

# The Dog in the Room

*Isla Jeffers and Dr. Coleen Jones*



Photo credit: Zen Tshabangu

## Introduction

This article as a form of ethnography recounts the collaborative work done by assistance dog Hallie from Dogs for the Disabled, her handler a psychotherapist, Isla Jeffers and Isla's Clinical Supervisor, Dr Coleen Jones. The project was supported fully by the CEO of Dogs for the Disabled, Jennifer Dowler. The work was located in and welcomed by the YMCA in Cork, Ireland as part of their Youth Counselling Service which is funded by the Cork Local Drugs Task Force through the HSE.

This article is co-authored by Coleen and Isla who present their experiences and their thinking behind the project which aims to make counselling and psychotherapy (from here on referred to as therapy) more accessible to young people and perhaps to others in different

circumstances. We frame our delightful experience and scaffold it carefully and ethically by articulating the thinking and theory behind the experiment. So far the experiment makes the working alliance between client and therapist easier to form, allows the therapeutic relationship to develop and normalises the therapeutic space making it more informal and relaxed as it reduces anxiety. There is a caveat here that the dogs used in this pilot have been carefully selected and thoroughly trained by Dogs for the Disabled. It seems that not every dog is suitable to the task.

## CONTENT: COLEEN

This project started in the middle of 2016 when Isla introduced the idea of bringing an assistance dog into the counselling room at the YMCA. Thankfully she had experience

in handling assistance dogs, as her daughter has a wonderful assistance dog called George. It was necessary for Isla and myself as her Clinical Supervisor to consider what supports were needed, identify what hurdles needed to be cleared, get the support and co-operation of both Dogs for the Disabled and that of Cork YMCA. We spent a lot of time weighing up the risks. In the end it was decided to pilot the project and begin writing it up and collecting insights from October 2016. Quite simply Isla in a very matter-of-fact way introduced the dog Hallie – a two year old Golden Retriever - into Support, Training and Enterprise Programme (STEP) and Work Orientation Training (WOT) – the YMCA's vocational training programmes, as well as into Nino's – the YMCA canteen area at lunchtime. This allowed the young people who were around to make contact, become familiar and begin talking. Then Hallie was introduced into a couple of sessions only if the clients were completely happy with the idea.

## CONTENT: ISLA

This pilot programme was initially suggested by Jennifer Dowler – CEO of Dogs for the Disabled, an amazing charity which trains dogs for children and adults with a physical disability. I already had strong links with them through my daughter who has one of their assistance dogs - George. Jennifer was keen to explore new possibilities and proposed introducing one of the charity's dogs in training into the counselling room. I was keen to trial it as were the YMCA – where my counselling service is based. George has had such a positive influence on our family at home that I was keen to see what effect such a dog would have on our YMCA family, specifically

within the counselling space. Following preparatory discussions with Dogs for the Disabled, our YMCA staff, our young people and my supervisor Coleen, we decided to go ahead.

I brought a dog into the counselling room with me one day per week for a total of eight weeks. Hallie – a two year old Golden Retriever in training as a therapy dog came for the majority - seven out of the eight weeks. Hugo, a two year old black Labrador, also in training came once. Hugo was affectionate but got bored and after a while would go over to the door and whine. Hallie was better suited and happy to stay all day – four counselling sessions each day. Over the eight week period a dog, either Hallie or Hugo, was in the counselling room with a total of twelve different young people (aged 18-22) from two different YMCA programmes.

The experience was extremely positive and particularly helpful with regard to the accessibility of counselling. Hallie made that first step through the door so much easier. Any taboo left regarding counselling just melted away at the prospect of the dog being there. More than once I heard, *“I’ll definitely go if there’s a dog there...”*

Obviously the dog in the room is not for everyone. Not all clients like dogs and preparation prior to the first session was important, *“There will be a dog in the room. Are you ok with that?”*

We did nothing special. Hallie was there in the room and the interaction was natural. We had a water bowl, a blanket and dog treats that clients could give her if they wished. Hallie shunned the blanket in favour of the empty chair! Sometimes she would go over to the client. At other times she curled up in a chair and slept. There was a sharing between us in the simple joy of that, *“Look at her, she’s so cute!”* It was so normal. She

modelled relaxation perfectly and I was able to make reference to that as I introduced a relaxation exercise, *“So let’s begin to relax and take deep breaths. See what Hallie is doing.”*

It was during those early sessions that Hallie was most useful. Many of my clients have been let down in the past by other adults and other professionals and so were rightly defensive of me. *“I’ve been to 12 counsellors and you’re number 13. Only one of them was any good and she left after four months...”* As yet another adult, another professional sitting across from them it can take time to build their trust. This process seemed to be eased, even accelerated with the dog in the room. She was a bond between us, an equaliser. They pet the dog, I pet the dog. The fact that the dog trusted me helped them to trust me. This counselling was different. *“She has a dog with her. Ok I might give this a chance...”* I had gone to the effort to have the dog there for them, the extra mile. And that meant a lot. And there were indeed many extra miles spent walking her to and from the YMCA and out at lunchtime for a toilet break!

