

Episode 1

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Kate Hi and welcome to Weird Times, a podcast about mental health during COVID-19, brought to you by Hard Feelings.

I'm Kate Scowen, a social worker in private practice and the founder of Hard Feelings, a small non-profit social enterprise located in Toronto. We run a retail storefront and rent space to counsellors in private practice who offer low-cost counseling. Together our community builds access to supports and dialogue around mental health.

Check us out on Instagram @hardfeelingsto or on our website at www.hardfeelings.org

In this podcast, we're going to talk specifically about mental health during COVID times, or what I've been simply referring to as weird times. Because really this is just weird and it's also generating a lot of hard feelings. We've had to close our storefront and move our work online. We're missing you and the conversations we were having in person.

Since we can't be together, we want this podcast to be a space that builds community, with compassion and care for what you are going through now. It's not meant to replace a therapy session but we hope it can help you in other ways by providing information and insights, and by sharing stories of how others are struggling and coping.

We're going to chat with mental health professionals and hear from listeners about how they're getting through these weird times.

Today, we're going to talk about single session counseling. Some of the counselors in our community of practice have shifted their work to offer online low-cost single session counseling. They're doing this to be able to support more people during these challenging times.

Single session counseling is different than ongoing therapy and today we're going to learn more about it. For some, one session is enough. For many, it's all that we have access to right now through free services or what we can afford in fee-based counseling.

Taïna Mayberry is joining us today to chat a bit about single session therapy, what it is, what it's not and what the benefits and challenges can be. Taïna is part of the community of practice at Hard Feelings. She's been offering single session counseling for several years as a volunteer at a shelter in downtown Toronto. She holds a master of Social Work from McGill University and works full time in the youth care sector. Taïna is also the founder of the Most Nurtured, which creates community-based wellness initiatives exclusively by and for black women, femmes, non-binary in Toronto. These initiatives currently include yoga, meditation and mental health workshops. You can learn more about that by following their Facebook or Instagram @themostnurtured or visiting their website at www.themostnurtured.com.

Kate Welcome, Taïna.

Taïna Hi! Hi, Kate. Happy to be here.

Kate Thanks for joining us today. How are you doing in these weird times?

Taina Weird is exactly the word. I'm just trying to. I work from home now for my main job, which I know is a privilege and luxury right now. And I'm just trying to work within my control to do what I can to cope. And sometimes that just involves remembering to put deodorant in the morning.

Kate Right. It's all the little things. Yep. Whatever you need to do to get by. So Taina, we're gonna talk a little bit about single session therapy today, because that's something that I think a lot of people might not understand what it is, what the benefits and challenges might be. And you have a lot of experience offering single session therapy and you led some trainings for the counselors in the community of practice at Hard Feelings on this issue and just wanted to chat with you and, you know, help sort of talk about some things that people may have questions about, starting with just the basics, like what is single session therapy?

Taina Absolutely. I think that's a really good question because there is a lot to it. There are some things that are the same as long term therapy, but there are definitely a few distinct differences. So I started off by saying that there is no one theoretical approach for a single session therapy, but there are a number of guiding assumptions or principles. The main one being, of course, that the therapist and the client approach the therapy session as though it will likely be the only one. In some settings there is room for potentially to have another one. But the approach initially is that this is the first and last meeting. Single session therapy is also meant to - to some degree - to be in reaction or a solution for barriers which make mental health services less accessible or desirable. So you may see features with single session therapy that are meant to increase accessibility, so things like low or no fee or sliding scale; clients who are not required to have a health card or any form of I.D. to access services; you may not need to be a client of the agency that is providing the services; you might also see a shorter intake, no wait list and services provided on a first come first served basis. You'll also see a tendency more within the therapy to rely more on the client's existing skill set and knowledge to address any presenting concerns. And the accountability is placed more on the client to take what they've learned and apply it to life because the therapist won't be along the road with you to provide ongoing collaboration. So it's about what can we do right now that you can take with you after the session, because that's where the important work happens.

Kate So it's really about trying to help people connect with their own kind of inner strength and resilience, the coping mechanisms that they've maybe used before in their lives and sort of for whatever reason have not been able to tap into that and helping them sort of recognize it and and kind of use that in the current situation.

Taina Absolutely. It's a lot about focusing on those, as you said, inner strength and resilience that maybe even a client doesn't recognize that they have and asking those open ended questions to kind of figure out what those coping skills there are and to give them the confidence that those are skills that can be used in the future.

Kate So what kind of issues are, you know, appropriate to bring to single session? So what kinds of things does a single session of therapy work for?

