Journeying to Joy: The Key to Reducing Burnout?

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Abstract

This paper examines the idea of joy in professional practice, aiming to uncover what makes joy possible. Extensive research addresses burnout, including its causes, effects, and mitigation but limited research explores the interplay between counsellors' personal and professional lives, particularly what counsellors themselves gain from their work.

Using an autoethnographic approach, this study draws on multiple sources, including a reflective journal kept over 10 months as a trainee counsellor. This involved working as a counsellor and as part of a reflecting team in a university counselling clinic. Additional sources include literature reviews and discussions from supervision.

The study explores the transformative potential of counsellors adopting a collaborative stance and recognises the role of clients in fostering joy within professional practice. It asks: What if we consider how clients and their stories impact us? This opens possibilities for rethinking burnout, suggesting that joy may be a key factor in its reduction.

Introducing the Emergence of Joy

"Joy: the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation" (Dictionary.com, n.d). In the spirit of post-structuralism, Burr (2003) notes that language is always contestable, open to interpretation, and context dependent. In the professional context, my definition of joy is best described using metaphor. I imagine being on a journey in a sailing boat—it's raining, the seas are rough, and every effort seems to be met with resistance and struggle. During this struggle, I feel doubt, confusion, and anxiety. At some point, the sun shines, the sea calms, and my efforts align, allowing me to sail effortlessly across the water. I'm working together with the boat and the elements. It feels intuitive. I'm relaxed, my mind is open to possibility, and I feel joy.

My professional journey started as a nurse and midwife, where I first felt joy in my work through approaches that centred the client as the expert and positioned me as a collaborative partner. Joy resurfaced when I transitioned from being an employee to working autonomously in private practice, supporting nurses and midwives with clinical supervision. Most recently, joy has resurfaced in my life with greater intensity and endurance. This sense of joy has emerged through my work as a trainee counsellor, coinciding with a period when I was encouraged to explore and articulate the philosophical framework that underpins my unique practice.

I resonate with liberalism's emphasis on individual freedom and social constructionism's relational view of knowledge. Although these philosophical positions differ in their perspectives on knowledge, values, and societal structures, there are points of intersection. Both emphasise individual agency and share criticism of power structures that marginalise others. They both reject the essentialist view of identity and truth and highlight the value of dialogue. Liberalism is through the free exchange of ideas and social constructionism in the co-construction of meaning. (Hansen, 2004; Anderson, 2007; Mounk, 2023). These points of intersection suggest a common commitment to challenging dominant discourses and welcoming multiple perspectives. This research is conducted through a philosophical lens underpinned by social constructionist and liberal ideas.

This research unfolds during my professional journey as an emerging counsellor completing a Master of Counselling. I am part of a therapeutic team at the Queensland University of Technology counselling clinic, where I serve as a primary counsellor and a member of a reflecting team (Anderson, 1987). I am an outsider witness, listening closely to the client's preferred stories and values while observing from behind a one-way mirror. I offer my reflections to the client, inviting them to consider alternative perspectives that may support a more preferred story of their life (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 1995; White, 2007).

As joy began to emerge and linger in my role as counsellor and reflecting team member, my curiosity grew. Why was joy persisting in this setting, where previously it had been absent, elusive, or fleeting at best? The following vignette captures reflections from my journal, after being witness to conversations in the clinic and my initial glimpses of joy.

Vignette One: Glimpsing Joy

One of the team members observed that I appeared energised and enthusiastic when discussing ideas related to outsider witness practices. I noticed that this way of practising felt intuitive and comfortable, and the more I engaged with it, the more I loved it. This led me to reflect on times when others noticed something about me that stood out to them, prompting them to make a change based on my words or actions. These moments were powerful and certainly put a skip in my step at the time. Have these experiences helped me reconnect with my preferred story, and has this influenced my preference for this approach?

Midway through the research year, I began to lean into a collaborative approach, valuing individuals' expertise in their own lives and recognising their capacity for change. I viewed therapy

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as a relational process shaped by stories and interactions with others (Dickerson, 2010; Hansen, 2004; Anderson, 2007; D'Arcy & Holmes, 2020; McCashen, 2017). Yet, I remained uncertain about what specifically brought me joy in this way of working.

