

# In Touch With People, not Paper: An Interview With Doug Sotheren

Cathy Zervos

Doug Sotheren has been conducting well-regarded training courses in relationship counseling for over 25 years, outside a university setting. In conversation with his former trainee Cathy Zervos, he presents his personal philosophy of counsellor training, emphasising the need for trainees to be 'in touch with people' rather than with theory. His whole course is experiential and based on the concept that training (including the way the co-trainers handle their own relationship in front of the group) should model the counselling process itself. He talks about his way of selecting students, and his views on counselling students out of the course where necessary. A long-serving member of the AAMFC and former editor of their newsletter, Sotheren praises the AAMFC for requiring demonstrated competence in its members.

**Cathy:** Doug, I believe you have been conducting your training for Relationship Counselling course for over 25 years now and of course I completed it myself just a couple of years back. So I know your course can be pretty intense, but I also know that lots of people keep wanting to do it. Can you talk about the model you use for your training?

**Doug:** The primary model is a counselling model, the training process parallels the counselling process. As I see it, counselling is becoming present to another person or to a relationship, creating a safe space, and then within that space working with the client's material in such a way as they can begin to reshape and reformulate it, thus becoming more able to take charge of their own lives. That is what the course is about. The course assumes there is a body of knowledge for counselling that is a very useful body of knowledge, there are 3000 billion theories that can be useful or useless, and then there are the trainees. And if those trainees are going to become good counsellors, they need, at an almost a cellular level, to *gain* the experience of what it means to be present to someone and to have someone be present to them. To be open enough to work just with the material that is there, rather than



try and force it into some theoretical framework or box. They need to learn to trust the process enough to allow change to happen. That's the underlying model of the course. This is why it's such a scary experience but it's also why so many people want to do it.

In the training process trainees find that they are present to each other and we, as trainers, are present to them. At the same time we are informing this experience by offering counselling theory and some of the basic counselling models to give a frame. We work through that experience using the personal material the trainees bring with them. At the end of it, when it works well, something has happened inside each trainee that gives the trainee the capacity to be present and available to work with the client and the client's material and make use of any of the theories in whatever way they want.

In a funny way the course models the counselling process. The first few weekends are exploring 'meeting' and we look in considerable depth at this process that happens when I meet



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another person. We don't do theory of that. I stand in front of somebody and I notice that I go tight or they go tight æ and I ask, 'What's this about?' If I work at not being tight, suddenly I find we connect differently æ so that we learn 'meeting'. Once we learn meeting, the next thing is people start to talk about themselves, in the small groups and in the practice sessions, so the next stage of counselling is being present to and experiencing the client and their problem as it is and that happens in the course. The next thing is the reconstruction, so that issues are formulated to help people work towards their resolution. So again, the course in a sense models that, which is why it's so frustrating and scary for people. Frustrating, scary and exciting/stimulating æ it's unfair to use just the one word. Rather than teaching *about* counselling, it is *experiencing* counselling and that is really important for me. I reckon you can learn all about it and still not be able to do it. You can write about it brilliantly and not be able to do it. Where, hopefully, at the end of this course people have got some sense of how they are in relationship and enough respect for other people and their differences to create a safe space to work with the process rather than to apply a theory.

**Cathy:** Some University courses focus strongly on theory and some counselling associations are in favour of professionalisation. Do you see two worlds colliding here?

**Doug:** Well, in my understanding of this whole therapy world, for the last 30 years that has been the standard problem. People will say, 'I did four years of boring theory so I could get my piece of paper and *then* I went and learned to counsel'. But people tell me it's the same thing in the engineering world, they go and do this stuff that they are never going to use in the workplace to be engineers and then they go out and learn to be engineers. So I guess it's a standard dilemma in our society. I think it's sad that professionalisation and accreditation seem to be about being less in touch with people and more in touch with paper. A lot of people have done my course and then they have completed a university course for the bit of paper and the theory. I'm not against theory, I think good theory is wonderful. But some people seem to think theory is enough for practice æ they'll probably move on to management! [laughs]. I know even some of the accreditation stuff we had to look at for the course ... The nitpicking seems to be taking people away from the experience of 'being with' to learning about *bits* and I think it's awful. Still, it's the society we're in. We'll survive it, if we're committed at that gut level to working with people.

