

NOTICING AND BEING NOTICED

Jeanine Connor describes the transformative power of group therapy for disaffected teenage girls

'I'm bored.'
'Same.'
'This is so f**king boring.'
'I know.'
'Life is so f**king boring.'
'You're so right.'
'There's literally nothing to do.'
'I know, right.'
'Life is like - So. F**king. B-O-R-I-N-G.'

This was the opening gambit in my first session with this new group of 16-year-old girls. Connie was bored. Saskia was bored too. Chantelle agreed that life was boring. So did Mo, who literally spelled it out for us. Mercedes was seemingly too bored to say anything, for now.

These bored Year 11 girls had been referred to me because their student support manager was worried about their lack of engagement in school and their risk-taking behaviour out of school. Our group sessions ran for the duration of one school term. The girls were typically challenging and regularly boisterous. Progress was by no means linear or sequential; sometimes it was hard for me to recognise any progress at all.

What I'm sharing here is a tidied up, thought-through version of events, rather than a chronological one. I am hoping it presents a flavour of the chaos, with the benefit of reflective hindsight.

'You're bored,' I said, stating the obvious. 'We're so f**king bored,' Saskia agreed. 'In general, or about something in particular?' I asked. 'In general,' Saskia clarified. 'Everything is so boring.'
'Everything?'
'Yeah, everything.' She seemed adamant. 'That's interesting,' I commented. 'God, your life must be as f**king boring as ours if you find this s**t interesting!'

I smiled. 'I do find it interesting. I'm really interested in getting to know why each of you came to the group.'
'And you're interested in that because...?' Mo goaded.

'Good question, Mo. Why am I interested...?' I was playing for time as I thought aloud, and she knew it. 'Well, I suppose I'm curious why you would do something without having a good reason to do it.'

'F**k knows!' Mo spluttered. 'But do you know, Mo? Do you know why you came?'
Chantelle tried to help her out. 'It's not like we had a choice, is it?'
'Isn't it?'
'No, she's right. We got sent here.'
'Who sent you?'
'That woman in pastoral... what's her name?'

'Miss Martinez?'
'Yeah, her.'
Everyone nodded.
'I know I've only known you all for, what...?' I glanced at the clock, '10 minutes...' - is that all it was? It felt like longer - 'but you don't strike me as girls who would do anything you didn't want to, even if you were "sent" by a teacher.' I put air quotes around 'sent' to make my point. They all stared blankly, either at me or at the floor, and so I continued. 'So, if that's true, that you're not those sorts of girls, it makes me think there must be a part of each of you that thought it might be worthwhile to come.'

'I wouldn't have bothered if I'd known it would be like this,' Mo stated.
'Like what?' I wondered.
'F**king boring,' she clarified, like it should be obvious.

'Same,' Saskia and Connie agreed, simultaneously. Chantelle and Mercedes said nothing.

'Ah yes, the issue of boring. Tell me about that. Tell me what boring means to you?' I encouraged them.

'Boring means f**king boring! Jeez, are you dumb or something? What's the f**king point?' Saskia spat out the words and then sank down further on her chair to the point where it looked as if she might slide off.

What was the point? I was beginning to ask myself the same question. 'Well, I wonder if we could unpick that a bit.'

'Ooh, yes, let's unpick it,' Saskia mocked, miming pinching movements in

the air with her fingers. A couple of the girls sniggered, a couple snarled; I don't remember who did what. I decided to be less wondering and more directive. I persevered.

'Maybe we could each say something about the different parts of our life - school, social stuff, family perhaps - and share the most boring thing and the least boring thing. Could we give that a try?'

I was relieved when Mo took the initiative. 'That's easy,' she began. 'Everything about school is boring. Everything about home is boring. And everything about my social life is boring.'

Chantelle followed suit, 'School and home are totally boring.'
'And your social life?' I asked.
'What f**king social life?'
'You don't have a social life?'
'No.'

Mercedes had so far been silent. I'd similarly experienced her as non-verbal the first time I'd met her, in the one individual meeting we'd had, when she'd been sent to me for 'anger management'. But she'd accepted my invitation to join the group, and so I tried again to engage her.

'How would you describe school, Mercedes?'
'F**k off.' Her response was abrupt, but it was familiar.
'And home?'
'F**k off.'
'Your social life?'
'Will. You. Just. F**k. Off.'

I commented that Mercedes didn't seem up for talking much today and she told me, 'No f**king s**t, Sherlock,' which elicited a ripple of sniggers from the other girls. I took a moment to reflect on

'A couple of the girls sniggered, a couple snarled. I decided to be less wondering and more directive. I persevered'

what her responses had provoked in me, and, if I'm honest, it was an eagerness to find out more. She had spirit. She was rebellious, unpredictable and not afraid to say what she thought. I could imagine what she might achieve if she channelled those traits into something worthwhile, rather than challenging me and/or playing to the crowd. I was really keen to work with them all, bring them on board, engage them, get to know them, make sense of them and, ultimately, help them. I wasn't going to just f**k off, I was going to stick with them.