The dog in the room brought calm, comfort and unconditional positive regard in spades. Hallie responded to emotion. There was a particular joy and freedom in that the dog wasn’t restricted by protocol or policy like I was. In fact it was nice for me as the therapist to have a *“buddy”* too. She was able to go over to the client, to touch them, even lick them! If they were upset she would respond and go over to them and also to me. As one client spoke of his difficult childhood it was like he’d pressed the play button and just reeled off his story, seeming to come from his head space not his heart. He wasn’t feeling it. I however was feeling it. It was a surprise and a comfort when Hallie came over to me and put her head on my lap and

I realised that she was feeling it too. Another client rubbed Hallie’s ears as he spoke. It seemed to comfort him, to help him speak, a distraction from the horror of his story.

Many of my clients are presenting with anxiety. Having the dog there brought ease and seemed to calm their stress response.

Hallie also had an impact outside the counselling room. Walking her through the city to the YMCA, passing strangers would spot her, catch my eye and smile. In meetings with colleagues Hallie would lean on them and they’d pet her as they spoke. Bringing her into the training rooms brought energy to the groups. One facilitator said, *“The atmosphere in the group was lovely today,”* and thought it was to do with the dog.

Hanging out with Hallie at lunchtime brought valuable interaction. A lad in for an appointment who usually preferred to wait by himself came in and sat down with the others in the canteen. Hallie went to them all, no favourites, no judgement. She was just being herself, playing, lying upside down, and hiding nothing. She just wanted to be loved and it was wonderful to watch the young people respond. Hallie expressed a delightful openness and heads lifted up from phones! She brought togetherness, a shared joy and I witnessed something of a soul connection. Some young people and a dog - ordinary and yet extraordinary!

### **CONTENT: COLEEN**

In October in supervision we started putting some words, context and theory to what was happening. The immediate attraction to the dog made the connection which helped the clients relax particularly those who would usually be apprehensive of therapy. There was an emotional softening with the dog being there. Hallie seemed to bring with her, and

create a form of safety. Hallie simply walked from one to the other, lay on the floor or at times seemed totally disinterested as she curled up on the free chair in the room. At times Hallie needed toileting or a walk. One would have thought that this would be an interruption, but in a way “less is more” because it made the work more earthy and ordinary. This was significant, this “normalising” effect which brought with it EASE. SO often in the medical world there is a focus on a DISEASE model which pathologises and diagnoses (labels) the client in some or other way. For young people starting out in their lives this is less than ideal. We wanted to look at what was happening for them as a lack of ease or DYS-EASE, from the Greek, and normalise their experiences, thoughts and behaviours. For this to happen these young clients needed an atmosphere and climate which felt safe, where they could feel sooth-ed. Patting a dog like Hallie provided just such a tactile, soothing and emotionally calming encounter. Where patting the dog brings with it as part of the flow, a form of touching which is sensual, connecting and initially non-verbal. It was as if the dog, Hallie acted as a co-therapist in a homely and very ordinary and earthy way. The wonderful paediatrician and psychotherapist Donald Winnicott (1960) favoured the creative space where people could meet, play and create. He called this the Transitional Space. It’s a space which promotes an energetic flow and good, real contact between people. Winnicott wrote that this connection is brokered by a Transitional Object. Babies mostly have their teddy bears as warm, cuddly objects that hold them until Mother re-appears. The transitional object soothes and reassures the child or person until the links with the significant other are in place. In this way Hallie seemed to be this Transitional Object, securing and hastening the contact in the therapy room. It is not what is said

that is always the palliative, but how the therapist is heard by the client who is anxious and confused. The neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist (2009) differentiates the semantic language from the prosodic language. This means that the anxious client like a newborn baby is less able to understand the words being said and more tuned in to the musicality of language and what is the felt atmosphere in the room and in particular the tone, timbre and warm intentions in the voice of the therapist. Hallie the assist dog brought the “coo-ing and oo-ing” warmth into the room in a very real and felt way. In the words of Carl Rogers (1980) who wrote extensively about Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) as one of the core conditions for a sound therapeutic alliance and relationship to form. The dog conveys UPR implicitly by communicating trust, warmth, acceptance, loyalty, commitment and non judgement... and Love.

At this point it is important to look at the dog as not only connecting client and therapist but also as serving to integrate and regulate the client’s nervous system. In circumstances where the client is hyper-aroused, there is an immediate stress response with the client’s system flooding with the stress hormone and other hormones to either cause the client to fight, take flight or freeze. This is generally the case with young clients who are afraid of the therapist and unknown about therapy and what it entails. Often this results in stony silence which may be really difficult to thaw. The clients who are often terrified actually can’t think of what they want to say or where to begin. In our experiment it seems that the dog, Hallie, as a Transitional Object acts as a distraction, soothes, eases and serves to integrate the Cortex with the Limbic system. The Cortex allows the client to think clearly and

have access to high level cognitions and emotional processing while the Amygdala as a part of the Limbic system is focused on survival and will block the client, so that they freeze or get out the door as soon as they can. It is vital that the client is able to have access to the pre-frontal Cortex. But in view of the pain, neglect or terror experienced by many youngsters, their Limbic systems are flooding and primed for survival. It’s like driving a car and having access to one gear only, often stalled or the reverse gear. The dog seems to help the client shift through the gears and get moving.

