

What I'm really thinking: The cognitive hypnotherapist

'I'm there to help them change, not to hold their hand and tell them how awful it all is'

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'It amazes me how long people will live with a problem that is ruining their lives.' Photograph: Lo Cole for the Guardian

I am always fascinated when I first meet a client. Three people can come to see me for the same issue, but each session will end up somewhere different – everybody approaches their problems in a unique way.

I hear some terribly sad stories, and I have to stay detached and professional even when clients are in tears. I'm there to help them change, not to hold their hand and tell them how awful it all is. That's not what they pay me for. I hope they understand that and know I wouldn't be in this job if I didn't care.

When I started out, it was very scary. I'd sit there nodding, a calm smile on my face, but underneath I was panicking. I'd worry I was going to run out of questions, that my techniques wouldn't work. I don't think it showed. My trainer called it "the swan effect": calm on the surface, paddling frantically below.

It amazes me how long people will live with a problem that is ruining their lives. I see a lot of clients who have spent years trying to cope with things such as insomnia, panic attacks, phobias. I don't wave a magic wand, but I often hear them say, "I wish I'd tried this years ago."

I have to resist the urge to "help" everyone. I offer free sessions to friends and family, but I can't make them do what I want them to. That's something I've come to realise over time. Plenty of people say there are things about themselves they want to change, but they have to be willing for results actually to happen.

• Tell us what you're really thinking at mind@guardian.co.uk.

