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extra

Can psychotherapy replace the void left by religion in a modern post-religious society? First-person account

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Having experienced some difficulties in my life, I found myself at the receiving end of cognitive-behavioural therapy. I have never been a particularly religious person, but like every human being I have a deeper, ingrained instinct of hope and wanting to believe in something even if it does not have a name.

The experience of psychotherapy was overall very positive and I could not help myself wondering whether this is becoming 'a thing'. As a young professional I have started to share my deepest feelings and emotions, looking for support in our turbulent society, and I was not the only one. Looking around the waiting room, I saw people of different ages, religions and social backgrounds.

A couple of centuries ago, the generation of my parents and grandparents would have found this halt in religion; praying and confessing to share the burden and pressures that rested on their shoulders. You would pour your soul out to a representative of your religious choosing, which helped to soothe the pain and suffering.

Ellis and Beck pioneered cognitive therapy in the 1960s and the development of behaviour therapy can be traced back to the early 20th century. The merging of cognitive and behaviour aspects of psychotherapy constituted the last, 'third' wave of CBT during the 1980s and 90s and formed the foundation of CBT as we know it today.

As a young female doctor I am not very religious. I am too scared to call myself an atheist but at the same time I am not actively believing. I found that my therapy sessions had filled a void, leaving me wondering whether this would have been filled by religion in the past. 50 years ago others would have looked at you funny if you said you would go to the gym – 'What is a gym?', 'Why would you want to run on the spot?' Today, going to the gym is a thing. I can imagine 'seeing a therapist' becoming a thing too. Keeping your mental health fit.

Just like a priest guiding a lost member of his congregation, can a therapist signpost us in the right direction with our mental health? This question is not aimed to belittle anyone who is religious and finds a halt in their religion. I look around and see young professionals in a very similar position to myself. I wonder whether psychotherapy can create an environment outside of religion for people to cope better with their problems without the fear of being judged as sinful. I remain a little more startled now than before I engaged in this thought process. I am not sure whether I am right or wrong or whether there is a right or wrong answer.

The following words of William James, an American philosopher and psychologist who also trained as a physician, capture my thoughts perfectly: 'The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.'

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