

# McCoCo Welcome Questionnaire - 2011

McCoCo 2011 was a co-counselling residential held at Wiston Lodge near Biggar, Scotland from Thursday 28th April until Monday 2nd May. 40 people attended. I was present and afterwards, being curious about the levels of familiarity with being at a co-counselling residential, and interested to explore the attitudes and practices surrounding participants being new to the experience, I compiled the...

**"Si si si si bah nah Ha questionnaire" for the purpose of maximising the welcome the community extends to those attending their first McCoCo and/or their first co-counselling residential:**

and I invited the 40 participants to respond anonymously to the questionnaire. The results are in, thank you very, very much to all the 25 people who responded.

The following figures and quotes come from these 25 people (I am told that 25 out of 40 is a very good rate of response). Please note that not all answers add up to even the 25, because invariably some people's experience does not fit into either a "yes" or a "no" box.

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## *Numbers of people and extent of experiences*

**1. Question:** Have you been to McCoCo before?

**Answer:** 22 people had been to McCoCo before; it was their first time for 3 people.

**2. Question:** How many co-counselling residentials have you been to before McCoCo 2011?

**Answer:**

20 people had been to more than five co-counselling residentials before McCoCo 2011, 3 people had been to between 1 and 5, and 2 people had never been to any before.

**3. Question:** Have you attended any residentials outwith England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales?

**Answer:**

10 people had previously attended residentials outwith England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and 15 people had not.

**4. Question:** Do you teach co-counselling?

**Answer**

8 people teach co-counselling, 4 people have had a connection with teaching co-counselling, and 13 people do not teach co-counselling.

The answers to these first four questions describe a group of co-counsellors, the vast majority of whom have substantial experience and familiarity

of attending McCoCo and other co-counselling residentials in Britain.

A substantial minority have attended co-counselling residentials abroad; and also in the minority, but only just, are those who teach or have a connection with teaching.

One might have supposed that a continuum would exist ranging smoothly in small steps between those with none and those with lots of co-counselling residential experience; instead there is a striking difference between the experienced and the non-experienced.

From my observation alone I would guess that if I had data on all 40 attendees the picture of overall experience and familiarity of attendees would be even more skewed towards long time residential attending co-counsellors. Logic also backs up the idea that attendees who are brand new or relatively new would be more likely to respond to a questionnaire regarding newness.

The following answers explore questions 5 to 9, and consider various ways in which co-counselling residentials attempt to integrate their diverse attendees and run for the benefit of everyone:

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## ***Melting In workshop***

**5. Questions:** Were you aware of the Melting In workshop?

Were you present at the Melting In workshop?

Any comments?

### **Answers**

Out of the 21 people who were aware of the Melting In workshop:

- 5 attended,
- 2 people did not know about the workshop, and
- 18 people did not go to it.

1 person thought the question referred to a different workshop which ran at the same time, and stated that: *"It was excellent; it helped me to "arrive"*.

**Comments - Specifically** there were both positive statements and criticisms of the Melting In workshop at McCoCo 2011:

*"It was very helpful"*

*"I really appreciated the experienced co-counsellors support and advice"*

as opposed to

*"I did not feel I was being introduced to McCoCo as was suggested in the w/shop description"*

*"Perhaps didn't give people what they needed"*

*"Didn't cover the issues that a newcomer will need to know".*

**General** comments were made about previous Melting In workshops:

*"I don't remember finding it useful"*

*"I also felt as if I might be missing something more exciting that might have been happening elsewhere"*

Reasons were given for going:

*"Sometimes my motivation for doing so has been feeling a need for connection, or short sessions, or both; sometimes it's been to be a "resource" as a more experienced residential-goer"*

*"Usually like to go to feel connected and to support new people"*

Reasons were given for not going:

*"I didn't go because... I knew how to get the information which I need for feeling comfortable".*

**Suggestions** were made for future workshops:

- to make guidelines by collating *"suggestions from previous Melting In workshop facilitators"*
- *"to answer Qs especially of new people, i.e. be lightly facilitated"*
- *"To be informative and provide for different needs."*

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## ***The Buddy System***

**6. Questions** Were you aware of the buddy system?

Did you take part in the buddy system?

