



## *Talking It Better: From Insight to Change in the Therapy Room* by Matthew Elton

(PCCS Books, 2021)

In this highly original and engaging book, Matthew Elton invites us to step into his therapy room to see how he works with the people who come to seek his help. Through a series of fictionalised case studies, he describes how he works with different people and their difficulties, and how he responds when the work becomes stuck. What we discover is Elton's distinct model of psychotherapy – or “talking it better” – and more particularly his model of therapeutic change.

For Elton, despite the wide range of situations, experiences and personalities that these “help-seekers” reveal in the therapy room, what unites them is their dissatisfaction with their current selves and their desire to become closer to a preferred self. His fictional Isobel enjoys being helpful but wants to stop feeling resentful when friends don't reciprocate; Calum wants to be able to have discussions with his partner without getting defensive and shutting down. He frames these desires as the development of “mind skills”: learning how to do emotional work differently. “Talking it better” enables people to develop the mind skills that will bring them closer to their preferred self.

Elton argues that these mind skills are part of a family of skills that are practical and undertaken in real time: skills like catching a ball, playing the piano or speaking Spanish. He suggests that just as we can learn these skills, so we can learn the mind skills that will improve our lives. And in the same way that internal blocks get in the way of improving our piano playing or our dancing, internal blocks can hamper our progress in therapy. If we can identify and challenge these self-defeating beliefs, change suddenly becomes possible.

*Talking It Better* stands out from many books about psychotherapy. First, it is refreshingly practical. We can hear the practitioner's voice on every page; and we are left in no doubt that Elton is giving us his experience of what works, rather than a theory of what ought to work. Both in the case studies and in the surrounding discussion, we see him engaging with help-seekers in what he calls a "collaborative enterprise", bringing warmth, challenge, curiosity and optimism to the process.

Secondly, it makes explicit the idea that understanding why we are doing something (insight) is in no way the same as being able to do it differently (change). As a fellow practitioner, I am regularly confronted by the frustrating fact that, despite a sophisticated understanding of themselves and their motivations, clients can remain stuck for months and sometimes years. Given how common this experience is – both to practitioners and to help-seekers – it is surprising that the difference between insight and change is so often overlooked in psychotherapy writing.

Thirdly, it is striking in the extent to which it frames therapeutic change as a learning process, with all the pitfalls and obstacles to progress that learning entails. For just as we don't expect to learn tennis on our first attempt, we can't expect to make emotional shifts without practice, feedback and some degree of self-belief. We need to learn in stages, tweaking our technique along the way, practising regularly and allowing for the possibility that if we've failed in the past, that's because we've started off on the wrong foot, not because we're a hopeless case.

Elton has an impressive ability to simplify rather than complicate, with the result that his book will appeal both to mental health professionals and to the general reader. Potential help-seekers will, I'm sure, recognise themselves in the case studies and might well find encouragement to dive in and give therapy a try. At the same time, his self-confessed "relentless optimism", and his drive to demystify complex psychological ideas, sometimes left me wondering how he would work with people whose difficulties and states of mind are darker and more frightening. What has happened to the murderous rage, the all-consuming envy, the hopeless despair of some help-seekers? Of course, in one sense the genre demands that the extremes are watered down before the story begins. And yet, perhaps less watering down might have helped convey not only the cognitive depth, but also the emotional intensity, of the work.

And, finally, I wonder whether I agree with the premise that therapy is like learning; that the therapeutic endeavour is primarily about the development of mind skills. Sometimes, certainly. But fundamentally? Towards the end of the book, we are introduced to a different sort of case: a woman whose daughter has died. Elton makes it clear that this help-seeker is not wanting to develop mind skills; she is "sharing the load" with him, having encountered something in her life that is just too big to manage on her own. We see in this example that, as a practitioner, Elton is capably flexible in his approach; he does not set about improving the mind skills of a

person in the depths of grief, but sits with her, listens and invites her to talk about her daughter. She leaves the therapy feeling that something has shifted: while she still feels profound sadness at the loss of her daughter, she has come to accept the wide-ranging thoughts and feelings that colour her day, and she no longer feels she is losing her mind. His description of how he worked in this encounter came closer to my own experience of therapy, both as practitioner and as help-seeker: the complexity of our emotional landscape, and the mysterious transformation of feelings that comes from finding our way through it in the presence of another.

*Ruth Yudkin*

*Matthew Elton graduated from Corpus in 1990 with a degree in Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology. He then completed a DPhil in Philosophy and Cognitive Science at the University of Sussex and went on to become a lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Stirling until 2002. After leaving academia, he combined working in the third sector with training and developing as a psychotherapist, an occupation that he now pursues full-time.*

*Ruth Yudkin graduated from Corpus in 1993 with a degree in Philosophy and Modern Languages. She now practises as a psychotherapist and supervisor in Bristol.*