Let's be honest

I decided to share my feeling response with the group. 'At the risk of stating the obvious, again...' I glanced at Mercedes, who was glaring at the floor. 'I'm sensing that so far I might have missed the mark a bit here.'

A couple of girls shuffled in their chairs; the others remained stock still. 'I'm grateful that you've each been honest with me about how you're feeling, which seems to mostly be bored, but also, I think, a bit p**sed off... with home, school, maybe Miss Martinez, maybe me. One thing that's really important is that we feel safe enough to be honest with each other here, so I'm pleased you were able to do that.'

They were still listening, and no one had told me to f**k off, so I continued. 'My understanding about why Miss Martinez suggested the group to the five of you in particular is because she's noticed that you seem bored too and she's worried about you and about your behaviour.' I noticed Saskia and Chantelle squirm. 'I'm not here to judge you. I'm hoping that you will start to feel a bit better about life, a bit less bored and a bit less angry perhaps.' I still had their attention. 'I'm going to be honest with you too. I'm really keen to get to know you all, to learn more about you, what you enjoy, what you don't enjoy, maybe what you're finding tough, what's really p**sing you off.'

'You're starting to p**s me off!' Saskia stopped me in my tracks.
'Am I?' I had thought I was doing OK. 'How am I p**sing you off?'

'By going on and on and f**king on...'

'I suppose it might seem like that. It's just that it felt important to say those things and to be honest with you all.'

'Yeah, thanks, Miss,' Connie said, 'I do actually appreciate that.'

'That's OK, Connie. And you can call me Jeanine. You can all call me Jeanine.'

Saskia accused Connie of being a 'suck up', Connie gave as good as she got. Chantelle sided with Saskia, and Mo argued for Connie.

Mercedes observed in silence. She seemed to do that a lot. I noticed her observing me too, which I'd experienced before, of course, in her individual therapy, when she'd perceived my barely there smile and gentle nod of the head, and delivered the immortal line, 'Will you stop f**king nodding!'

I let things play out for a while, ready to step in if it got out of hand, and then I commented on what I'd observed.

'It's interesting to watch what happens when you have a disagreement.'

'OK. That's weird,' Chantelle squirmed. 'I'm going to stick with interesting rather than weird.'

I took a risk and asked Mercedes if she'd found it interesting too.

'It was fascinating!'

That was a better reaction than I'd anticipated, although I was worried there was a chance she was being sarcastic. 'Go on...' I encouraged her. 'What did you find fascinating?'

'How they all have positions.' I nodded for her to continue.

'Saskia's clearly the gobby one.'

'Oh, thanks,' Saskia said, mock offended. 'Sorry, but you are.'

'I know, fair point,' she conceded.

'As I was saying,' Mercedes paused for comic effect, 'Saskia's the gobby one, but Mo likes to be in charge, so they clash. Chantelle is a follower, and she's the real suck up, to whoever she thinks has the power. And I'm not sure about Connie; she's a bit of a dark horse.'

'I don't think you're allowed to say "dark horse" any more,' Connie challenged. 'It's racist.'

'How can it be f**king racist, Connie, when I'm black and you're white?'

'OK. Good point.' Connie backed down.

'Often 16-year-olds don't know how they feel, or why they did what they did, or what they want to do, and they hate not knowing'

I invited the others to share their response to the way Mercedes had described them. Saskia agreed that she was gobby and Mo said she liked to be in charge. Chantelle gave an 'I can't argue with that' kind of expression when she was described as a follower, and Connie wasn't sure what it was like not to have a 'position'. I think she felt a bit put out. Mercedes seemed spot on and, because she was their peer, the girls had taken her straight-talking, honest observations at face value.

I really wanted to know how it felt to be noticed in this way, but I didn't think the girls were ready to acknowledge their feelings just yet; I didn't think they had the words, other than 'bored' or 'angry' or 'I don't know' – another adolescent stock answer. But often 16-year-olds don't know how they feel, or why they did what they did, or what they want to do in the future, and while that's often frustrating for adults, it's even more agonising for adolescents, who hate not knowing.¹

'Thank you for sharing your observations, Mercedes. And thank you, girls, for listening. I think this is the sort of thing that might turn out to be helpful.'

'Arguing?' Chantelle asked.

'Noticing, being noticed, talking, listening...'

'And that will help us how, exactly?'

Mo pressed.

'Well, hopefully by noticing yourselves and each other, and how you relate to each other here, you will get a better understanding of what's going on for you – a better sense of why you feel the

way you feel and why you're doing the stuff you're doing.'

