

## EMPATHISING WITH THE ANXIETY OF FACING LIMITATIONS: CLIENT EXAMPLE

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Supplementary material for *Existential Therapies: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2015), Chapter 5.

A more extended example of validating the feelings evoked by limitations--in this instance, the paradox that loving life means a greater fear of losing it--comes from about six months into a weekly series of therapy sessions with a young male client. Matt wanted to find some direction in his life, and move on from his job in business administration towards something more creative. About eight years before the therapy, Matt had had a 'breakdown' in which he had experienced severe and debilitating fears of becoming schizophrenic. Although he had not experienced those fears in recent years, about two months before the present session he had experienced intense feelings of depression, anxiety and tiredness. Over the last few weeks, however, these feelings had entirely turned around, and in the last few sessions he had arrived reporting that he was feeling better than he had been for ages. This extract, written-up after the session, begins about two minutes into our regular Wednesday meeting.

Matt 1: This week was pretty much great... or, at least, a weird one. I went out with some friends on Friday night and we just had a great time. We went to the theatre: I really got into it. And then, on Saturday morning, I was just waking up in my room listening to this owl hooting and I was thinking, 'This is really good, I feel really Ok here. I like this.' It's been the best I felt for ages. And then-- it seems so typical, just a little thing. I went out on Sunday afternoon and I had this weird sensation in my head, which I've never had before. It was like a kind of buzzing... like a buzzing in my ear. And it really set me off. I thought, 'I've never had that before, not that kind of buzzing.' It's just really bugging me, really staying with me.

Mick 1: I'm getting a sense of that anxiety that you were feeling, that actually it was pretty intense. And I'm just wondering if it was related to what you've mentioned before about your 'breakdown': Was it that the buzzing might be a symptom that you were going psychotic?

*[Matt confirms this, and we then spend about twenty minutes exploring, in more detail, Matt's 'breakdown', in which he became obsessed that every physical change and sensation he was experiencing was a symptom of an impending psychotic episode]*

Mick 2: I get a sense of so much fear and anxiety that you experienced then, and it sounds like you are experiencing some of that again now.

Matt 2: I can feel the anxiety right now. It's like a knot in my stomach. And it's like, when I think of all the new things that I am starting to do, like writing stories and doing pictures, it like makes me feel really sad that all these things are going to come to an end: Just as things are getting sorted out I'm going to go mad... psychotic, everything will get taken away... eaten away.

I tell you what I think: It's like, when things start going well for me, I can't allow it. I can't allow myself to be happy and enjoy things. So it's like I almost create things for myself to worry about... maybe I even created that buzzing in my ear -- that sounds bizarre doesn't it -- so that I could worry about it. I'm such a twat.

Mick 3: There's a sense of you sabotaging yourself? [Matt: Mm. Pause]. I guess what's going on for me-- and this is coming a bit from my existential background-- it might be totally wrong for you. There are two, kind of, ways that you could look at this. One is to say, 'Ok, there is something particular about you and who you are that means that you can't allow yourself to experience positive things without undermining it.' But I guess another way of looking at it might be to say that it's more of a human thing-- that it's a really human thing that, the more that we enjoy life and make the most of it, the more frightening it becomes to lose it. So that now that things are going well for you, you're feeling happier, it's not kind of surprising that you are also more scared of losing things: that things are going to go wrong or get eaten away. In a sense, you *do* have more to lose.

Matt 3: I never realised people had articulated it in that way before. [silence]. It's helpful to hear that: gives me a sense that I am not alone with this.

At Mick 3, I could have explored Matt's sense of self-sabotage, and that might have been very helpful. However, Matt was so consistently critical of himself, so quick to 'therapise' his own behaviours, that at that point it felt more helpful to challenge his self-pathologisation, and instead emphasise how intelligible his feelings of fear and anxiety might be. Matt seemed to find this helpful. It did not take away his anxiety (the primary feeling), but it did challenge his emerging, secondary feelings of shame and guilt about this anxiety.