of the issue being addressed. For example, “because I was scared stiff of my dad’s rages I am frightened of my own anger and can’t connect with it”.

The final skill is to use an energy intervention to clear and heal the trauma from that thought field. Typically, the therapist will instruct the client to hold or tap meridian or chakra points. Energy centres such as chakras and meridians are understood to contain information and memories. These simply taught methods in which the client taps or holds these energy centres and channels may clear and heal traumas, blocks, reversals and dis-organised states, enabling insight and healing for the client. Bringing these four skills together into psychotherapy often enables therapeutic change to be accelerated and deepened.

One client who received fifteen sessions of Energy psychotherapy from MEET wrote to us (in part) as follows:

“I am writing to express my heartfelt thanks for the therapy I have received over the last few months. It is no exaggeration to say that the treatment I have received has transformed my life. For the first time I am able to feel alive and present in my body and where there was anger and depression is now a gentle peace and blossoming spirituality. Also as I have improved I have seen this reflected in my children’s behaviour as they have become happier and more relaxed. I can only hope that in the long term this has broken the cycle of unhappiness that has passed down through my family. Not only have you freed me from past issues but have also provided me with tools to continue to maintain my well-being in the future

I have been amazed at the simple effectiveness of energy psychotherapy, I can’t believe this is not more widely available. All I have been offered

through my GP was antidepressants and CBT neither of which actually addressed the core issues but merely tried (unsuccessfully) to manage the symptoms.”

Training in Energy Psychotherapy is available in Oxford from the Energy Psychotherapy Network which, under the title ‘Converging Streams’, runs courses in London, Oxford and Leamington Spa. The idea of these courses (as against the more ‘trademarked’ trainings of specific energy psychology modalities) is to teach the core ideas and skills of EP and encourage each therapist to make their own integration with their core psychotherapeutic modality. MEET now has one graduate of the Converging Streams Foundation course as part of our core team (Karen Stowe has replaced Janet Toyne who has had to retire for family reasons) and we are hoping soon to have more MEET associates who have completed the course. The next Oxford Foundation is in January and March 2017.

MEET lacks the time or person power to network as much as we would like to do with other organisations who provide services to our client group. We would particularly like to have a closer connection with the Complex Needs Service as many of our clients come to us while on the waiting list for that service and others come after completing that programme. We have a number of clients who come from Crisis Skylight and we have also received referrals or sign posted self-referrals from GP counsellors and other counsellors, from Howard House and SMART, the Infant Parent Perinatal service, Oxford University Counselling Service, Restore, Relate, Maple Tree Refugee Resource, the Children’s Society, the Children’s Centre, and the Mind guide. We recognise that our referrers are also very busy so it is hard to find the time to connect but we are planning to have an AGM on June 26th 2017 and hope that this may be an occasion to meet some of those who refer and signpost clients to us.

Judith Anderson will give a talk on The Gifts and Challenges of working with New Therapeutic Paradigms. Judith Anderson is a Jungian psychotherapist with a background in mental health as a Consultant Psychiatrist. She has been using energy techniques in her practice for nearly a decade and teaches on the Converging Streams course run by the Energy Psychotherapy Network. Having chaired Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility for a number of years, she is on the Executive Committee of Climate Psychology Alliance and runs their website.

Sandra Figgess has an MSc in Gestalt Psychotherapy from Metanoia. She is also accredited as an EMDR practitioner and as an energy psychotherapist. She works in private practice with adults.