'What about you?' she asked.

'Me?'

'Yes, you. Will you be telling us why you feel the way you do and why you're doing what you're doing? You expect us to tell you everything and you tell us f**k-all in return.'

'I really don't expect you to tell me everything, Mo, only what you're comfortable with. I will tell you how I'm feeling here, but it would be totally unfair of me to talk about myself, when I'm sure you all have enough on your plates. This is a space where you don't have to worry about me or how what you do or say affects me.'

'Because you don't give a s**t?' Saskia half stated/half asked.

'I absolutely do give a s**t. I give a very large s**t about every one of you. OK, that sounded weird. What I mean is, I'm not your teacher, or your parent, or your friend, so you don't need to worry about how what you say affects me. It won't change me, or our relationship, or how I feel about you.'

'Now she's gone all lovey-do-da on us!' Connie said, and the others laughed, but not in a ridiculing way – in a more affirmative, non-threatening way. I thought it seemed as if they liked the idea of being liked – maybe even loved the notion of being loved. It might not be too much of a stretch to imagine that they could love the idea of being loved by me.

Psychoeducation

As is the case for many of the young people referred to therapy, I suspected that Connie, Saskia, Chantelle, Mo and Mercedes might be experiencing some form of family dysfunction. We'd been meeting for a few weeks when I decided to find out more, in an effort to contextualise the girls' presentations and help them to make sense of their boredom and anger. I began by asking a benign, open question.

'How was your weekend?'

Connie replied, 'The usual.'

'What's usual for you?'

'I got p**sed.'

'And how was that?'

'A bit boring, to be honest.'

'Getting p**sed is boring?'

'It is now. It's the same thing every weekend. We get a few bottles, hang out, get p**sed, something kicks off, we go home.'

'Did something kick off this weekend?'

'Yeah.'

'Can you tell us about that?' I enquired.

'Only if you want to,' I added, a bit wary about what she might divulge.

'One of the boys was getting a bit lairy. He can't handle his drink. He was grabbing at this girl who Declan's been talking to, so he knocked him out!'

'Your friend Declan knocked the lairy boy out?' I attempted to clarify.

'Yeah. Then the cops turned up and put him in a cell for the night. The other boy, I don't know his name, was taken away in an ambulance because he had concussion. We were all questioned about it. I told them what I saw, same as what I just told you.'

'I heard about that,' Chantelle said, her interest piqued, seemingly eager to know more.

'It sounds quite dramatic,' I suggested.

'Not really,' Connie disagreed.

'Not really?' I asked.

'Just the usual.'

'It's usual for someone to be arrested, someone else to be taken to hospital and for you to be questioned by the police?'

'Pretty much.'

'Is it usual for all of you?' I asked, attempting to open up the discussion.

'It's pretty standard, yeah,' Mo affirmed, nonplussed.

'We had the police at ours again on Sunday,' Saskia stated.

'For your dad?' Mo asked, as if she already knew the answer.

'Yeah.'

'Your dad was arrested on Sunday?' I checked.

'Yeah. He was off his f**king head. Smashed a window. I think the nosy b**ch across the road called the cops. It's usually her.'

'Usually? Does this happen a lot?'

'Yeah. My dad's a complete w**ker. He's always getting nicked.'

'Oh.' I didn't know what else to say.

'I thought he was inside,' Chantelle said, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

'He was. He's out now, but he'll go back in. It's like a revolving f**king door.'

Over the course of the session, I learned that Saskia's dad had served a number of short prison sentences for grievous bodily harm (GBH) and actual bodily harm (ABH), some of which had involved attacks on her mother. He was a heavy drinker and occasional drug user. Mercedes' brother was currently serving a sentence for aggravated burglary and possession of cannabis with intent to supply. The girls were familiar with the jargon.

Like Saskia, Mercedes had also witnessed domestic abuse. Connie's mother used (illegal) cannabis for 'legit' medicinal reasons and had a diagnosis of depression. Her parents weren't together. Nor were Chantelle's, and her mother was depressed and possibly had an anxiety disorder, while her father was dependent on alcohol. No wonder the girls were angry; there was a lot to be angry about, and I said so.

'What do you mean?' Mo asked me.

'I mean there's a lot going on for all of you at home. You've all been through, and are still going through, lots of stuff, and it makes sense that you would feel angry about it.'

'My dad p**ses me right off,' Saskia admitted. 'So does my mum for having him back every f**king time.'

'I can understand why,' I said, to validate her feelings.

'Can you?' she seemed surprised.

'When the thoughts and feelings became too much, they were acted outwards, to get rid of them. Hence, the acts of anger'

'Absolutely. And I'm also starting to understand why you might act in angry ways, sometimes, as a way to get some of that anger out. That goes for all of you, by the way, not just Saskia.'

