

Nominate a Professional

Sarah Clay

Sarah Clay was my psychotherapist for 7 years and she saved my life. She worked in private practice and in the community. She specialised in helping people with chronic health conditions, disability and miscarriage. She is a humanistic psychotherapist who treats the whole person – mind, body and spirit. I was very fortunate to be her client and I slowly learnt how to acknowledge my disability and depression, deal with grief and loss and how to manage my emotions. I was suicidal when I met her but slowly, through her treatment and commitment to me as a client I am now healthier, happier and able to manage my health conditions, including anxiety and depression. This is my story of experiencing psychotherapy with Sarah.

Sarah Clay is a Humanist Psychotherapist and Counsellor working in private practice from her home. Before training as a Psychotherapist she was a Physiotherapist in the NHS for many years. The combination of these occupational skills and her human kindness made her an incredible practitioner. I feel as a client and service user that private practice mental health professionals do not get the recognition they deserve, because of the confidential and ethical nature of private therapy practice. These stories are rarely told and for me the therapy experience was life-saving and life-changing.

I met the psychotherapist Sarah Clay 7 years ago when I started having therapy as her client in her private practice. I had been suffering from depression and anxiety all my life and I had reached breaking point after a series of medical diagnosis causing me to have chronic and lifelong health problems.

I was a Special Education Teacher and had to leave work as chronic fatigue and pain overwhelmed me. I had been a driven and energetic person but I had burnt out at the age of 35. It took me until I was 46 to seek therapy with Sarah. I had spent those years in between in denial about my disability and suppressing my depression, with the hope it would just go away. By the time I got to 46 I couldn't get out of bed because of severe arthritis and a deep depression that left me feeling suicidal and desperate for help. This led me to Sarah's door one Tuesday lunchtime in October 2015; little did I know that the first session would lead to 7 years of humanistic therapy with Sarah.

Sarah embodied the humanistic approach by listening, kindness, presence, attunement and empathy. She acknowledged both my physical and mental health and no professional had ever done that before. She let me tell my story and what emerged was childhood trauma, neglect, abandonment and later on the effects of homophobia and grief. She did not judge me but instead recognised and celebrated my bravery and my achievements (which I had never done) and something inside me had shifted ever so slightly, a tiny space for hope had opened within me when I met her.

The healing came over time and hard work from both of us. It was gruelling at times but I learnt to be open and vulnerable because Sarah had created a really safe space for me. I can honestly and wholeheartedly say that she saved my life and has had a lasting and profound effect on me and my family. She challenged me every step of the way to grow resilient to listening to my own story. To use new tools to manage my pain, depression and anxiety.

Sarah has had a huge impact on me in many ways. She helped me recognise my childhood and generational trauma, my many health problems, grief and loss, resistance to change, and at last I more comfortable with vulnerability. I can now regulate my emotions and tend to them as a healthy parent would. Before, my depression was like a runaway train I couldn't stop. Now 7 years later I have many tools I have learnt because of therapy with Sarah. Learning for the first time at the age of 46 how to truly look after myself and want to live.

I had escaped my childhood on a council estate and got into University. I had one parent, my beloved Mom who helped me in every way she could, She herself suffered from depression and was also often working split shifts and getting home in the early hours of the morning. I was often on my own, sometimes hungry and cold.

As a result of this childhood I felt driven to escape these circumstances and make my Mom proud. I did all of this but the problem with being driven and not looking after myself was that it accumulated in my body and mind and I was often highly anxious and dismissive of my body. By the age of 35 I was diagnosed with my first chronic illness, a rare disease called psoriatic arthritis. Instead of this being a wakeup call I doubled down and became busier, taking on extra teaching work and just pretended it was not happening, despite terrible pain. But really I felt lost, angry and broken.

Sarah and I are from different worlds in some ways, I am a member of the LGBTQ community and she is not. Because Sarah treated me equally and respectfully,

acknowledging my wife and healing the pain I have felt from discrimination in the past from judgemental people who do not understand. She restored my faith in people and I no longer felt angry or disenfranchised from the wider community. I was also able to actually say out loud that I am disabled. Because I was able to acknowledge this, I was able to get treatment and manage my conditions. By exploring all of my symptoms both psychological and physical, Sarah encouraged me to re-engage with Drs and specialists, after a childhood of not trusting or using public services. During my time in therapy with Sarah I have been diagnosed with other chronic conditions, which also explained some of my mental health problems.

Things started to become clearer and slowly Sarah and I tried to unravel and provide healing to the trauma, pain and confusion I was experiencing. Because I am on disability benefit, she never charged me more than I could afford for sessions which enabled me to carry on. By the time we finished therapy I was able to return to work part time in special needs education after a ten year absence from any employment.

We went through the lockdown together and very sadly my Mom died of Covid. It was the worst time of my life and Sarah, again guided me through it. We met every week virtually and Sarah even attended the funeral virtually.

Despite Sarah's own autoimmune disease and her husband having cancer, she took a short break and was back to her practice, continuing until her retirement in February 2023. Her retirement has prompted me to nominate her for this award, for the amazing work she has done for me and in our community through her private practice and work in the NHS.