**Cathy:** Could you talk a bit about the importance of having two facilitators for the training course?

**Doug:** It seems to me that because we're teaching relationship counselling, we need to model relationship, therefore there needs to be two people, preferably two people of the opposite gender, so that the whole male/female thing can get worked out. Because the whole course is experiential and based on modelling a counselling process, it needs the same trainers doing their bit pretty much all the way through the course. That way people can do all their projection/attachment/transference onto the same trainers. This allows the opportunity for a relational growth process to happen. A range of various trainers coming in and out destroys the potential for that process. Ideally, the trainers themselves are a couple, because while we're learning relationship we're also experiencing the way relationship is working now, with the leaders, and that can be very tricky for us leaders.

**Cathy:** Would that still work the same for gay or lesbian trainees?

**Doug:** That's an interesting question but a bit irrelevant for the course as it is not about sexual orientation but about the projection processes and attachment issues that arise in response to the experience of female and male bodies and the different energies around that. In the ideal, the training relationship needs to include both genders æ the sexual orientation of either is secondary.

The other thing is also because we are in an experiential course, we're not just sitting up the front saying 'this is what you have got to write about, this is what you have got to prove to get your evidence', we're saying 'join us in this journey and this experience'. Because relationships are so tricky and things can get easily lost, it's important to have a deal going where, when one trainer is processing, the other is monitoring so that we can keep a check on each other rather than get lost. So that if I get, as you've seen, involved and excited by some intellectual journey that's totally irrelevant, I can have a co-trainer just gently pull me back to earth. Or if sometimes my co-trainer gets a thing going about 'This person's got to face some particular issue', and I'm saying 'Hang on, that's your need not theirs ...' So there's a balancing that's needed. And I much prefer that because I certainly can't æ and I don't believe anybody else can, really æ be in that atmosphere of such powerful emotional process and think that I'd be able to stay absolutely clean. So that's why the two.

And the other really important thing is that the trainees hopefully see pretty quickly that while there

are these two people who are supposed to know what they're doing, they're different from one another, they don't do things in the exact same way. So that's another thing that I really want for this course, that at the end of it people are able to say, 'I can develop my way of doing this, I don't have to be like Doug Sotheren, or anybody else'. In the final analysis, it's *me* that's the therapist. That's the whole issue of the counsellor or the therapist's presence being the key thing: *the way you are* is healing, and then skills come second, and (for me) theories come a poor third, although they're incredibly useful. So my ability to be in relationship in a healing way is what makes the difference. The other stuff is just useful.

**Cathy:** Can you explain the philosophy behind requiring a psychometric test for prospective students in the course?

**Doug:** For me it's very important, because it says to each trainee that we're treating you as an individual and we are wanting to look at what this test shows about you. While I personally don't like testing as a part of the therapeutic process, it is a useful training tool because we can sit down with people, and depending on how valid these tests are æ and they seem to be pretty useful as job selection tests æ we can say to them, 'These are likely to be your strengths and these are likely to be your weaknesses. On the basis of this, do you really want to do this course?' And out of that discussion often we're very challenging of people, like, 'This test suggests you might be too vulnerable here or you'll get carried away with stuff here'. We really invite people to look at themselves and say 'Yeah, I still want to have a go at this'. Also, from our point of view, we've not conning people, and as trainers we gain some sense of what we might be dealing with in the process.

I think people going into the courses just because they've got the right academic qualifications, who haven't really thought about their own personal structure and the way they work, are disadvantaged. Occasionally you come across borderline or schizophrenic personalities so it's important to lovingly suggest that they not participate. On the other hand, I had one person who said 'I'll pay my money and do the course but I'll never counsel' and of course that person now works as a counsellor. The work they did, and the motivation they had was unreal. They were going to change themselves no matter what, and they did.

**Cathy:** There is some debate in the family therapy community about the relevance or even the necessity of family of origin work for trainee therapists. Could you talk about your feelings on this area?