This study was inspired by my desire to identify the elements of joy within my practice, offering a roadmap of sorts to navigate towards future experiences of joy. Reflecting on the potential impact of this research, I began to consider whether sustained joy in practice could enhance my professional experience and inspire others to uncover new possibilities in their work. During conversations about these ideas, I recall one particular instance where the topic of burnout was raised, and there was curiosity about whether exploring joy could provide an alternative to traditional approaches for preventing burnout. Until then, I had not considered joy in the context of burnout: is there a connection? As I delved into the literature and reflected on my practice and counselling framework, my research question began to take shape: *Journeying to Joy: The Key to Reducing Burnout?*

Autoethnography: Navigating the Personal-Professional Boundary

Many researchers note the relational aspect of counselling and emphasise the value of bringing the person of the therapist into practice (White, 1997; McLeod & McLeod, 2014; Proctor, 2014). I agree, and it has always seemed unethical to turn my back on or set aside the essence of who I am in my practice – something I had previously felt obligated to do in past roles. The counselling training program I was engaged with emphasised collaborative learning, providing philosophies and theories while encouraging us to develop our unique ways of working.

As such, there appeared to be no better way to bring myself into practice than through autoethnographic research. This qualitative research method aims to produce meaningful research grounded in personal experience (Ellis et al., 2011). It involves retrospectively writing about and analysing personal learnings or epiphanies (Ellis et al., 2011).

Heath et al. (2022) describe autoethnographic research as a method where the author is part of the story, aiming to "show rather than tell" (p. 28). In this study, "showing" emerges from data collected through weekly journal entries over 10 months. The entries capture my reflections on working within a therapeutic team, offering counselling and supervision to individuals, couples, and families. My thoughts focused on conversations as a counsellor and as a member of the reflecting and debriefing team. While the research focus was initially broad, over time, my entries became centred on the presence of joy in my practice.

The journals were structured using Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which supports learning by reflecting on experiences (Trottier, 2024). The process involved documenting reactions and observations, connecting them to values and societal discourses, supporting findings with literature, and planning how to apply the learning (Trottier, 2024). The analysis involved reading through journal entries to identify themes, which over time started to reveal various elements that were, or were not, present when joy was experienced.

Additionally, "the showing" will be further illustrated using vignettes. Humphrey (2005) describes vignettes as vivid portrayals of everyday episodes based on reflections captured after field experiences. In this study, the vignettes consist of reflections on my experiences, aiming to situate myself within the research and invite readers to engage with my journey. These thoughts are layers of my reflections rather than observations about clients. Heath et al. (2014) note that in-the-moment storytelling in autoethnographic research "places the reader in the mind and the heart of the therapist" (p. i). While these reflections on joy are my own, I hope that others will resonate with them and find further meaning through reading my work, in a way that might contribute to joy in their practice.

This exploration of personal reflections and storytelling led to a critical examination of the broader narrative in caregiving professions, particularly the tendency to frame burnout as an individual failing—an idea captured in the notion that "the person is the problem". This marks the starting point of the research journey.

The Person is The Problem

When examining the understanding of joy in the literature, particularly within the context of the counsellor's personal life, the concept of "burnout" seemed to be in the way. Miller et al., (2015) reference an article in *Scientific American Mind* that declares job satisfaction to be in a very fragile state, with between 21 and 67 per cent of workers experiencing high levels of burnout. A qualitative study on job satisfaction and burnout among those who do "people work" suggests that reducing burnout levels can lead to highly satisfied and blissful practitioners (Rosales et al., 2013). Burnout is a term I have heard often in my professional life. I was interested in this idea of burnout that seems to obstruct joy, job satisfaction, and bliss.

