

family therapy unit at St Pau Hospital. When I moved to the UK, I started doing volunteering work with refugees and Latin American women, who were all survivors of a variety of abusive and traumatic circumstances. That experience led me to study at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust in London, and deepen my understanding of trauma and trauma-focused work. Soon after, I started working as a coordinator, progressing to manager of therapeutic services within the VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) sector. During that time, I qualified as a clinical supervisor and co-wrote the first *Guidelines to Work Therapeutically with Survivors of Genital Mutilation*.¹ After working for about 10 years in that area, I moved to the HE sector. Nowadays, I have left my managerial responsibilities and work as an independent counsellor/ psychotherapist and clinical supervisor for universities and NGOs.

While I continue doing therapy in my private practice and at Roehampton University, I have developed my latest and most exciting project yet: *Mind your Mind* podcast,² which aims to encourage all professionals working in the helping and caring professions to develop their personally meaningful self-care strategies, and to avoid the potential emotional and psychological impact of their work. In every episode, my guests and I talk about different aspects of self-care and burnout prevention, with a strong emphasis on taking action, one step at the time. We give tips and ideas for everyone to practise.

Q What are some of the highlights on that journey?

The highlights on my journey are also associated with some challenges: every new placement and every new country put me in the position to reach my limits as a person and as a practitioner, but also gave me a hugely valuable experience with regards to understanding multiculturalism, multilingualism and the work with



Above Altiplano in the North of Chile near Arica city

Roxana Parra Sepulveda

trauma survivors in different settings and languages. As a multilingual psychotherapist, I have been examining multilingualism for several years, culminating in a co-edited publication called *Tuning In: an anthology of unheard experiences of multilingualism and psychological therapy*, currently available as a free download.³ My journey has led me to meet amazing people along the way; those who believed in me when I was new to the country and those who respected me and welcomed me, allowing me to give continuity to my work and grow as a therapist.

Q Which book has most inspired you?

Many, but one of the books that did have a big influence in my work with survivors of trauma is *Trauma and recovery* from Judith Hermann⁴ and now I am reading her latest book, *Truth and repair - How trauma survivors envision justice*.⁵ I really like her approach to the work with survivors of abuse, her application of feminism to therapeutic practice, and the clarity when sharing her knowledge.

Q How did you get into student counselling?

I have always found fascinating the energy learning institutions have offered. I enjoyed my experiences studying at university, and I am aware that these periods in life can be full of fun and change, but also emotionally demanding at times. I had the opportunity to be the manager of a university wellbeing service and that gave me the opportunity to work in the HE sector.

Q Tell us about your current role and where you work

I work as a counsellor at Roehampton University within the wellbeing team. I love to work with young adults and engage in reflective dialogues, allowing me to witness their changes and evolution while facing adversity. I simply love therapeutic work. I am also developing my independent career and always looking for new projects and organisations to work with.

Q Why do you enjoy working in your institution?

The team I am part of is amazing, very committed to what they do, and we have

managed to create a synergy of collaboration and support for each other. Roehampton University is located in a beautiful area of London and the environment we work in is conducive to maintain a positive work-life balance. We have been through very difficult periods but now the service has increased capacity to become even more effective in service delivery.

Q How do you practise self-care?

Self-care is a fundamental part of my work. With the experience I have gained over the years, I have come to the conclusion that the only way to achieve a fulfilling career (in any field) is to have a healthy self. My self-care strategy has changed over the years coinciding with different moments in my life. Currently, I have been tuning in with my hormonal rhythms, understanding my stressors and being more conscious about what I eat in order to enhance my immune system and to keep a healthy gut. Cycling is always part of my selfcare; my bicycle balances me as well, as it helps me to maintain connection with nature.

Q What are the current challenges you face?

I am a strong believer in change and the possibility to become stress resilient. I feel persistently privileged about the trust my clients invest in me, and although the challenges related to childhood trauma are difficult, I have been able to persist with a sense of hope in my approach to therapy.

I am aware of the potential impact on myself from witnessing the suffering of others, so the challenge for me is to keep myself in the best shape mentally, in order to be a good-enough, secure base for all my clients, in my current role and my private work.

Q Can you identify better ways of working as a result of COVID-19?

One of the good outcomes of the pandemic is the new way we are able to work with the assistance of technology.

We have gained flexibility that allows us to give continuity to the work we do with our students; we have the possibility to be available either online or face to face, and that has given access to students who might not otherwise have accessed our services.

Q Who currently or in the past has inspired you as a counsellor?

It is difficult for me to name just one person because I have met many inspiring therapists during my career. When I first came to London and volunteered to provide therapy for Refugee Action Kingston, I worked with an amazing service manager who supported me to transition and adapt to the UK modalities and ways of working. Soon after that, with the support of new managers and my supervisor, I was able to complete the BACP accreditation process. While working in the charity sector, I have been particularly inspired and honoured to be part of services working alongside a great number of women, with a strong commitment to end violence against women and girls.

Q What are your hopes and fears for the future of student counselling?

My hope for student counselling is that each university finds a way to have strong collaborative relationships with their local community services. I believe that the route towards providing integral support is working in partnerships. I have led successful partnerships with community services, and found that it gives a good balance and clarity with regards to expectations, but most importantly, this allows the development of smooth referral pathways which benefit students, especially when they are struggling with severe mental health difficulties.

We constantly have the challenge of long waiting lists, which provides an opportunity for service managers to innovate, and introduce new modalities of working therapeutically. I hope senior

management in universities realise that investing in staffing to respond to increasing service demand is a wise business decision, not only for student satisfaction and retention but also for staff wellbeing.

And most importantly, I hope all organisations take seriously the importance of care for all their frontline workers supporting students in distress day in and day out. A systemic and consistent approach towards staff wellbeing are fundamental in this line of work to avoid burnout and staff rotation.

Q What do you see yourself doing in five years' time?

I see myself surrounded by people, continuing with collaborations, producing useful material that allows me to share my knowledge, participating in conferences, continuing with my international work and my podcast² with the mission of encouraging frontline workers in diverse fields to develop their personally meaningful self-care strategies to thrive instead of becoming burnt out while doing the job they love. ■

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