


The Talking Cure: Normal People, Their Struggles and the Life-Changing Power of Therapy (2019) by Gillian Straker and Jacqui Winship. Sydney, Australia: Pan Macmillan Australia. ISBN-10: 1760781169; ISBN-13: 978-1760781163.

 pacja.org.au/2020/08/the-talking-cure-normal-people-their-struggles-and-the-life-changing-power-of-therapy-2019-by-gillian-straker-and-jacqui-winship-sydney-australia-pan-macmillan-australia-isbn-10-1760781169-j

[Return to Articles](#)

Reviewed by:

Jennifer English, *B. BSc., Dip. Ed., B. Ed. (Counselling)*, AHPRA registered counselling psychologist (Victoria).

The Talking Cure is written by two Sydney-based, highly-skilled, and experienced psychotherapists and supervisors, with Professor Straker also having academic experience. The book highlights an approach that the authors call “relational psychotherapy,” a term they ascribe to one of Freud’s patients, Bertha Pappenheim. In keeping with the importance of the client’s story in therapy, the authors take nine examples from their vast experience, amalgamating client histories to form unique people while protecting clients’ confidentiality. Each story is an example of a psychological dynamic and how it can be worked with in relational therapy. Each chapter demonstrates the active collaboration between the therapist and client that distinguishes relational psychotherapy from classical psychoanalysis and that forms the vehicle by which insight and change occurs.

The book, according to the authors, is written for a general audience, and is not a psychotherapy textbook. It can be classified as a self-help book. It aims to give readers an insight into the workings and value of relational therapy—a talking cure—and, through examples, to highlight the usefulness of in-depth therapy to bring about self-understanding and transformation. As the title suggests, this is a book for “normal people”. It is not a diagnostic manual, nor does it seek to describe pathology. The authors never use the words treatment plan or refer to a diagnosis or pathology.

Each chapter is one client’s story with many examples of dialogue from the therapy session, the authors’ thinking and interpretation, the client’s responses to the interpretations, and collaborative exploration of the relational dynamic. Each chapter begins by setting a scene and embedding the dynamic to be explored, in everyday life. Each chapter ends with a short summary of the dynamics discussed (called

“considerations for the reader”), followed by a list of markers of the dynamic or ways to recognise it in oneself, common childhood experiences contributing to this situation, and tips on how to make changes. This is the self-help aspect of the book.

Each chapter takes its time to describe the person, give some of their story, and thoroughly describe the dynamics at work in their lives and how it evidences itself in therapy. The dynamics chosen are broad and yet general, in that they are everyday struggles everyone will relate to in some way. Chapter 1 (“The Making of a Merger: Why is My Child a Monster When I Try So Hard?”) explores projection and splitting within a mother-daughter and family context. The authors walk readers through the psychological issues at work in the relationship as it unfolds in the therapy and becomes described as a “merger”. We see the client resist reflection and the therapist struggle with ways to help the client see the dynamic. This is a complex topic and one many therapists struggle to understand and it is well described here. Similarly, in Chapter 7 (“Love is Madness: Why am I Always Attracted to Controlling Men?”) the authors delve deeply into the client’s early life and track her experiences to display how this in-depth exploration can lead to identifying patterns and be the start of change.

The authors are generous in sharing their own thinking and process, as well as their confusion and vulnerabilities as therapists. Each chapter contains examples from their own experience, and describes their reactions to clients, observations, and the thinking that leads them to make the interpretations they do. Relational therapy relies on insight and ultimately change to occur in the therapy via the transference and the identification of these patterns at work in relation to the therapist. The dialogue and the discussion of the therapist’s formulation of the transference, as well as client’s reactions, clearly shows the reader how this works and why therapists make these comments about the relationship.

The reader gets a clear picture of how the unconscious is at play in the client’s life; how it gets enacted both within the problems that bring them to therapy and within the consulting room in relation to the therapist. If the reader recognises themselves, they can do the checklist at the end of the chapter and find useful tips on how to move forward. Reference is made to popular TV shows, such as *The Sopranos*, and articles about celebrities, such as Lady Gaga. The sources are referenced as footnotes on each page and come from academic sources as well as popular media like *ET Online*.

This book is successful in achieving its aim of showcasing in-depth psychotherapy at a time when short-term, outcome-focussed therapy is what is on offer and Medicare supported. It successfully explains and demystifies the process involved in relational therapy. It covers a range of common dynamics, but as the authors acknowledge, “can never be complete given the amazing complexity of the human psyche ...” (p. 253).

As readers gain this insight and appreciation, the authors hope their voices will be added to the growing pressure to make this type of therapy more accessible. *The Talking Cure* is engaging and very informative. The reader will need to have a reasonably sophisticated understanding of psychological language and be able to grasp and accept the concept of the unconscious, in order to really get the most from the book. If the reader perseveres,

they will see how the unconscious and early life experiences affect our everyday life and personal relationships. The authors descriptions and examples of unfolding self-awareness are gentle and empathically told, thus avoiding defensive reactions in the reader! The self-help section at the end of the chapter nicely allows the reader time for reflection and insight, as well as some tools to move forward. The accessibility of this book leaves it open for readers to grow more curious about their unconscious, consider therapy, and to understand what to expect should they go down the in-depth therapy path.

There is a lot in this book for therapists too, even though they are not the target audience. As contemporary training in psychology, psychotherapy, and counselling primarily focusses on cognitive behavioural therapy, and short-term Medicare funded approaches, this book is a breath of fresh air for those who have trained in the more classical therapies, or those curious to know more and offer their clients a more in-depth and transformative approach. Because the authors take their time to explore and explain the transference and countertransference in plain language, this is a useful starting point for therapist and counsellors to grasp these often—complex concepts. The footnotes point to an excellent reading list for those wanting to delve into the in-depth psychotherapies.

The Talking Cure has a clear purpose: the authors invite readers to

journey with us behind the consulting room door and to eavesdrop on the talking cure so as to gain an understanding of the process of psychotherapy. We hope you will come to value how a deep engagement with the psyche, undertaken in relationship with a skilled therapist, can reveal how the shadows of the past may be playing out in the way you relate to yourself and others in the present. (p. 14)

The authors stay true to purpose and have certainly achieved their goal. Time will tell if the pendulum will swing towards the more in-depth therapies again. I certainly hope so.

— Jennifer English
jenny.english10@gmail.com

[Return to Articles](#)