

Course funded – year 2, intermediate level in family therapy and systemic practice at the Prudence Skynner Clinic, St George’s Mental Health Trust.

Started October 2023 and completed July 2024

Role – CAMHS Practitioner

Following completion of the course I feel more confident using specific systemic interventions with families. In my assessments with families, I am now considering which systemic theory base would best suit the family considering the ‘presenting problem’ and profile of the family. I think I am able to think about how a mixture of theories may play a part in an intervention. I feel more able to be adaptable during therapeutic work to add or change ideas I may have about what type of work will be the most effective. My knowledge and awareness of theory has improved significantly which allows me to think about planning in a much broader way. In my team there are two systemic psychotherapists. One of the systemic psychotherapists in my team is a senior clinician in the service and therefore has influence over team culture / dynamics. It has been helpful for me to have him in this position as he has introduced group discussions where we as a team reflect on our work from a systemic lens. I think these discussions has led to clinicians from other professions becoming more ‘systemic’ in their thinking and at times will seek consultations from the systemic trained clinicians in my team in order to support thinking about their cases.

I think in the past I have considered myself a slightly private person though during course I have been called to speak about my family and life experiences, as part of wider group discussions. I have enjoyed putting words to some of my experiences and reflecting on them in terms of how they influence the present. I reflected that my initial reticence around this may in part stem from my mother, who tends to be very private, which she feels is a reflection of the Caribbean (St Lucia) culture she is from. In this culture there are strong notions of shame between families within close-knit communities and therefore there is a strong sense of keeping things ‘within the family’ as this may have impacted on wider social relations.

I was interested in the study we completed around couple’s therapy and found the ideas of working in this relationship interesting. Although I work in CAMHS, and therefore my work is focused on the mental health of the young person, I have started to think more about how I can bring working with the couple dyad more into my family therapy. I feel more confident doing this and am certainly more aware that there may be occasions where this would actually be beneficial to the wider treatment plan. The dynamic between parents is often a main component of the young person’s mental health presentation and therefore it has been helpful to think about this during the year.

Following the teaching day on disability I became conscious of trying to bring ‘quieter’ voices into family discussions. I feel I am more aware of who’s voice in a family is being foregrounded and who is not perhaps being listened to. I am now thinking more about how their voices may be heard when they are unable to express themselves fully in their family and how other family members can be supported to start to hear their voices and considered things from their point of view.

During this year I have been influenced to introduce conversations about race with the young people / families I work with. I have found it useful in some conversations, to refer to my own race, and how this may impact me. I have found with certain families this does lead to more open and helpful conversations. I certainly feel more confident to bring up and raise issues around race with young people and explore how this may inform their experiences and emotional distress. It does feel more 'normal' or easier to do this with a family who are of a minoritised ethnicity which is likely reflective of wider society discourses of white being seen as the 'default' or 'normal'. It has been helpful to consider and assess the impact of 'racial trauma' as well as the on-going experiences of discrimination that young people may experience.

During this year I learnt that I do need to 'think outside the box' a bit more when it comes to engaging young people in sessions. I did also learn that I find this type of work really enjoyable and worthwhile. I think I learnt that sessions can be fun for young people and that creating playful ways of communicating do not undermine the seriousness of the overall work. I think I also perhaps learnt that I have perhaps avoided using more creative/playful ways of engaging families and young people because I hold worry about not being taken seriously. This may be because of my age (I am typically younger than the parents I work with) and perhaps also because as a black clinician I feel that I have perhaps have to 'prove myself' to families (because there are so few black clinicians in my service) and therefore do sometimes struggle to relax enough in sessions to create a more playful atmosphere.

The systemic year two has developed my skills as a mental health clinician working with adolescents. I feel I have been able to develop my skills of observation and analysis in my assessments. I am able to think about 'problems' and hypothesise around the origin of these mental health problems and solutions for how they may be addressed. I can offer treatment to young people in my team, as a systemic practitioner, for various mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. My contributions to wider team clinical discussions are certainly richer and more in depth. My reading of risk and formulation skills have also been developed following completion of this course.

I have found this year very useful therefore for my day-to-day clinical work with teenagers. My intention is continue studying in this area (systemic family therapy) and to complete the system family therapy MSc. My team are wanting to support my progression in this area and I feel motivated and excited to progress in this discipline.