### **CONTENT: ISLA**

Weekly debriefs happened with Jennifer from Dogs for the Disabled when I brought Hallie back to the charity after our day’s work. We quickly decided to stop bringing toys for her after the second week when she was distracted. Jennifer understood straight away. “Was she minding something?” I remembered, “Yes, she was *cuddling a toy*.” There were no more toys and no further problems.

I knew that having the dog present was really working but for both myself and the clients it was difficult to articulate why. “Do you think having the dog here is a good idea?” “Yes definitely.” “Why do you think it’s a good idea?” “I dunno. It’s nice like...” Supervision with Coleen was “key” here. She was able to help me work through why it was working and apply relevant counselling theories such as Winnicott’s. It was during one such supervision session that I had a moment of epiphany. The experience at work of the dog in the counselling room was actually mirroring our experience of the dog at home with my daughter. In just the same way as Hallie at work, George has brought comfort, acceptance, togetherness and an

indescribable joy to our family at home. This was a striking and deep moment of realisation.

In conclusion, the dog in the room is not vital. The therapy happens anyway, regardless of whether she is there or not. But having her there is a huge help with regard to accessibility, trust, normalising, reduction of anxiety and the intrinsic building of the therapeutic relationship.

### CONTENT: COLEEN

It would be true to say that the dog comes into the (therapeutic) space, and surprisingly amplifies the space. The dog can't hurt, can't judge and as such it facilitates the Working Alliance. It gives the therapeutic space depth and opens another dimension. Arnie Mindell refers to this dimension as "hyperspace of the imagination" in his book *The Quantum Mind and Healing*,

"a two or three-dimensional perspective is usually sufficient for most purposes in life, but many problems need more dimensions to get resolved. In a hyper-spatial view of yourself, you are not dead or alive, healthy or ill, but an on-going process moving between and through" (Mindell 2004, p 47).

Isla as the handler and therapist is also "modelling" behaviour towards the dog such that there is Joy in how the dog is received. The dog is also a positive object for the client's projections allowing a melting of the defences, which is most useful. Isla regards the dog as another "tool" in her "toolbox" of interventions which helps build trust. She commented in supervision as follows, "everyone wants to come into the counselling room with the dog there...they suss me out to see how I am with the dog...and there's a deepening in my relationship with them (clients)... we're sharing the dog together..."

*its equalising when normally its so one sided...there's a lightness... we play...I (Isla) really think it works for the right people...there's a connection beyond the issue...in a way the (clients) think that I am going the extra mile for them".* The dog is not a negative distraction, but requires more work, collecting, grooming, walking and toileting the animal by the handler. What is significant is the way the dog serves to integrate, bring together what would normally be "scattered" when the person's psyche and personality is experienced as disintegrated. Clients often talk about feeling "in bits" or feeling "scattered" or "all over the place". Integration as clearly articulated by Ken Wilber (1993) is a process of bringing together, linking, cohering and remembering what has been felt, experienced, lost or thought as a result of crises and trauma.

### IN CONCLUSION:

Dogs often feature in mythology and story telling from Greyfriars Bobby in Scotland to Gelert the faithful hound of the medieval Welsh prince, Llewelyn the Great who put a sword into his hound's side, thinking it had killed his heir, when the dog's dying yell was answered by the child's cry, indicating that the dog had rescued and protected the child. From this story we see symbolically how "dog" and animal nature serves as a protector of the young. In Greek mythology we know the story of Cerberus a three headed dog guarding the entrance to Hades the underworld allowing spirits of the dead to enter but not leave unless a "sop", a payment was paid to Cerberus in order to transit back to the world of the living. In a creative way the "dog in the room" is hopefully a soul-guide bringing life and hope to these young clients on their way to living more fully. ☺

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### For more information:

[www.dogsfordisabled.ie](http://www.dogsfordisabled.ie)  
[www.ymcacork.net](http://www.ymcacork.net)  
 #ymcahealth  
 #DogsforDisable1

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### Isla Jeffers

Isla Jeffers is a psychotherapist working in the Youth Counselling Service with Cork YMCA. She is a mother of two daughters and expanded family incorporating George, a golden Labrador/Retriever trained as a stability dog for one of her daughters by Dogs for the Disabled.

### Dr Coleen Jones

Dr Coleen Jones is a psychotherapist and supervisor working in Cork. She is a member of IACP and IAHIP and was the representative for Ireland to the EAP (European Association for Psychotherapy). She was a Core-Trainer on the Masters in Integrative Psychotherapy at UCC for some fifteen years. Coleen is supportive of the work done by Dogs for the Disabled and the contribution made by dogs in so many aspects of life.