The conceptualisation of burnout, along with related conditions including compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, emerged in the 1970s. Many agree that burnout occurs when chronic stress is not managed (Geldard, Geldard, & Foo, 2022; Squellati, R., & Zangaro, 2022). Burnout is often characterised by emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion, leaving individuals disconnected and unmotivated (Geldard, Geldard & Foo, 2022; Mathieu, 2022; Miller, 2015). Burnout has been reported to have several effects on the lives of people working in caregiving roles, including growing rates of absenteeism, high job turnover, anxiety and depression, and diminished spirit and passion for the job (Collette et al., 2024; Mathieu, 2022; Miller, 2015; Rosales, 2013). The impact of diminishing passion led me to question the potential role of joy in reducing burnout.

A brief review of the literature notes a recurring theme that burnout is widely regarded as a potential hazard of working with other human beings. Much of the focus is on how practitioners can mitigate the risks of burnout through self-care strategies and resilience programs (Mathieu, 2022; Geldard, Geldard & Foo, 2022; Collett et al., 2024). However, alternative research challenges the emphasis on the individual to reduce burnout, particularly the popular recommendations of self-care and coping strategies. Bober and Regehr (2005) conducted a cross-sectional study to assess the effectiveness of these commonly recommended forms of prevention. They found no evidence to support an association between devoting time to these coping strategies and reduced stress levels, noting that these strategies unduly individualise the problem.

Evidence of these effects of individualising the problem can be found in much of the literature. For example, an article titled "Eight Ways Nurses Can Manage a Burnt-Out Leader" (Squellati & Zangaro, 2022) places responsibility on nurses to recognise the signs of burnout and practice mindfulness and other methods to decrease burnout. Similarly, in *Revisiting Burnout*, Miller et al. (2015) discuss counsellors' experiences of feeling pressured to do more to support their mental health and well-being. They express scepticism about the effectiveness of these strategies and the guilt associated with the perceived ethical duty to care for themselves. It is interesting to consider other inconsistencies and contradictions that may be evident in this dominant story of burnout. Are there other narratives?

Re-authoring: The Membership of Life

Michael White, an Australian social worker and psychotherapist best known as a co-founder of narrative therapy, introduced the idea that "the problem is the problem; the person is not the problem" (White, 2007). Many agree on the benefits to clients in a counselling context when viewing problems in this way, including identifying the client's skills and resources, highlighting what may be important to them, and giving clients the agency to live the life they hope for (D'Arcy & Holmes, 2020; Morgan, 2000; Madsen, 2007). Considering these ideas in the context of burnout in the helping professions seemed relevant.

In his work examining the narratives of counsellors' lives, White (1997) notes that, alongside the nature of the work and institutional structures, burnout is often attributed to the individual, as found in the research by Bober and Regehr (2005). Practitioners are sometimes offered the notion that they are "not cut out for it" (White 1997, p. v). This perspective places the problem firmly with the individual, suggesting deficiencies or flaws predisposing them to burnout. White (2007) argues that this approach to problems shapes how efforts to resolve them are made and influences people to believe certain "truths" about their character, relationships, and those around them.

Michael White offers alternative ideas about relational practice that may help reduce burnout (1997). He speaks openly about experiencing joy in his work. This joy does not arise from professional expertise, but rather from the knowledge he has gained through the "membership" of his own life. The "membership of life" refers to the knowledge gained through our personal histories of living in this world and interacting with others (White, 1996). These ideas resonate strongly with me and contrast with the discomfort I've felt in systems that discourage practitioners from sharing aspects of their personal history.

Building on Michael White's ideas about relational practice and the "membership of life," the concept of meaning-making within a social constructionist framework further highlights the collaborative and relational nature of constructing personal meaning. It acknowledges the impact of cultural and social contexts, highlighting the role of language in shaping understanding through relational conversations (Anderson, 2007; Bird, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). Jonella Bird (2002) describes how singing often evokes strong emotions and memories. She suggests that within a post-structuralist conversation, where one human spirit connects with another, there is potential for "talk that sings" (Bird, 2002, p. 30), implying that both the client and counsellor may benefit from the shared experience of the conversation. I began to notice evidence that both I and the client were benefiting from conversation.