**Doug:** The more knowledge the counsellor has about self in relationship the safer they will be for their clients. My family of origin profoundly influences all my reactions to others, so the training process of revisiting and creatively re-experiencing my own family joys and traumas provides a framework for dealing with some of the complex countertransferential reactions that may arise in an interview setting. I find in clinical supervision so many of the issues that are troubling counsellors about their work with their clients are resolved when they get the connection to aspects of their own family experience, both current and family of origin. I belong to the group that believes if people are not willing to constantly work with their own issues, they ought not be counsellors. If the counsellor's tool is the self and the self is both a product of and profoundly influenced by relationships, the fantasy that I can work relationally without exploring the role of my family of origin is just that æ a fantasy.

**Cathy:** I recall that 'gatekeeping' was one of the skills that you stressed as essential in couple/group work, but also that it is a skill that is not often used by therapists. Could you talk a little more about that?

**Doug:** Over the last 30 years I believe some essential couple counselling skills have been lost, and gatekeeping is one of these. I suspect the move to some of the systemic family therapies and the academisation of counselling training were factors in this loss. Sensitive, empathic gatekeeping is one of the most wonderful skills in couple work. Gatekeeping is a lovely technique of working with the flow of couple communication that slows the communication process and gives partners a much greater chance to hear both their own and their partners' messages. For some couples, it is the only skill needed for people to be able to hear each other and renegotiate their relationship. For others it becomes a basic tool in supporting a respect for, and focus on, the couple relationship while other interventions are being employed. When used properly it gently emphasises the individuation of each partner, while at the same time honouring the fact that these people are in relationship and holds the relationship as the primary focus of the counselling work.

**Cathy:** Can you tell me about the balance between content and process in your training course?

**Doug:** Yeah, I think that's really tricky. If our course has a weakness, it's that I'll go with process rather than content. If we can create experiences such as the 'meeting' in the beginning of the course, where people experience the panic, excitement or

the muscular tension, and *then* read the theory, they read it in a new way, that they're open for new learning rather than closing it off. I feel it's really important for people to go off and do their university training and then if they want to, come and do this course æ or vice versa as you have done æ but finally, we want both. If there is a choice, we'll go with process because that's where the learning is. If trainees have incarnated the art of experience they will then be able to make good use of content, so I would prefer training to begin with experience and follow with theory.

**Cathy:** What about when things go wrong? Do you just adapt to whatever happens, and make something useful out of it?

**Doug:** On one level, things don't 'go wrong'. Whatever happens, happens, and we go with it. There have been one or two training groups where the negative transferences or projections have been so overwhelming that it's been awful. And as trainers we've had to go and get some really solid supervision so we can hold the tension in ourselves and hopefully hold the tension in the group. For one group many years ago we had two members of the group who really wanted to annihilate each other, and holding that in such a way that we could work with the relationship between those two was profound learning for the whole group. But oh! It was stressful for us! You can be a mess afterwards.

Each group has its different stress. Usually that stress has become a very healing place as well, as long as we can hold and contain, and it goes wrong if the facilitators lose the capacity to do that. The same as when a therapist starts to want to be too loving or too caring for the client or gets angry at the client, they lose that capacity to hold the space. So in that sense we're modelling counselling as well.

**Cathy:** What about conflict between co-trainers?

**Doug:** Oh, yes. Sometimes we've been able to manage that in the group. It has always been very respectful conflict but occasionally, particularly in the early stages of the group, a new trainer will come along and still be in the academic thing of æ you have the program, you have the model and you're going to teach just that. And suddenly you're in the middle of this process that seems to go nowhere, or everywhere at once. Sometimes trainers and I have been on the edge of separating in the middle of a course for that. Usually at the end of the first course as co-trainer, and it never happens again. We just know we're working with the process. Often we'll have differing points of view and have to have a bit of a fight about how to work with somebody in the group. And we'll have really

different projections about a person and the task is then to fight it out in a way that we come back to 'It's up to this person not us as to how they progress or not.'