Taina Good question. I would say and I will preface that single session does have kind of that vibe of goal oriented and what can we do now to help you in the future? But there are

definitely is the opportunity where a therapist can just sit and hold space for you, for your feelings, and you can use this truly as a space to just release emotionally. And that there aren't specific follow-ups. And it's more about that mutual understanding and the expectation that a client has with their counselor at the beginning so that they both understand that this is what the point of the session is for. So it can be used definitely for those who have specific presenting problems and concerns as well as those who go in to understand that it might just be to release their feelings. Perhaps they don't have anyone else that they can vent to and they simply just want to feel heard and seen.

Kate And that's feels particularly relevant right now, I think, for a lot of people during these weird times. As we're all self isolating and physically distancing. There may be a lot of things that are coming up for people that they just need an opportunity to have a safe place to have a conversation, feel heard and held and sort of maybe get some support around tapping into those inner strengths and coping mechanisms. Is there anything you think that a single session of therapy would not be appropriate for? Is there anything that's not meant for single session therapy?

Taina Definitely. And I will as well see that not every single approach to therapy fits everyone. So similarly, single session therapy might not fit for some people the way other therapeutic approaches may or may not fit for you as well. So single session therapy is not a crisis line. And depending on your organizational policies, it is discouraged in terms of those who are actively suicidal to use single session therapy. And there is a difference between being actively suicidal and using self-harm as a coping mechanism. But it is definitely not necessarily the place where you will get the most appropriate services. I would also say, especially during this time, there are those who really need specific support and want questions answered about things like employment benefit claims. Or OW and ODSP policies or maybe the Canada Emergency Response Benefit. But this is not the space for that. This is the space for emotion focused exploration, a safe space to kind of explore that side of yourself rather than where are some services and what is my eligibility for them?

Kate Right, because a lot of those services are free and online and whether, you know, counselors often will connect people with those resources. But the gist of the session is meant to be more about how are you feeling, how are you handling these challenges, how are you coping and providing people with a space outside of family or friends who have, you know, some subjectivity to who you are and how you respond. So being able to speak with someone who's objective and not judgmental and warm and professionally trained to support your mental health.

Taina Definitely. I would also add that for those who are dealing with things like incredibly complex trauma and feel that they cannot safely feel supported by a therapist unless they devote one whole session first to explaining maybe their family history or the history of a traumatic event, before discussing things like coping strategies and support, this might not be the space. Only because you only have one session and perhaps you don't have the time fully to explain the background and also receive some connection around coping strategies and you leave the session feeling escalated. And as well, I will say in terms of being in this very strange time that we're in, that there are many people who are going to truly feel the need to have single session therapy because of complexities related to COVID-19. So, for example, if you're dealing with challenges related to disordered eating patterns and now you feel triggered because of ideas about food and grocery stores. This would be a space to connect if you had maybe some challenges around maybe a partner that you now have to physically distant with. This would be a safe space, as you've

mentioned, where you are able to feel seen and heard and connect about something that's very important and concerning for you.

Kate Okay. So really the gist of it is active suicidality - outside of self-harm as a coping mechanism which is a whole podcast episode in and of itself - and sort of specific practical resource sharing, those are those are not necessarily best suited to single session therapy or, long term trauma complex trauma issues maybe not be well addressed in single session therapy. But outside of that, given these complex weird times, a single session of therapy, it sounds like, can be really helpful to get some perspective. And as we said before, kind of tap into your own strengths and resources. So if I'm a client, kind of curious and deciding to reach out and schedule a single session with a counselor anywhere. What can I expect in that session? What's it gonna be like? Can you talk us through that a little bit?

Taina Definitely. So I would say kind of what we were kind of alluding to a bit before you can expect someone who will connect with you, but may only focus on your past to a certain degree. They'll focus on maybe what of your past is currently affecting your present and how can we leverage your strength to make positive changes for your future. You will encounter many of the same features of longer term therapy, where you will have a qualified counselor who is here to listen to you, to focus on your concerns and motivations for change and take into consideration your lived experience and identity. Someone who is eager to understand, who may have an emphasis on goals or actions for the future, but is also here to sit and listen to you. You may hear questions as well, especially if there is an emphasis on your personal goals for a plan. You may hear questions like what is one small change you would like to see happen by the end of our session? Or what are some strengths you have used in the past that might help you in your present situation? So you'll hear those kind of open and ended non-judgmental questions. Just trying to figure out what are you able to use right now for your future in a way that works for you?

Kate And you talked a little bit Taina there about identity and you and I had chatted about that before, like figuring out how to bring your own identity to this action, because that's a fairly complex issue for many people. So can you speak a little bit to that?

