

MSc in family & systemic psychotherapy

I am a clinician working with adolescents who are involved in the criminal justice system, and their families. I have been very fortunate to receive support from FPSA towards studying for an MSc in family & systemic psychotherapy. I have recently completed the first year of the MSc programme at the Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College London. This constitutes the third year of systemic training overall, as the first two years are study at postgraduate certificate level.

I have noticed my theoretical understanding and clinical skills develop a great deal over this past year. It has been a challenging year in which to train, as much of the clinical work has had to move online due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, in doing so, my student colleagues and I have been challenged to adapt the systemic skills we are learning in order to deliver therapy online via video conferencing with families and individuals. For family therapists, this is an area of new and emerging theory and research, which we have had to keep in touch with. Rather than limiting our experience and ability to practice new skills, the context of Covid-19 has stretched us and pushed us to recognise and respond effectively to the unique contexts of the families and young people who are seeking therapeutic support.

Much of the teaching for this course has also been delivered online, which has brought challenges but again, has called on us to adapt and find ways of keeping connected with each other as students, and with our tutors, while we cannot share the same physical space very often. The teaching has remained at high quality and the theoretical elements of the course have continued to challenge and engage my thinking in new ways.

Highlights of the teaching this year have included seminars on working systemically with psychosis, using an attachment-based approach to ameliorate risk of self-harm and suicide with adolescents, and systemic approaches to eating disorders among young people.

Applying this theory to practice in my clinical training placement, and my usual workplace with adolescents, has led to new ways of supporting clients to achieve their goals and establish more safety and stability in their lives. Applying a systemic lens leads to young people being viewed and worked with in their own contexts, which tends to be more supportive of positive change, than treating them as though their problems have emerged individually in a vacuum, not accounting for wider influences and discourses. Often, systemic practice is also a less-threatening approach to therapeutic work with children and young people, who might be wary of being blamed for difficulties, and wanting to resist the idea that there is 'something wrong' with who they are.

I am grateful to FPSA, as without this funding I would not have been able to proceed to study at MSc level at this time. I hope that the foundation will be able to support more practitioners working with adolescents to study systemic psychotherapy in future. I especially hope that greater numbers of practitioners working in the area of youth offending (and other forensic contexts) might come to recognise the value of systemic ideas to the problems of offending behaviour and community violence, which are putting so many young people at risk.