Any comments?

### **Answers**

- 24 people answered that they were aware of the buddy system,
- 12 people took part,
- 13 people did not take part.

### **Positive comments**

There were a lot of positive comments:

*"Good idea"*

*"Very valuable system"*

*"It was great – always nice to have a buddy"*

*"Always participate, like extra feeling of creating own back up system"*

*"Worked really well for me", "it's great to have a buddy when things get difficult"*

*"Got to know a new friend"*

*"My buddying relationship was one of the best parts of McCoco 2011 for me".*

### **Qualifications**

There were also comments from people for whom the buddy system didn't work this time:

*"We never met after first arranging to be "buddies"*

*"Buddy forgot it was reciprocal and didn't articulate needs".*

And there were comments from people who find the buddy system generally unhelpful:

*"I tend to run a pattern of constantly searching to see if the person is alright"*

*"Forming a close, supportive bond with somebody you've just met felt more of a challenge than a support"*

*"For me, it is a responsibility that I do not want, to be someone's buddy".*

## **Presentation**

There was a comment about this year's setting up of the system:

*"Think a bit of confusion at early stage/day one of McCoco which prevented clear introduction to/reminder of buddy system in safe and encouraging way and making sure oldies came forward/were visible/available to support newbies"*

and a useful reflection on the premise of a buddy:

*"I just find it confusing...2 different ideas of buddies... presented as if they were the same thing. One is that new people might like a more experienced buddy to help them. The other is that*

*any two people might like to be buddies to each other".*

## **Support Groups**

At this point support groups were mentioned:

*"I usually find that a support group works as sufficient support for me at residential",*

I can only offer my apologies for not including a question about support groups in the questionnaire. This was a serious omission and there's no good explanation. I have particularly valued and treasured the support groups I've been in and (perhaps being wary of hearing any criticism) it did not cross my mind to ask how anyone else felt about them!!!

Comment comparing the two:

*"I am inclined to think the support group is enough. I think the support group is based on very well researched practice in psychology that people can relate well to a family sized group. The buddy to me is more about an intimate partner and dependency".*

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## **The Green Ribbon Scheme**

### **7. Questions**

Were you aware of the green ribbon scheme for indicating you

- need a session partner?
- Did you use the green ribbon scheme?
- Any comments?

### **Answers**

- 20 people were aware of the green ribbon scheme for indicating you need a session partner,
- 1 person was not aware,
- 4 people had a vague awareness.
- 1 person used the green ribbon scheme,
- 22 people didn't,
- 1 person stated that they had used it at other residential.

### **Comments on Presentation**

Specific to this McCoCo, comments were made regarding the scheme's announcement and its visibility:

*"Could have been better announced, earlier and more clearly"*

*"Needs to be visible where you find the ribbons".*

### **Reservations**

Reservations were expressed about the nature of the scheme:

*"People... wandering about disconsolately wearing their green ribbon", "could be yet another emotional trigger re exposure/neediness/vulnerability"*

*"I would really not feel safe to suddenly get a counselling partner at random, particularly one who is indicating "I desperately need a session and I will burst if I don't get one right now" It feels like I would have to cope with too much distress"*

*"It's entirely possible to walk around all day wearing a ribbon and not get a session".*

## Suggestions

These reservations were often addressed by the making of an alternative suggestion:

*"If I want a session, I ask someone"*

*"I would like people to be able to say if they want a session"*

*"I ask individuals for sessions i.e. people that I feel comfortable working with"*

*"I would rather ask someone I know and feel safe with"*

*"It comes down to developing a flavour (as does often happen) that anyone can ask for a session anywhere, as the need arises".*

Perhaps taking into account the possibility that some newcomers may be in the position where they do not yet know anyone that they feel comfortable and safe with, it was noted that: *"A system may make it easier for newcomers to ask".*

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## Trust/Safety Persons

### 8. Questions

- Were you aware of the role of trust/safety persons?
- Did you know who the trust/safety persons were?
- Did you volunteer to be a trust/safety person?
- If you were a trust/safety person, were you approached for support?
- Did you access the support of a trust/safety person?
- Any comments?

### Answers

22 people were aware of the role of trust/safety persons, 3 people, although somewhat aware of the role, expressed confusion about it.