In the clinic, I observed that outsider-witness practices, where I listened for what was implicit in clients' stories and then offered reflections, created opportunities for clients to expand their preferred story (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 1995; White, 2007). Hearing their stories reflected from other perspectives seemed to deepen their sense of agency and foster hope for a preferred future (Beaver & Gardner, 1995; Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 1995; White, 2007). Invigorated by these experiences, I began to extend these ideas beyond the reflecting team, integrating them into my role through the use of therapeutic letters addressed to the client. This approach seemed to allow me to draw on my own "membership of life" to foster meaningful, collaborative exchanges.

Therapeutic Letter Writing: Thickening the Story of Joy

Therapeutic letter writing offers a valuable means to highlight overlooked aspects of client stories — effectively "thickening the story" to extend the therapeutic conversation beyond the session (White & Epston, 1990). This narrative therapy practice involves counsellors writing letters after each session, capturing reflections on themes, strengths, and values expressed by the client. These letters are shared with the client to support further reflection and are retained as part of the client's records, providing an ongoing, meaningful account of their therapeutic journey (Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

I started to notice that I was drawn to Michael White's (2007) four categories of inquiry in outsider witness processes. These categories guided how I listened and offered my reflections in person and when writing therapeutic letters. The focus is on what expressions stand out to the listener, what images of people's lives these evoke, and what these images suggest about their values and purposes. The listener considers how the story resonates with their own life and how they have been moved as a witness to the conversation (White, 2007; Carey & Russell, 2003). White suggests, this process can "contribute in significant ways to rich story development for clients" (Denborough, 2008, p. 56).

In discussing Meyerhoff (1986) in *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and essays*, White (1995) describes how an "outsider witness" provides people with an opportunity to be seen as they wish to be seen. This process amplifies and validates their preferred self-view, supporting a sense of agency and expanding their awareness of options for shaping their lives. These ideas resonated with my experiences of others noticing my preferred story. In an article discussing reflecting Teamwork as a Definitional Ceremony, White also notes that deconstructing comments within personal experiences helps to counter power imbalances and foster a more egalitarian stance (1995).

Reading this article at a particular moment felt strikingly significant, a flag waving for my attention. I wrote the following journal entry in response.

Vignette two: Egalitarianism

Although I have read about outsider-witness processes, and perhaps even this specific article, many times before, the meaning resonates more at this point in my journey, particularly the emphasis on fostering an egalitarian approach. This theme has often surfaced in my journals, reflecting my belief that all individuals, regardless of background or circumstance, deserve equal opportunities and the chance to thrive. I've also noticed that when others position themselves as authorities over me, it leaves me disempowered and unseen. This feels like a significant and powerful realisation.

My reflections on my experience of working in this way seemed to amplify my curiosity about what makes joy possible, a theme woven throughout my journal entries and shared in the following vignettes.

Vignette Three: Creativity

Being witness to conversation and an author crafting therapeutic letters seems like a creative expression. It requires me to suspend judgment, lean in, be curious, and wonder. In my personal and professional life, I appreciate the excitement of uncertainty, not knowing exactly how things will progress or where they will end up. I've noticed a tendency to resist prescribed methods, often feeling discontent when creativity is absent. When I practice from a position that centres me as the expert, creativity tends to vanish, leaving me bored and unsatisfied.

Vignette Four: Foundations of Joy

Could it be that narrative and collaborative approaches within a social constructionist framework nurture creativity and support an egalitarian stance, which, in turn, has allowed joy

to emerge? Is it the framework that makes joy possible? I feel compelled to use a metaphor here. There was a show in the 70s called "The Dating Game," where contestants asked questions to three mystery bachelors or bachelorettes hidden behind a door. The goal was to select one person based on their answers, with the mystery dates revealed at the end. Have I chosen an approach that aligns with my values and how I see the world, which supports my journey to joy?

Vignette Five: Taking it Back

But wait, there is more. It seems that the client also plays a vital role in facilitating joy for the counsellor within the therapeutic process. In describing the two-way account of therapy White (1997) that notes "the life-shaping nature of this work" (p. 131). In being witness to conversations and deconstructing comments within my personal experience, I have felt joy, and agree with White that it has been life-shaping. White describes "taking-it-back" practices, where counsellors share with clients what they have learned working in the therapeutic relationship, positioning clients as knowledgeable contributors. When I look at the joy I have felt, I realise that much of this joy stems from the act of taking-it-back.

