

# Counselling in a Wheelchair

by Christine Willows

I completed my L4 diploma in April 2014 and have been seeing clients since 2012. As part of the course we were introduced to working creatively with clients and I have since done a Barnabas Counselling Training (BTC) L5 Course Integrating Creative Interventions and so work with both creative and talking therapies. Working creatively makes me feel alive in the counselling room.

In 2017 Charis Counselling opened and I was appointed as their service manager. We cover the community of Crawley, with many clients being referred to us by local GPs and several local mental health services. I also have a small private practice.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is very much my own personal experience of being a counsellor who is also a wheelchair user.

I have used a large electric

wheelchair both indoors and outside for more than 20 years due to fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome. These cause chronic pain and difficulties with fatigue and stamina daily.

I am very independent (sometimes to my detriment!) - happily travelling alone for several miles on pavements and using trains, planes and the occasional bus.

I recognise that not every person who uses a wheelchair would have this same level of independence and we need to remember that every wheelchair using person has their own individual strengths and needs. This article will, therefore, not represent how things are for all counsellors and clients.

## TRAINING

All my counselling training from Level 2-5 has been with BCT, Levels 2 to 4 were taught in our church building which is mostly accessible.

The Level 5 Integrating Creative Interventions was planned at a building that did not have an accessible toilet and so the location had to be changed, when it was realised that I was attending and so thankfully without any fuss or me needing to ask.

Throughout level 2-4 courses my co-trainees and tutors regularly commented that the height of my wheelchair would have a negative impact upon the client and therapeutic relationship. However, I have not found this to be the case. I am aware that when I have my own wheelchair, which is set at a height where I feel comfortable and confident, it feels part of who I am, whereas when I am in a loan chair (as I am at the moment) it is much more like it being a part that has been bolted on, so I do not feel so comfortable or confident; in fact people often say that I look vulnerable and that is exactly how I feel. So maybe the height is not

so important as how I feel in the wheelchair.

Also, during training, I had a couple of clients who wanted to be 'my carers'. I found this quite difficult to deal with at this early stage. I remember one in particular who felt I needed help with packing my bag, etc., as she knew she was my last client. I did not want to hurt her feelings so created a fictitious client who came after her. I did not feel good about it, but it worked.

### FINDING A PERSONAL COUNSELLOR AND SUPERVISOR

Finding a counsellor and supervisor has been so difficult over the years. It is amazing just how many homes and premises are not accessible and how many people think their home is, but it proves not to be, even though they have been given wheelchair measurements. I have even arrived, having had a conversation on the phone about my requirements, to find five steps leading to the door. I could not even knock, let alone get into the property and was reduced to shouting, which did not feel very professional. At another property I was faced with two scaffold boards leading up to a patio door. These are sometimes suitable but, on this occasion, I was somehow expected to jump up onto the boards which were about 15cm off the ground and then somehow turn through ninety degrees to be the right way round, all after avoiding a fishpond. It was difficult because I could see that this person had tried and was not impressed when I said 'I am sorry but this is not going to be possible'.

During my training I was able to use a room at our church building for both counselling and supervision – however, this was far from ideal, as the room was based on a busy corridor and I did not feel safe and secure as a client. Therefore, there were some key issues that I felt unable to discuss.

It is not just about getting into the building, but whether there is an accessible toilet and if not,

where can I find one close by. This is especially important if I have travelled for an hour or so on the train. You might be thinking there are accessible toilets on some trains. This is true, but trying to get out of my wheelchair and balance sufficiently to not fall over whilst the train is juddering along is impossible for me. I have, though, discovered that there is a chain of coffee shops that have excellent accessible facilities.

Thankfully, I do now have both a counsellor whose home is accessible and safe, and a supervisor who I meet in an accessible room in a community building or online. Both are a good journey away from my home but both are worth it. Due to Covid-19, each one is available online at the moment.

### ACCESS

Having the experiences above, it has been important to me that any counselling I am involved with is as accessible as possible.

Charis Counselling is run from our church building, which is mostly accessible apart from the upstairs. The most difficult part is getting through the inner doors at the entrance to the building and further double doors inside, as I need one hand to drive with, so two doors with only one hand is a challenge and I am often carrying

something else too – I often feel that God should have given me three arms!

My private practice is held at my home where access is good but closing doors for confidentiality takes some manoeuvring for me.

Generally, it is doors that are the most difficult for me and they can crop up anywhere, even at the Hayes Centre (ACC Conference) where I always feel very well cared for. Access is generally good, however there are heavy doors in the accommodation, which means I need to either have someone with me or wait for someone to come along to open them. Last time I was at the Hayes Centre I found myself waylaid by a total stranger to get the alarm cord in the shower untied from the ceiling level.

### BEING THE CLIENT

I suppose I do not think about my wheelchair much, as it is just part of who I am; without it I go nowhere. People who know me mostly do not even see the wheelchair unless I accidentally run over their toes!

I felt quite humbled by the care taken by both my counsellor and her husband, who at the beginning was remodelling ramps he had made to help me get in the front door. My counsellor was manhandling the ramps and furniture to meet my needs until she had a counselling room built,



which has loads of space for me to manoeuvre and a table at the right height for me to work creatively. She is also always there with an arm to help when I move from my wheelchair to the settee and has always done her best to ensure I am as comfortable as possible. I felt and feel so cared for I cannot really explain it.

Interestingly I have noticed that she sits on a cushion to raise her closer to my height.

Sometimes working creatively itself takes creativity, such as when working on boundaries with pashminas, needing to tie them together and put them around and across the back of my wheelchair rather than just around me, smashing something I made from clay at a table in my counsellors' sitting room instead of the garden.

## BEING A COUNSELLOR

I love being a counsellor! It is such an honour to work with clients. That said, I have to manage my days and weeks to ensure that I am in the best state physically and from an energy perspective. This means not only that the number of clients I can see in a week is limited, but that the number of other things I can do is also limited. Being physically at my best for my clients and myself as a client is my priority.

My wheelchair enables me to recline and tilt my chair into different positions between clients, and this enables me to care for my body as well as clients. However if, like now, I need to use a loan chair, there has never been one yet that meets my physical needs to change position. Using a loan chair enables me to get about to some degree but I need to balance even more my physical needs.

I have had tussles within myself as to whether I should tell clients before I meet them that I use a wheelchair. Generally, I find that I say to my new Charis Counselling clients, 'You'll know it is me because I use an electric wheelchair'. I say this because Charis Counselling

operates in a building that can be quite busy and it enables easy identification – to date there has not been anyone else in an electric wheelchair at the same time!

I do not feel I am necessarily so upfront with my private clients; it is like it is not part of my thought at the initial phone call. I do not want to make that first conversation about me. Am I being unfair to these clients? Should I need to say something? After all, would counsellors with hidden disabilities feel they needed to explain them to their clients at the initial phone call?

However, my wheelchair can be a shock to some clients. To get the balance right is a challenge. I have taken to identifying my house by the wheelchair ramp at the front door but wonder if this is sufficient? So many questions arise.

With all clients I answer any questions about my disability and or wheelchair, which I realise is much more disclosure than many counsellors would make, but the other option is to have those questions on my clients' minds whilst expecting them to work on their issues.

From the perspective of the actual counselling I do not think there are any differences for me compared to a non-wheelchair user. I do use a taller table rather than a coffee table so I can see what the client is doing creatively and write my notes, etc.

It is frustrating to me that some of the techniques involve working with the body and would be better if I could access the floor or a lower seat. Working creatively with things and using the floor means having the client to pick everything up, which doesn't feel right to me, but it is the only way. I also have a raised sofa so that if a client wants me to sit next to them rather than opposite them, I can do so. Why a raised sofa? Because I feel getting stuck on the sofa would not give the impression of independence that I want to present and I do

not want to encourage any more carers!

## CONCLUSION

So yes, I am a wheelchair user and a counsellor, which are not mutually exclusive. For me it is much more about managing my conditions with rest, medication and my wheelchair. However, writing this article has helped me to appreciate that clients quickly see that I use the wheelchair to meet my physical needs and that the skills required to help them on their journey are separate from this.

### Christine Willows

#### About the author

Christine has 3 children and 6 grandchildren

She moved to Crawley with her children in 1992 and worked in the local primary school for 18 years. She also joined Crawley Community Church, which is still her spiritual home. She became part of and eventually leader of the ministry team. She worked with the elder to find an organisation that would train a group in counselling and in January 2008 they started Level 2 with a cohort of twenty one, mostly from the church. They followed this immediately with Level 3 and a cohort of eleven and then had a break until April 2012 when they began Level 4.

It was during Level 3 that Christine realised that she could not cope with working on a daily basis, even with her wheelchair. She retired on ill health grounds. In her free time she loves reading, working on craft projects, swimming, jigsaw puzzles, being out in the countryside and doing puzzles such as crosswords