22 people knew who trust/safety persons were, 2 people knew vaguely or knew some of them.

5 people volunteered to be a trust/safety person, 19 people did not.

## Potential

Generally there were positive comments made about the scheme:

*"Very useful if I had needed it"*

*"I thought it was a useful system to have in place"*

*"Potentially good as signalling"*

*"I think it's a really good idea".*

But several people noted that it wasn't yet an established practice:

*"Idea is there but it's not really in practice"*

*"It is not a habit or a tradition"*

*"it would be good if it became a recognised/"normal" part of CCI residential culture".*

It would seem that the potential of this scheme may fail to be realised in practice if signalling continues to be seen as something separate from the purely verbal creation of sessions. What might be involved in helping this scheme off the ground is in its presentation as an optional adjunct to an overall encouragement of session creation.

2 trust/safety people were approached for support, 2 were not.

3 people accessed the support of a trust/safety person, 18 people did not.

### Affirming Comments

Comments included affirmations of the role:

*"An essential part of the culture"*

*"An important back up system"*

*"I think it could be invaluable if I felt threatened or unsafe"*

*"Very helpful, timely and supportive. Much appreciated".*

These positive comments included one regarding post residential support:

*"Afterwards I needed to seek trust person support to review issues which had come up for me at first residential".*

### Qualifications

There was noting of unsuccessful experiences:

*"I (previously) did ask for some mediation and I found it disempowering and useless"*

*"I got a poor response to my concerns".*

Some people queried the need for such a role at all: *"I do not think it is necessary to have such a*

team as I think it portrays an anxiety about risk and it may put into people's minds that the event may not be safe."

"I really think this is another unnecessary system that gives self important people the opportunity to be unequal and suggest that they can solve your problems. Are we peer or are we not?"

### General support

Informal approaches for support were both encouraged:

"Being able to "collar" someone and have a reasonably good chance that they will say "yes" is also good"

"Any co-counsellor can be approached for help"

Informal approaches for support were also found to be problematic:

"was unsure how much confidentiality applied".

### Definition

There is a lot of fuzziness about the nature, boundaries and purpose of this role:

"This role was not clearly defined"

"Lack of clarity about the role and how to do it"

"Unclear of much of the terminology around the trust/safety person's role".

### Suggestions

Uncertainties have been partially been addressed at previous residential:

"Daily meetings for trust/safety persons, didn't happen this time and it was difficult for trust/safety people to know what they could be doing"

"In the past ... we met up regularly to see how things were going in a confidentially respectful way"

For this role to be effective it appears to require to be well defined to both those who take on the role and those who do not, to be thoroughly transparent and to have a mutually supportive element.

I do not think that the peer nature of co-counselling need be undermined by the existence of trust/safety persons. The value, worth and overall life experience that each co-counsellor brings to a residential need not be overshadowed by the willingness of those with greater experience of attending co-counselling residential to share their knowledge.

It is, however, unfortunate that the trust/safety person is currently perceived as a trouble-shooter. Not only does this put people on alert that there might be trouble, it also sets the criteria for approaching a trust/safety person as considering oneself to be in trouble. This is an unhelpfully narrow view of such a potentially valuable resource.

Perhaps a name which more accurately reflects the role would help – one could volunteer to be a "R.O.C.K." (Repository of Co-counselling Knowledge). Such a name change emphasises and celebrates the existence of such knowledge, encourages its sharing and creates a more approachable, positive, growthful aspect to the role than the narrow, mainly troubleshooting, reputation it seems to have acquired.

Ongoing clarification of the role of trust/safety people, their clear availability and their mutual empowerment could be key to the support and successful integration of new people.

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## Validation Wall

### 9. Questions

- Were you aware of the validation wall?
- Did you put up an envelope?
- Did you receive validations?
- Did you post validations?
- Any comments?

### Answers

24 people were aware of the validation wall, 1 person was not.

6 people put up an envelope, 19 people did not.

7 people received validations from the wall, 2 people stated that they received verbal validations.

12 people posted validations, 9 people did not.