This concept of taking-it-back feels both valuable and slightly risky, as it implies that something is taken from the client, a notion not often emphasised in traditional perspectives on the counsellor-client relationship. However, as I work through my journals and read through my retellings of client stories, I am reassured that I have been able to re-deliver to clients the things they value, in a way that may have resonance for them, and can contribute to rich story development (White, 2007). The following are some examples of what I have been able to take- back to counselling and supervision clients.

I noticed the client valued agency and resonated with the story of being misunderstood. This had me taking back an appreciation of how I might use transparency in both my personal and professional life.

I noticed the client valued capability and resonated with the story of being fearful of not having the right skills during a period of transition. This had me taking back a different perspective on change and a curiosity about dominant ideas of professionalism, wondering if these are okay or not.

I noticed the client valued relationships and resonated with the idea of presence and "being enough." This had me taking back an appreciation for times in my life when I could acknowledge that being present may have been enough.

It is interesting to consider these ideas in the context of counsellor effects. What impact do these practices have on the personal and professional lives of counsellors? How might participating in or facilitating these reflective practices contribute to a counsellor's sense of meaning, well-being, personal and professional growth, and joy?

Redefining Boundaries: Ethics, Joy, and Collaboration in Practice

It's becoming clear that the core of these reflections is the value I place on relationships in both personal and professional contexts, and the belief in the personal being the professional—the two cannot be separated. Both Anderson (2007) and George & Wulff (2007) expand on this idea, proposing that collaboration is more than a technique; it is a lifestyle. Anderson describes this as a philosophy of life, reflecting a natural rhythm in how one shows up in the world and across all roles in life. George and Wulff (2007) add that "operating from a collaborative stance allows us to feel good about what we do". Could this sense of "feeling good" be interpreted as joy? And when this outcome is achieved, where is burnout?

This research has prompted me to rethink the strict professional boundaries I've encountered throughout my career. White (1997) observes that when we step into the professional realm, we're often encouraged to set aside our personal histories, which become marginalised in favour of prioritising professional knowledge. White suggests that sharing our personal and professional histories can foster the sharing of values and beliefs that enrich meaning-making. Reflecting on my experience with boundaries, a metaphor comes to mind: In a scene from The Lord of the Rings, Gandalf is on the narrow Bridge of Khazad-dûm, blocking the way of the fiery Balrog, firmly declaring, "You shall not pass." The Balrog lashes out, ultimately causing Gandalf to fall into the dark abyss, an illustration of how rigid boundaries can sometimes feel perilous and isolating.

White (1997) critiques the tendency in many counselling approaches to maintain one-sided conversations, where the counsellor is positioned as a neutral observer. He argues that conversations become "problematised" when this one-way ideal is disrupted, particularly when counsellors bring parts of themselves into the dialogue, as if daring to cross that narrow bridge invites confrontation with the Balrog. This reflects my own experiences early in my career, where I felt constrained by these strict boundaries, often confusing this rigidity with a confirmation that I wasn't doing a good job. I agree with White's suggestion that when counsellors share their own experiences, it fosters a more egalitarian dynamic, allowing both the counsellor's and client's lives to be integrated into the conversation (1995). This two-way model encourages counsellors to engage in their own acts of meaning-making, enriching their work and shaping their professional identities (White, 1997).

McLeod and McLeod (2014) highlight the value of the "constructive use of self" in therapeutic relationships but caution that counsellors must prioritise client outcomes over their happiness. Interestingly, they also note that self-disclosure can strengthen relationships, provide alternative perspectives, and potentially equalise power dynamics in therapy. Contrary to McLeod and McLeod's (2014) caution about prioritising client outcomes over counsellor happiness, White (1997) frames the two-way account of therapy as an ethical commitment, enriching both the lives of clients and engaging counsellors in the reauthoring of their own lives and their work. This perspective aligns with Fife et al. (2014), who advocate for a "both-and" approach, integrating the way of being with techniques and the therapeutic alliance in their meta-model. Similarly, Anderson (2014) underscores the transformative potential of a collaborative way of working, which ethically influences and benefits both the client and the counsellor through shared interaction.