**Cathy:** I'd like you to say something about the way the experiential weekend functions as part of your training. What would you hope for, for the trainees?

**Doug:** By the time this weekend arrives, trainees are in the ninth or tenth month of the course, usually there's a whole lot of stuff that has been stirred up. So it's a personal 'help you clarify and complete stuff that has been bubbling away in there since the course began'. And secondly, it gives you the experience of staying present to powerful emotion, because I think some people have been fully trained and can't stay in the room with an angry or crying person. I've assessed tapes of counselling where, the minute there was emotion, the counsellor ran away. So hopefully by the end of the weekend, people have sat present to this depth of emotion, and they're still alive and they're still there. Hopefully it takes the fear out of intense emotion. So many therapists who are academically trained seem to be frightened of emotion. Third, it can demonstrate skills so that trainees can say, 'One day I hope to be able to do that, but right now I wouldn't even try'. Many people have said the experiential weekend has been a life changing experience for them. Many have said that it's what they came to the course for and they left after it. The whole thing, it's like we're modelling and experiencing a therapeutic process, but with a training outcome. We're not doing pure therapy, there's that balancing act which can get tricky.

**Cathy:** At one point in the course that I attended, one member became somewhat abusive to the other members, some of whom might say to you that that process was allowed to go on for too long, whereas others could sit with it. How much process is enough?

**Doug:** Yes. At times we can have groups very angry at us for allowing something to go on, and yet if we had blocked it or stopped it, it would have stopped the group. We would have suddenly said, 'We're in charge here: you're the clients, we're the counsellors. This is what you're supposed to do to be good, now be good!' If you end up with all these 'good' students doing what you want, which is what the bureaucracy tends to want, you end up with a group of people who are unable to be present to a process. Whereas, what's important to us is: 'At this moment, just now, these people are wanting to annihilate each other. How can I be present or hold them in a way that this can be creative?'

**Cathy:** The course is conducted once a month over two full days and in the case of the Experiential weekend, three. Do you find that overwhelming?

**Doug:** Sometimes totally exhausting, sometimes totally invigorating.

**Cathy:** You also run a five-month Body Focused Counselling Course. Would you like to talk about that?

**Doug:** My aim in the Relationship Counselling course is for people to be able to be present to others and use good basic counselling skills and feel free, not frightened of themselves in those places. To be able to draw on some of the core theories when needed, and be willing to go off and work at developing what their specialities might be. The Body Focus course is another stage of development that counsellors can go into. Hopefully the course (Relationship Counselling) provides the basis for people to go off and develop in a particular stream. That's one reason why we're a bit airy-fairy with theory. We look at lots of theories in all sorts of ways, saying you can choose from this, this or this track, but follow any of these tracks without this core way of being and you're going to be useless. I mean if you can get this right, then they are all there for you if you want them.

**Cathy:** You've had a longstanding connection with the AAMFC æ the Australian Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors. Can you say something about the importance to you of that connection?

**Doug:** If someone asks me [for an opinion] about a counsellor, I tell them to ask that counsellor three questions:

- Do they belong to a professional association?
- Do they have professional indemnity insurance?
- What do people in the community say about them?

Then you can go on to ask about academic qualifications and so on, although they're not necessarily relevant to their ability. And it seems to me that membership of a professional association is a statement about a commitment to the profession and this sort of work. And certainly in my life, AAMFC was the association that I saw as the best because it focused on relationship counselling. In some ways it's a bit of a boutique agency, which I really enjoy. Its clinical membership is based on demonstration æ by videotaped session æ that you can do it. I am very suspicious of bits of paper that say what you can do, and very suspicious of bits of paper that describe what people have done and then you look at a tape and think 'Oh! They must have sent the wrong tape!' So I like the fact that membership is based on demonstrated skills in front of a group of experienced peers and then supervisors' reports. Counselling is a set of skills and a way of being that you can measure. Lay people can watch a tape and decide whether they would go to that person or not. What's important for me is that the AAMFC are still committed to demonstrated competence.

**Cathy:** It has been most interesting hearing your views Doug and I want to thank you for your time today.

**Doug:** My pleasure, Cathy.