## Comments on Presentation

It was noted that this year *"the validation wall went up a bit too late"*

and the suggestion was made that it *"needs to be enthusiastically presented and flagged up or not done at all"*

## Reservations

Reservations were expressed about the nature of the scheme:

*"Found it a real chore"*

*"This validation has become a chore, not sincere and causes guilt and anxiety"*

*"I used to get really tied up in knots about validation"*

Reservations about giving written validations were often countered by an appreciation of verbal validations:

*"I much prefer to give validations directly to the person"*

*"I can appreciate people in person without doing envelopes"*

*"plenty face to face validations go on"*

## Value

The physical, transportable and lasting nature of written validations was appreciated:

*"A nice channel ... for people to take away some positive feedback and have a souvenir of new connections made"*

*"A lovely thing to take away from a residential"*

*"It's really nice getting to take something home with you and re-reading it later in the year".*

Also there is appreciation of the value of this scheme for new people in particular:

*"Used to love this at first residentials when everyone participated"*

*"Did appreciate giving and receiving via the envelopes in earlier years"*

*"Particularly for new people it's lovely".*

## Alternative suggestion

*"What I do think is a great idea is that people be given an envelope to write a letter to themselves with all the things that have been special for them at that residential. Six weeks later the organisers post the letters to you. I still treasure some of these"*

There is a discrepancy similar to that expressed regarding the green ribbon scheme in that whilst the concrete nature of the scheme is valued for what it offers to new people, people who have already built up experience of attending residentials are equipped to address the subjects directly and have little time for the trappings of schemes.

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## Orientation, specific attention/support for new people

### 10. Questions

Do you think it is beneficial for people new to McCoCo to be offered specific orientation (guided tour/culture setting etc)? What do you think would be most useful?

#### Numerical Answer

- 24 people think it is beneficial for people new to McCoCo to be offered specific orientation (guided tour/culture setting etc),
- 2 people disagree.

### 11. Questions

Do you think it is beneficial for people new to residentials to be offered?

- Specific attention/support?
- What do you think would be most helpful?

#### Numerical Answer

22 people think it is beneficial for people new to residentials to be offered specific attention/support, 2 people agree but with reservations, 1 person disagrees.

#### Further comments/suggestions/proposals/ideas

There was an overlap of comments made in reply to question 10 regarding people who are familiar with the co-counselling residential experience but who are new to McCoCo, and question 11 regarding people who are brand new to the whole world of co-counselling residentials. Therefore for the sake of clarity I have amalgamated comments made in reply to questions 10 and 11. The following section also includes responses to question 12 and question 13 in order to draw like comments together.

## 12. Question

Any further comments?

## 13. Question

Any suggestions, proposals, ideas etc?

## **Answers to 10, 11, 12 & 13:-**

### 1. Guided tours

There was agreement on the benefits of guided tours:

*"Good to offer some sort of guided tour, if you're new to a place it can be quite disorienting".*

*"We used to do a lot of this welcoming and showing around in early days and it has been appreciated".*

*"A guided tour of the venue is often useful"*

*"Big rambling building and quite a big residential, so a tour of building...will help".*

### 2. Written information

Written information was considered important to have around:

*"Support/reminders of ground rules ... offered and available in reading material"*

*"Written guidelines on coco culture such as confidentiality, boundaries, etc"*

But it was pointed out that:

*"I know that it is easy not to read handouts, so something to cover the ground has obvious benefits".*

*"It is not enough to have this written down but for this to be spoken about at the beginning of every event".*

### 3. Rules and Culture

Most comments made it clear that the entire group needs to be informed of house rules and be involved in reaffirming co-counselling culture norms/rules:

*"People should be... familiarised with general format of residential i.e. opening circle, buddies etc; told rules of the house, meal times etc".*

*"People should be offered the idea of how things operate: reminded of coco "rules" re equal time/confidentiality/safety"*

*"A sharing about what is expected at events e.g. self-responsibility, self-motivating, respect for others, NO VIOLENCE either verbally or physically.. negotiating sexual boundaries. There needs to be*

*Ground Rules made explicit in the opening circle for everyone".*

*"We make our own culture afresh each time"*

*"Whole group culture setting"*

*"Culture setting yes but it is only really meaningful if the whole group do it, otherwise it can be a bit misleading, and ineffective"*

There is a subtle difference between the sort of undisputable, nonnegotiable hard facts that people need to be informed of (where the toilets are) and the norms of a culture which at its best supports the group in structuring and creating their own experience, It is almost a paradox that the norms of this culture of freedom are as nonnegotiable as the location of the toilets. For norms/rules to be supportive and not be oppressive they have to be made explicit, acknowledged and accepted anew by each new gathering of co-counsellors.