'I think that might be why I wind people up,' Mo seemed pensive.

'I don't mean to, but it's like I can't help it. I just feel so wound up all the time, so I pick fights with people, because I'm just so full of... I don't know... this kind of rage.'

'Full of s**t, more like,' Mercedes joked, and Mo smiled. 'Seriously though, I know what you mean. I think I do that sometimes as well.'

I knew what Mo and Mercedes meant too – they were describing the classic defence mechanism of displacement, one of the ways that our mind (unconsciously) protects itself from becoming overwhelmed when we feel frightened, which would be an ordinary, appropriate response to being in a violent or threatening situation. Because violent and threatening situations were commonplace for the girls, they presented as if they had become desensitised to danger, and in a way, they had. I think that they tried to internalise the aggressive thoughts and impulses – that is, keep them to themselves – which is why they sometimes presented as withdrawn and dismissive. But when the thoughts and feelings became too much, they were acted outwards, in an attempt to get rid of them. Hence, the acts of anger and aggression I'd heard about and witnessed.

I thought it might help the girls to think about this together, to use what can be framed as psychoeducation, which isn't therapy as such, but it can certainly feel reassuring (and therapeutic) for a young person who is beginning to make sense of the way they feel, think and behave.

I said, 'I think what Mo and Mercedes have said makes a lot of sense.'

'Me too,' Chantelle agreed. 'I think my mum does that. Takes it out on me when she's angry with my dad.'

'It's quite common,' I said, 'Especially when it feels too risky to get angry with the person that we're actually angry with.' ►

'So, like, if someone's being bullied, they go and pick on someone else who's weaker than them, rather than stand up to the bully?' Chantelle was really grappling to come to terms with the concept of displacement.

'Yes, that's the same sort of thing,' I assured her.

'So, rather than risk getting punched in the face by my dad if I tell him what a f**king c**t he is, I p**s my boyfriend off, over nothing, because I know he'd never hit me?' Saskia was getting it too.

'Yes, that kind of thing too. So, when you get angry and rageful, seemingly for no apparent reason, there is absolutely a reason; it might just not be obvious what the reason is because it's about something that happened before or with someone else.'

'This s**t makes a lot of sense,' Mercedes admitted.

'I'm pleased you think so.' I smiled. 'And that's why "this s**t" is so interesting to me, because it makes sense of what's going on for you and demonstrates that how you act is saying something about how you feel.'

'So, you're saying it's not our fault?' Chantelle asked.

This was a tricky question. 'I'm saying that how we behave is a communication about how we feel and that it should be taken notice of, not just dismissed or punished,' I ventured. 'But also, as adults and young adults, we have to take responsibility for our actions, while accepting that we are in no way responsible for the things that happen to us growing up.' I think my response covered all the bases.

'Blame the parents!' Mo exclaimed.

'I'm not blaming parents, either,' I hastened to add, 'because there's a reason why they behave the way they do, too. We're simply trying to make sense of what's going on.'

What was going on for Chantelle, Mo, Mercedes, Connie and Saskia (and, I hypothesised, for many of their parents too) was physical and verbal domestic abuse, loss of a parent, emotional neglect and experience of family members who were depressed, who misused drugs and alcohol and who were or had been in prison.

'By sticking with it and with them, adolescents can learn to trust us and, through that process, change can happen'

There is a link between the number of adverse childhood events (ACEs) experienced and negative physical and mental health outcomes in later life. Of particular interest is the research suggesting a causal link, rather than a mere correlation, between ACEs and antisocial behaviour,² particularly when they occur in adolescence rather than in early childhood.³ But I still believe in the potential for a better outcome for young people than the gloomy statistics would have us believe. I couldn't do what I do if I didn't.

According to research with young people who have experienced adversity, a central feature of a successful therapeutic intervention is the establishment of trust, not just in the therapeutic alliance, but through activities that build trust between peers,⁴ such as groupwork.

This is no mean feat, when young people have experienced multiple adversities and have a well-developed sense of mistrust. But by sticking with it and sticking with them, and by demonstrating a motivation to witness their boredom, anger and more 'without panicking or looking for a quick fix'⁵ adolescents can learn to trust us, the therapeutic process and themselves, and through that process, change can happen. ■

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* *Details of all clients and their stories in this article are completely fictional.*

• This is an edited extract from *Stop F**king Nodding - and other things 16 year olds say in therapy* by Jeanine Connor (PCCS Books). For our review, see page 48.

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Jeanine Connor is a psychodynamic child and adolescent psychotherapist, clinical supervisor and training facilitator. She is the author of *Reflective Practice in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy: listening to young people* (Routledge), editor of *BACP's Children, Young People & Families journal*, psychology editor for Curriculum Press and reviews editor for *Therapy Today*.