

Key Principles

Listen

It is often of great help for someone who has unusual beliefs to be able to talk to someone who accepts their experiences as being real and does not try to explain their beliefs away as being a delusion or information processing error. Allowing a person to talk about their beliefs and actively listening to them, without the aim of pathologising or modifying those beliefs, is often a good place to start and can be beneficial in itself.

Such listening and acceptance is beneficial because it does not cause alienation of the person with unusual beliefs. Nor does it set up power differences by implying, whether intended or not, that the person with unusual beliefs' view of the world is wrong and the person trying to help's view is right. By not attempting to change the individual's unusual beliefs their self-esteem can be maintained, and this approach can be protective against depression and a negative self identity. Indeed a person in distress can gain a great deal of support when they are listened to in this way and when others take an interest in them and their lives.

Actively listening involves trying to understand how the individual's experiences make them feel. It uses strategies such as reflection and non-verbal behaviours to demonstrate this to them. To provide the best kind of support to people experiencing these kinds of difficulties it is important to be a good listener, not denying the other persons experience but taking care not to add to their fears.

In addition to offering moral support, working within the individual's belief system will allow the therapist, or person trying to help, to suggest strategies to alleviate the problems as perceived by the person they are trying to help. This is described more fully under the next sub-heading.

Speaking to religious ministers can be helpful when people have religious unusual beliefs as these ministers may have a greater understanding of the topic than most mental health professionals. This source of support has the added benefit that it is generally more available than support from statutory services. However, not all ministers are sympathetic to people's distress and can sometimes make things worse, by, for example, stating that an individual's distress means

they are evil or is a result of their sin. It is therefore best to take this route with care and possibly try and find out from others who would be a “good” religious minister to talk to about these issues. Additionally, people who have some prior religious faith can often gain significant benefit from asking their God or spiritual beings for assistance in whatever type of distressing experience they are having.

Think creatively

The various techniques and examples given in this book are meant as suggestions and to be used as a springboard for further ideas. In order to work in this way, put aside your own reality and go into the person you are trying to help’s world. Next think of things they could do, or think, to enable them live more effectively in their own reality, with their belief system. Think creatively and laterally about what sort of things they could do to manage and overcome their problems. After all what the person is saying may be factually correct but improvable and so rather than seeking more and more ways to try and disprove them it may be best to help them cope with the situation as they perceive it.

Many of the mainstream and reasonably well known strategies for anxiety management and problem-solving such as preparing in advance for difficult situations can easily be applied to the approach of working within the individual’s own belief system.

Examples of using one’s initiative to help individuals within their own reality include the following situations. If someone felt that their spirit had left them, and was very distressed by this, it may help them to look at the spiritual literature and contact relevant organisations to find ways of helping their spirit return. Alternatively, if someone was depressed because they believed they were HIV positive (despite numerous tests showing the opposite) and feared they only had limited time left, it could be best in some cases to act as if their beliefs were correct, by, for example, encouraging them to live for the moment and to do the things they feel are important. Similarly, people who have unpleasant memories and flashbacks of incidents that the scientific community does not rate very highly such as alien abduction can be helped in a similar way to those experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder following an event such as a violent attack.

Look at books and other kinds of literature dealing with the content of the individual's reality

Looking at the literature specific to the content of the unusual belief can help some people find ways of coping. For example, according to the spiritual literature carrying iron objects can be used to ward off entities such as faeries, spirits and aliens (see Druffel, 1998) – techniques those with distressing spiritual beliefs may find of use in helping them cope with their experiences. There are also books available such as *Practical Psychic Self Defense* (Bruce, 2002) which describes techniques of how people can protect themselves against a variety of phenomena such as ghosts, spirits, and from receiving telepathic messages.

Those with distressing experiences regarding subjects such as the paranormal, ghosts or aliens can find information on ways of dealing with these experiences in books and on the Internet. In addition there are online support groups for people with these, and other, kinds of experiences. In these support groups people can share coping strategies and gain support knowing that they are not alone in their beliefs. Good places to look for information relating to a particular belief system include large bookstores (or sometimes small and specialised bookshops) and by doing Internet searches.

Some worry that accepting a person's unusual beliefs and reality is colluding and is going to "make them worse". In response to this, it is important to note that there is a difference between accepting an individual's reality and trying to help them deal with it, and accepting a person's experiences but frightening them even more. Suppose someone's reality is that ghosts are trying to attack them. Accepting this, trying to understand how it must make the person feel and looking for practical strategies to cope with the situation e.g. looking at books about defending oneself against ghosts would be beneficial. On the other hand, accepting the individual's reality but then telling them frightening information such as stories of people killed ghosts would clearly not be helpful.

Strategies to Reduce Fear and Increase Control

People who are having problems with unusual beliefs are often very afraid and want to feel safe. The following strategies describe various ways of attempting to reduce an individual's distress and to help

them feel safer and more in control of their situation. They are particularly useful in the initial stages of coping.

Protection strategies

This technique involves suggesting behaviours or actions the individual can do to help them feel safer or more protected in their situation. For example, John was convinced that he was going to be attacked by racist gangs. He would wear various devices to reduce the likelihood of an attacker causing serious harm, a strategy (supported by his psychiatrist) that allowed him to feel less distressed and able to do things he was previously too afraid to do. Similarly, Clare found that wearing a certain hat when watching TV stopped her thoughts from being broadcast to everyone watching. It is also quite common that people feel more protected if they go in to certain situations with another person than if they are alone.

It is understandable that if those trying to help do not share the individual's framework of understanding they may find it difficult to suggest strategies that may help. In these situations, it may be useful to contact organisations or consult books or websites that deal with the topic of the person's unusual beliefs. A collection of strategies to deal with specific unusual beliefs, including negative spirits, aliens and telepathy can be found later on in this book.

When there is no specific knowledge base on the topic of the individual's belief system, thinking laterally and considering what things the person with unusual beliefs could do to make them feel safer or less afraid in their reality is a good way of generating suggestions.

Strategies such as these have traditionally been criticised as they result in the person with unusual beliefs carrying out increased "abnormal behaviour" and are seen as "colluding with the delusion" (see Carr, 1988). However, there is no evidence that working within the individual seeking help's belief system will make their problems worse. In fact, after using such strategies people often report feeling less afraid, less depressed and more able to control their situation. Protection behaviours often reduce the individual's mental distress considerably and this, surely, is a main aim of mental health treatment. Statements from individuals who have used protection strategies, and took part in my research, demonstrate the value they can serve: