

The evolution of *The Cardiff Model*



The Cardiff Model was created in 2007 in response to changes in student needs and a growing recognition of the effectiveness of brief, and single-session approaches to counselling.

Sarah Worley-James celebrates 13 years of this BACP award-winning, sector-leading model, and gives a guided tour of its evolutions to date

Many of you will be familiar with The Cardiff Model (TCM) – the BACP Innovation award-winning approach to student counselling, based upon Talmon Moshe’s single-session approach and solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT).^{1,2} In this article, I want to take you on a guided tour of the different evolutions TCM has been through since its inception in 2007, demonstrating its flexibility as well as innovativeness and effectiveness. Whether you are already working within TCM or considering doing so, I hope you will find the story of how it came about, and how it has evolved every couple of years, fascinating.

The original Cardiff Model

To begin, I give you an overview of the original version, created in 2007 following a request by the then Head of Counselling, John Cowley, for the two student counselling managers, Vicky Groves and Annie Blackburn, to review the service and explore alternative ways of offering therapy. The reason for this is reflected in recent comments by psychotherapist Gareth Hughes that ‘...a high number of students do appear to experience poor

wellbeing at their time in university’ and that ‘...this has consequences for their learning, performance, retention and experience’.³ The core of TCM is the hour-and-a-half of therapeutic consultation (TC), where the client is offered space to be heard, explore and move forward in recognising and connecting to their inner strengths and resources, before, in the final part of the TC, identifying a range of strategies and techniques to support them in addressing their issues. To encourage the client to prepare for and begin the process of change prior to the TC, several SFBT questions were included on the referral form. These include asking what the client’s ‘best hopes’ are from the TC, what areas of their life they are managing best, and who they turn to for support. After the TC, they are sent an email with the concepts discussed and a description of the identified relevant strategies, along with links to other websites, apps and resources and suggestions for appropriate counselling service workshops to sign up for.

An important element of TCM is that the student has a period of ‘watchful waiting’ (usually four weeks) after the TC, in which to reflect on, experiment with and tweak the strategies.

This time also enables the student to consolidate and build on the new awareness and understanding they have gained from the TC. The statistics demonstrate that between 57% and 70% of students find this session has been sufficient for them to continue their studies without further support. Those who want further counselling request this after the four weeks of watchful waiting and are offered up to four further 50-minute sessions. The rationale behind this number was that the hour-and-a-half TC, plus four, equates closely to the traditional six-session brief therapy model.

Since the original TCM was devised by Vicky and Annie in 2007, it has undergone a fascinating process of evolution in response to changing student needs, developments in the higher education sector, increasing demand for mental health support, the introduction of online counselling into the university, and feedback from other education institutions which have integrated it, with various permutations, into their services.

Responding to changing student needs

Back in the mid 2000s, the counselling team at Cardiff University was grappling with that age-old question – how to respond in a timely fashion to increasing demand for counselling. There was also a recognition that, despite the existing approach of offering up to six sessions, some counsellors were engaging in longer-term work, leading to a situation where approximately a quarter of the clients were taking up more than half of the available sessions. This, in turn, was impacting on the waiting list, resulting in the uncomfortable reality that students applying for counselling at Easter were unlikely to be seen before the end of the academic year. Alongside this practical issue was the ethical concern that students were seeking counselling and potentially not receiving any support after this point in the academic year. This was

long before the advent of wellbeing services running in conjunction with counselling. In addition to these two concerns, a further consideration was emerging: recognising that for most students, longer-term therapy is not what they are looking for. Rather, their goal is to find a way to deal with their difficulties and issues well enough to enable them to complete their degrees. The vast majority are not looking to work on existential concerns or wanting a long-term space to work on deeper, past issues. They want to find a way forward, are future focused and at a place in their lives where they are in an environment where they are expected, and expecting, to be actively learning. Hence, when they enter counselling, they are looking for solutions, strategies and techniques to put into practice.

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So, Vicky Groves and Annie Blackburn put their heads together, began reading and researching, and were drawn to Talmon Moshe’s work on single-session therapy and the evidence for the effectiveness of SFBT.¹

They posited that students were highly likely to respond well to these approaches, as they mirrored the way that students generally enter counselling – through a learning environment where they are open to growth, change, challenge and trying new things. Vicky and Annie were also excited by the positive perspective taken by SFBT, inviting the client to identify and connect to their strengths and inner resources,

to build on these and focus on where they want to be, rather than spending significant amounts of time exploring where they don’t want to be. It is important to pause here and stress that an SFBT approach does *not* ignore the client’s struggles, trauma, hurt, anger, losses, helplessness. It acknowledges and empathises with these, while supporting the client to identify their own coping methods and inner resources, and recognise exceptions that tell them they can, and are, capable of moving forward – whether by coping better, responding differently, relating in new ways to themselves and others, or by accepting their past and finding a way to live with it as part of their history, instead of carrying it around with them as a present, ‘live’ reality.

As mentioned earlier, over the past 13 years, we have found that between 57% and 70% of students find the TC sufficient. This does not mean that some do not return for help with other issues, or to do further work on the original presenting issue. The service is open to all students throughout their time at Cardiff University, with no limit on how many times they can access the service. Importantly, we ask students to take two to three months to work on what they have learnt in their TC or ongoing counselling sessions, before reapplying, to prevent a back door into longer-term therapy by repeated applications as soon as one episode of counselling is complete.

Now, let’s take a closer look at the evolutions of TCM. The original version included a 15-minute follow-up session at the end of the four-week watchful waiting period – the rationale being to give the client the opportunity to reflect on the TC, and state whether they had gained enough from it to move forward without further counselling, or, alternatively, to request ongoing sessions. After a few years, it was apparent that a large percentage of students did not attend these follow-up sessions unless they wanted ongoing counselling.

The evolutions

Hence the first evolution emerged in 2010: dropping the follow-up. Naturally, this freed up counsellor time to see more clients for TCs and ongoing counselling. In effect, we were putting the responsibility for requesting further support into students' hands, thereby promoting autonomy by asking them to contact us if they required further input. We saw no detrimental effect on numbers requesting further counselling, so this evolution proved a win for everyone.

The following year, 2011, the second evolution occurred with the creation of the online counselling service. This involved discussions and considerations about how to offer an equitable experience for students accessing counselling via email and instant messaging as well as via face-to-face or video sessions. The decision was made to ensure that an hour-and-a-half was given to all TCs, whether conducted via video, audio, instant messaging or email. We also put a great deal of thought into how to manage risk when working online: this led to the creation of a robust process, ensuring that students were linked with all appropriate online resources and supported to engage with local mental health services, wherever they were located, when accessing online support from us.

The effectiveness of email TCs, which gave the client a written account of the session and a full description of the strategies and techniques suggested, led to the third evolution: a post-TC email sent to every client, outlining the key points of learning from the session and including links to useful websites, apps and workshops, along with descriptions of agreed strategies and techniques. This email means that the client no longer needs to take notes of the ideas discussed and can refer to the email when trying to remember a strategy. It provides a list of further resources that they explore and utilise – a reinforcement of the message that they *can* make

changes and are not alone in this process, and a reminder of the date agreed to contact us if they require further counselling.

As with all university and college counselling services, demand for counselling at Cardiff University has increased year on year, with evermore complex issues arising. So, while one of the initial drivers for creating TCM was addressing waiting times, by the academic year 2018/19, it was evident that we once again needed to take a creative and innovative look at our approach to providing counselling to our students.

Trialling a one-hour version

Every summer, the counselling team has planning days, which always include a review of TCM and discussions to see whether further evolutions may be useful in adapting it to the changing needs of students and the service. In the summer of 2019, after a great deal of debate, the team agreed to trial offering a shorter, one-hour TC to those students deemed not to be presenting with complex issues at the point of referral.

The counselling team has always been proud and enthusiastic in its advocacy of TCM, and greatly valued the unique effectiveness of the one-and-a-half-hour space given to TCs. However, they were open to this trial to see whether, for some students, the same degree of effectiveness could be attained through a one-hour session.

The trial ran for six months, and while an interesting process for the counsellors taking part, there was a consensus that the reduced time unwittingly put a pressure on the counsellors as they felt that they were unable to provide all they usually would in the hour-and-a-half. The phrase that summed up how they felt was that we had created a 'diluted version' of TCM.

In fact, the trial helped the counsellors to appreciate more deeply how the one-and-a-half-hour TC allows them time to hear the client, engage with them, listen out for and

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help them identify the exceptions that support them to recognise their strengths and resilience. The additional half-hour enables time to identify what strategies and techniques may help a client move forward. The extra half-hour also creates a space where a technique can be demonstrated within the session, such as a grounding or mindfulness exercise. And as we know, if a client has experienced using a technique with the counsellor explaining and demonstrating it, they are much more likely to feel confident enough to try using it themselves.⁴

In addition, we noticed that while students still found the hour-long TC helpful, 75% were requesting ongoing counselling as this space had not been sufficient, compared with only 43% requesting further ongoing counselling after the one-and-a-half-hour TC. This additional half-hour gives them enough awareness, self-belief and resources to move forward themselves, and continue more positively with their studies.

Reflecting on these figures, it is worth noting that psychotherapist Gareth Hughes has stated that it is '...difficult to assess the real level of wellbeing and mental health in the student population.' He also says that '...demand on services has more than doubled in the last five years',³ echoing our experience at Cardiff and the need for regular reflection and evolutions of TCM.

During that same summer of 2019, the wider service decided to revise and streamline the referral form, using a different approach where students

ticked how relevant various statements were to them, in order to determine which was the most appropriate team or service to refer them to. This meant that the solution-focused questions, which had formed a core part of the referral process and had been designed specifically to start the therapeutic process, were no longer included. At every previous summer planning day, the counselling team had deemed it important to continue including these questions as an integral aspect of TCM. So, alongside discussing trialling a one-hour TC, we focused on identifying ways to continue asking students these solution-focused questions prior to the TC.

The outcome was to include three of these questions in the 'Confirmation of TC appointment' email, asking the student to consider them prior to that session. The wording we settled on was as follows:

To help you make the most of your counselling session, please consider and answer the following three questions.

You may wish to bring your answers along to your counselling session to help you focus and use the time most effectively. We suggest no more than 100 words for each question, so it's not overwhelming for you.

- 1** What are your best hopes from coming to counselling?
- 2** What signs would you notice that things are changing for the better? (eg feeling more confident/better able to cope with stressful situations/more energy/maintaining routines etc)
- 3** Think about some examples of resources, support or activities that you currently have, or have had in the past, that are helpful to you and your wellbeing; feel free to make some notes on this.

To date, we have noticed that only a few students have taken time to consider these questions: those who do arrive for their TC with responses written down, ready to explore further. Hence, we have agreed to keep these in the email for those who find it helpful.

The challenges of 2020

This overview of the evolution of TCM brings us to 2020 – a year of change and uncertainty, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting us in a multitude of ways. At Cardiff, we initially responded by pausing our TCs and ongoing counselling so that we could send support resources and offer 'check-in' appointments to all the students who were at any point in the service at that moment (those who were already referred and waiting for a TC, in the watchful waiting period after their TC, waiting for ongoing counselling, or part way through their sessions). Once we had completed this process, we recommenced providing our service online. We were in a strong position to do this as we had a well-established online counselling service with a team of qualified online counsellors. This has enabled us to support the rest of the team to move to working solely through video or audio, while the qualified online counsellors focus on providing instant messaging and email counselling.

At our annual summer planning in 2020, we continued to explore ways to evolve TCM and are in the process of creating the sixth version – a model of working with trauma within TCM.

TCM has proved so successful that in 2010 it won the BACP Innovation Award and has been adopted by many other education institutions over the intervening years. We are keen for it to continue evolving, and for other universities to create versions that suit their environment and culture. We continuously look to the future, adapting and innovating, while keeping to the core principles of TCM, which are as effective now as the day they were created in 2007. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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