

# How I became a therapist

## Chris Williams

Trained by some of 'the greats' in the person-centred approach, Chris Williams offers cross-cultural couples counselling in Beijing

I was born in a small town in Northern Ireland. My father was a civil engineer, and his job took us to some interesting places. In the mid 1970s 'the Troubles' in Ulster motivated him to move his family to Hong Kong, and since then I have had several careers and have lived in various countries, including Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore and China. I currently work as a counsellor in Beijing, and I find the experience of having been an expatriate child, teenager and adult very helpful in my counselling role in this multicultural setting.

Prior to counselling, my background was in international trade. I started work in a 120-year-old British trading company in Hong Kong in 1976. My first experience of personal therapy was in Beijing in the mid 1990s, when a friend suggested I see a psychologist. In 45 minutes I was diagnosed with moderately severe clinical depression. I took the prescribed medication, and continued to see my great therapist for a year. She was respectful, thoughtful and, although a qualified psychologist, she worked very much in the person-centred approach. A year later, a painful relationship break-up led me back to therapy, and again I felt huge benefits. I decided that therapy was the greatest gift a person could give himself or herself.

My father passed away in the late 90s, and left me enough money to pursue counselling studies. The key to unlocking the door was a certificate in counselling, so I hopped on a 747 and flew from Beijing to Derry in Northern Ireland – I think they let me on the course because I had travelled so far!

My next step was a diploma course, and luckily I met Marina Sweeney, who I refer to as the 'Mother of Counselling'

in Northern Ireland. She told me about Strathclyde University's person-centred training. I was enormously privileged to learn counselling there directly from Professor Dave Mearns. Learning with Dave was almost surreal, because he was Carl Rogers' supervisee in the US for three years, and so had extensive contact with Carl. This led to a unique teaching experience, where Dave would say, 'Carl said this, Carl said that,' and sometimes it was as if Carl was in the room. The two things I remember best from Dave were, 'The counsellor needs the qualities of fearlessness and stillness', and, 'You should treat yourselves as trainees for five years after you graduate'. For some reason I seem to have fearlessness and stillness in abundance, and these are very useful qualities in my chosen field of couple counselling, especially when doing 'recovery from an affair' work. Treating myself as a trainee after I graduated helped me keep my ego in check, and also led me to hoover up as much CPD as I possibly could.

Dave also attracted the 'greats' to lecture us at Strathclyde – people from the person-centred world like Brian Thorne, Charlie O'Leary, Margaret Warner and, of course, Elke Lambers.



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The brilliant Mick Cooper joined Strathclyde University that year, and I was very privileged to have Mick as the leader of our small supervision group. Returning to Ulster after Strathclyde, I did two courses with Marina in Derry, acquiring the skills of solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT), which Marina had learned directly from Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg.

After graduating, I did lots of CPD, including one weekend with Dr Charlie O'Leary, who is a leading person-centred couple counsellor. This course convinced me that I wanted to do couple work, because of its dynamic and fast-moving nature. The work unfolds right in front of you because both parties are there; you can see progress, check facts, and – heaven forbid – interrupt your clients to clarify meaning!

In 2010, I returned to Beijing, to run the company I had started in 1992. I now split my time: CEO of the company during week and counselling couples and individuals at weekends. My clients include individual expats, mixed marriage couples and expat couples. I love the mental buzz of couple counselling, where I'm trying to keep track of two people at once. Although cultural differences do exist, I don't let them dominate therapy. In my experience, most problems are caused by differences between men and women.

If I could wave a magic wand, I would ask for more CPD, supervisors and liability insurers in Beijing. Professional liability insurance is simply not available, CPD opportunities are few and far between, and therapists suitable to be supervisors come and go with depressing regularity. My current supervisor is an American psychologist, and we get along just fine. I would always prefer someone from the person-centred approach but right now, to my best knowledge, I am the only one in Beijing. If there are any others out there, please get in touch! ■

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