Taina Definitely. And for me, that's definitely a priority motivation. Myself as a black woman who has accessed services myself. I always think how can I represent myself in a way where I feel seen and heard and that my lived experience in my intersectional identities are truly taken into consideration. And that is a question people could have for both short and long term therapy. And I can take a whole podcast to kind of talk about what that looks like, especially for people of color. But I would say in terms of that, sometimes that involves pre-planning and even thinking about what specifically to I want my counselor to focus on and how can I highlight that? It might also involve in the pre-planning, looking specifically for therapists who maybe reflect your identity or asking them by email questions such as how does your experience, education and training support people of my identity? What sort of experience do you have in doing this before? During the session, it can involve even asking your therapist to paraphrase. So if you just explain something that in my case might involve talking about a racialized microaggression, I might even ask my therapist, can you tell me what you think you heard me say? Can you tell me how you understood what I just said?

Kate Those are really, really important points, and I think, you know, that whole piece around preparing for a session. There are so many different ways to prepare. And you talked mentioned a little bit. Sort of preparing in a way that you are ensuring that your

identity is highlighted and the focus is there for the counselor. How would you prepare for that? Is that sort of like writing out a series of questions that you would want to make sure you ask? Or how do you get a therapist to focus and highlight, focus on the things that are important to you based on your intersectionality and your identities.

Taina Some strategies I find are just kind of writing out for yourself in advance and just writing down certain aspects that are connected to your identity be it your LGBTQ+, you come from a racialized identity, you're living with a disability. There's many, many different identities and intersections that this kind of touches on. But writing down those key things that you want your counselor to know or to understand so that when you're in that session and you touch on those things, that those are things you have in focus that they truly are understanding and are taking them into consideration. When you're talking about strategies or when they even say things like, I hear you and I am holding space for you and really kind of asking them. You can even ask them back, what does that look like to you? What does that mean in terms of what you're taking into consideration of what I just said? So being able to just be very upfront about those sort of things from the beginning because a single session therapy, you only have that hour. So being able to be upfront and honest with your therapist about those specific parts of your identity is really important because it gives your therapist an opportunity to respond to that and also to provide you with that assurance that they have the experience, education and training to support you and hold you.

Kate Yeah. Now, I mean, not only are we talking about single session therapy, but right now this therapy is happening online or over the phone. And that has again, that could be its own podcast as well. We've got so many podcast ideas coming out of this conversation, but that, you know, that throws another element into it of sort of, you know, feeling connected and understood and held by a therapist who is not across a room from you, but across the city, from you on a screen in front of you. So, you know, thinking about that impact and those different ways of connecting is also probably something to think about in there. So is there anything else, Taïna, you think that is important for people to know about single session therapy, online therapy, these weird times that we're living in and that you want to sort of send us off with any kind of thoughts or ideas or challenges?

Taina I would say that it's okay to reach out for help. We are really in a time where being able to connect with support is incredibly important. Coping strategies, both large and small - so putting on deodorant in the morning - to connecting with someone online or by phone for a therapeutic relationship. Those are all valid and incredibly important ways that we are able to get through this time, both as individuals and as a community. I think that this pandemic has truly illustrated that even though we may think we live in isolation, that the impact of our interactions with each other are truly what at the end of the day shape us as individuals and as a society, and it is that collective care and community care that we're able to provide for each other through mutual support, that really is what makes a difference right now. So whatever you're able to tap into too big or small when it comes to healing, recovering, creating a space where you can just breathe is valid, is important, is critical. And I really encourage everyone to reach out to what that looks like for them.

Kate Thanks, Taïna. That is so on point and important right now. I think that we're all really craving connection. And I think that sort of call to action around really reaching out and getting the support you need that's going to make things better for you is really, really important. So thanks so much for joining us today. I wish you could be here in the room with me instead of over the phone, but hopefully we'll get back to that fairly soon.

Taina Absolutely.

Kate If you're interested in connecting with a counsellor for a single-session of online therapy through Hard Feelings, you can find out more about that on our website.

If you're in crisis, please don't wait. Check the resource list on our website for some places you can connect with in Toronto, or reach out to your local distress centre or helpline.

Thanks for listening. We hope you will send us your questions to include in future episodes. Let us know what you're struggling with and how we might be of support to you.

We're in this together and we're here to help.

You can reach me at kate@hardfeelings.org

Weird Times is produced and edited by Arij Elmi.
It was recorded at the Dark Studio Sound Company in Toronto.

Please note that this podcast is meant strictly for informational purposes and is not a substitute for mental health care from a regulated health professional.

Stay tuned, stay well and stay home.