I've noticed a sense of lightness and perhaps even relief in understanding where joy has emerged, particularly how it flourishes when boundaries are redrawn, allowing for a collaborative practice where client and therapist are interconnected (Anderson, 2007). From my perspective, this creates an environment that would be difficult for burnout to flourish. I'm curious about what others might think. Some consider the idea of counsellors gaining or taking anything from their clients to be radical (McLeod & McLeod, 2014). In this context, where this approach questions traditional assumptions about how counsellors should practice and invites a shift in perspective, I agree that it may be radical, and I'm okay with that.

In commitment to radical ways of working, my final offering to you, dear reader, is an invitation to reflect on these ideas and consider how they might resonate with you in your practice.

Implications and Conclusions – A Letter to People Working with Other Humans

To those working in one of the many fields under the banner of the helping professions, this letter is for you. While it would be presumptuous to assume your reasons for choosing this career path, I can reflect on why I entered this arena. I hoped to care for and nurture others and was motivated by a desire to work closely with people. I wanted to do meaningful work that made a genuine difference in the lives of those I encountered. It was important for me to do a good job. Is this comparable to your reasons?

As a young nurse, however, I quickly became convinced I wasn't very good at my job. I was distracted by conversation, often prioritising time spent with patients and their families over other tasks. This was where I was first introduced to the concept of boundaries and expert positioning. I learned that bringing myself into the professional alliance was considered risky and unprofessional, and my role was to be the "holder of knowledge". My expertise, I believed, was what people needed; I was in a position to help by sharing my knowledge with them. Yet, I felt uncomfortable in this expert role and felt pressure to "be better". The more I worked, the heavier this burden became. I'm curious if this speaks to your experience.

The pivotal moment came when I was introduced to a collaborative approach that positioned me as a partner with the client, removing the weight of needing all the answers. It offered a different approach that valued egalitarianism and creativity- two things I realise now have always been important to me. This is the moment joy first emerged in my work. What are your experiences of joy in your work?

As an emerging counsellor, working from a social constructionist and liberal framework, I started to experience joy on a more regular basis and wanted to know why. My research has taken me to unexpected places, most surprisingly, the barrier of burnout and what potentially gets in the way of practitioner joy. It seems that people who do "people work" are feeling burdened and overwhelmed, not just by the work, but by the pressure to do better when it comes to self-care. Does this resonate with you?

My research has been influential in uncovering the sources of joy in my work. While I eventually arrived at a clear understanding, the journey was far from straightforward and led to unexpected discoveries. Initially, I hypothesised that working congruently with my way of being would naturally bring joy into my practice. What I discovered, however, was both more complex and, surprisingly, simpler.

It was the collaborative, philosophical stance that allowed me to bring Belinda, the person, fully into the therapeutic space (Anderson, 2007). The relief of no longer feeling pressured to leave the essence of who I am at the counselling room door- but instead being invited into the room, was pronounced.

You might be thinking, but isn't this risky? Are you suggesting therapists bare everything to their clients? Far from it. Michael White's concept of "two-way" therapy invites counsellors to thoughtfully deconstruct their personal experiences to contribute to the rich story development of those consulting them (White, 2007). In this approach, counsellors share how a client's story has moved them, shaped their lives, and led them somewhere unexpected. White emphasises that these responses are not grand or self-serving but powerful in positioning the client as a knowledgeable contributor. This final element has become the most surprising source of joy in my practice. The act of taking-back what I have gained as a result of sharing in conversation with another human being has brought immense joy.

If, like me, you've entered this work with a desire to make a genuine difference in the lives of those you meet along the way, consider this: what if the people we work with, care for, and support can also make a difference in our own lives? What do you think about that idea? This research has helped me appreciate that a collaborative and philosophical stance supports me in working in alignment with my values, specifically creativity and egalitarianism. These values, in turn, allow me to bring myself into the work, resulting in a profound sense of joy. I'm interested to know how this approach, or way of working, might change how others view burnout. Could joy indeed be the key to reducing burnout?

Warmly
Belinda

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