

Wounded Healers?

How many stories of trauma, abuse, loss and grief, serious illnesses or disabilities and marriage breakdowns have you heard in your astrological practice? Is this a frequent occurrence for you? The majority of people seek a consultation when a crisis occurs or they are troubled not when life is joyful and full. Astrology students often come to learn when they are seeking answers about their own life journey and they too have their own, at times, traumatic and troubled stories.

Do you find some of these stories leave an impression that sometimes lingers with you perhaps on and off for days? Some points to ponder ...!

Did you come to astrology as part of your own life's journey, as a way of helping others to gain insight into their lives in order to help and perhaps heal? Perhaps your own story that echoes with the stories of some of your clients? You, as an astrological practitioner, know that during a consultation you work hard to build a rapport with the client by showing care, empathy and interest in their stories so you can better assist them but do you have an awareness of how your own experiences influence you?

Carl G. Jung discusses in 'The Psychology of Dementia Praecox' (Jung 1907) countertransference, as one of the challenges for the therapist in that the therapist will have conscious and unconscious reactions to the patient due to their own life experiences. This may impact deeply on the therapist if they are not aware of their own issues both past and current and have not worked towards resolution or a certain level of acceptance and also have an awareness of their own limitations. I know of many counsellors, including astrological counsellors who seem to draw to them the very clients who have, or are experiencing life events similar to the counsellors own personal experiences both past and current.

The predicament here is the counsellor is in a unique position to empathise and understand. However, at the same time the echoes of experience bring forth the conscious and unconscious reactions that may lead to a relived trauma for the counsellor, lessening the ability to remain objective, to listen and to help. If you knew of the possible echoes of your own experiences being brought into the consulting room you may sensibly refer the person on but on many occasions it is only after the consultation has begun that you realise. So does being exposed in a consistent way to such situations impact on you? Is there a cost to caring and being a healer?

It is widely acknowledged today that those in 'helping' professions, who frequently, if not daily, listen to stories or witness emotional distress, trauma and loss, are at risk of developing 'compassion fatigue' (Figely 1995). Compassion fatigue was first noted with nurses especially those who worked in emergency wards and were constantly exposed to physical, mental and emotional trauma and frequently faced grieving relatives. Compassion fatigue is recognised as affecting all the 'helping' professions from emergency personnel, to counsellors, clergy, and human services workers, to medical and mental health professionals. Those most at risk are those who have empathy for others, those who have experienced trauma in their own lives or have unresolved trauma and those working with children's trauma.

The symptoms of compassion fatigue can be exhaustion physically, emotionally and mentally ('I have no more to give') a difficulty in separating your work from your personal life, the withdrawal from usual activities plus family and friends and often with the attitude of 'I can't talk about it'. There is a feeling of hopelessness, overworking but always feeling behind in tasks, irritability, anxiety, the abuse of alcohol or drugs, anger, blaming others, low self esteem, relationship problems, the inability to feel joy, sleep disturbances, chronic lateness, depression, headaches and a variety of physical symptoms. It is not 'burnout' as burnout is about lack of job satisfaction and manifests in a different way.

Many people come into counselling roles because they have suffered their own traumatic wounds and now wish to help heal others. The cost of providing the needed wisdom, empathy and care to others on their own journey can have a high cost. So how do you take care of yourself? Firstly stress management principles – eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, make sure you get enough rest and time to relax and enjoy your relationships with others.

Gain an awareness of your limitations and your own needs. If a client calls for an appointment spend a few minutes asking about why they want to see you. If they have an issue that reflects your own situation it may be wise to refer them on or if you don't feel comfortable talking to them don't make the appointment – trust your intuition and somatic signs. Set clear boundaries around your availability to

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clients and students so you have personal time. Don't make appointments that will overload you even if someone 'just has to see you as soon as possible' and allow enough time between appointments for some relaxation, or if needed a debriefing about the session.

Who do you debrief with?

This is where it is important to have a network of supports including other astrologers who you can call to discuss a difficult session. For new astrologers it is important to have a mentor or supervisor who you can talk through issues with and to gain support, understanding and guidance. For those with experience there will be those times when you need to do this for your own sake. It is also good to have a referral list of other professionals, in a variety of fields, so that you can refer clients as needed for specific issues.

Above all know your own triggers, accept help from others, allow yourself to feel and safely express your feelings, laugh, cry, use humour, spend quiet time alone every day. Mediate or learn to, have meaningful conversations with those you have a connection with, have a night out and learn relaxation and deep breathing techniques.

Remember that 'Knowledge is the gift of memory, given to many – Wisdom is the gift of experience, given to only a few.' We all have our own life experiences and we are all 'wounded' healers but it is from experience that we gain the wisdom, compassion and care needed to help others and while we do that we must remember to extend our care and compassion to ourselves.

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