McCoCo was just such a gathering of co-counsellors, it had certainly run before, but McCoCo 2011 was a unique event comprised of a unique composition of individuals. Many of the participants may have met and worked with each other in similar ways in the past, but new people bring a fresh perspective to residential and offer the whole group the opportunity to renew their understandings of what a residential can mean.

Anything other than the whole group agreeing to the rules suggests a disempowering experience for new people. Nobody wants to be sent away from the rest of the group to sit on their own and study the rules in print format, and it is also not acceptable for new people's Melting In Workshop to be used as an indoctrination channel where it is only the new people who have to be informed (and subscribe to?) rules presented as if they exist as disembodied statutes.

But the fact remains that certain things are not up for negotiation, the culture created afresh each time is built on commonly accepted foundations and when newcomers are informed of these norms/rules, everyone (for it is everyone who is expected to conform) should be present to reaffirm their acknowledgement and support of the norms rules and culture..

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## ***Some comments that focus on considerations concerning newness***

### **1. Expectations**

*"Fundamentals is a very safe and guided process whereas residential has a real culture of self-responsibility, could be a culture shock from one to the other"*

*"New people are sometimes completely naive about the culture at residential expecting much more structure and care taking. Can get thrown by the rowdiness and anarchy!"*

*"A residential is so new, everything is so new, place, location, room sharing, one doesn't know if your values and norms are similar. Risky, especially if you are the only person from your fundamentals"*

### **2. Preparation**

*"sending written information in advance about what is the offer to new people. Explain what a buddy system is and what a support group is and then you have time to think about what you want to take up".*

*"I always suggest to people doing a Fundamentals, that when they go to their first workshop they consider whether to ensure that someone they know is going too".*

The importance of this is reflected in this comment about how nice it is to be *"welcomed by familiar faces"*.

### **3. Support**

Some comments recommended for new people a preferred method of support from those examined in earlier questions:

*"An experienced cocoer as a buddy"*

*"A supportive support group"*

*"The Melting in workshop is especially meant for new people"*

These recommendations were expanded with some new suggestions:

### **4. Introductions**

*"For time to be given to introducing new people during the first morning opening circle and for there to be some sort of group sharing about how people have come to co-counselling, where they trained, what they get from events and a sharing about what is expected at events"*

*"At CCI abroad they have a big circle - step in if you are at your 1st CCI, 2nd, 3rd, 4th etc. I was amazed to see folk in their 20th CCI. That way you get to see a little how long people have been around. It's a kind of icebreaker starter".*

### **5. Manual**

*"a newbie's manual would be good to have available for reference"*

### **6. Tips**

*"Maybe funny cartoons displayed in prominent places with a few messages, like "It's OK to ask for support." "I'm OK" "I'm growing""*

*"Just a mention in the first day that "FREE ATTENTION IS ENOUGH. REALLY""*

## **Workshops**

### **• Specific**

*"Maybe peer workshops for new people to share difficulties"*

*"Maybe offer a daily get together for new people"*

*"Beginning/midway catch up"*

*"Melting in workshop and 'coming out workshops can also help with this and pick up any issues which might require support – also steer people towards local post-residential follow up support should they require it".*

### **• Whole group**

*"Melting In workshop could be not just for new people but for anyone who wants to feel they have arrived - an "arriving workshop". Something grounding, a way of beginning to feel safer, for everyone to get to know each other with fun and games and relaxation. Need more fun for building up rapport as a group".*

### **• World cafés**

*"More world cafe, less really long opening circles where the extravert gets too much time and the shy get intimidated"*

*"The world cafe idea where people freely talk in small groups on the first day seems to create safety and support"*

## **People Power**

It was pointed out that: *"Organisers are usually too overloaded to be responsible for the new people"*

But the suggestion was made that: *"More experienced counsellors could be proactive in ensuring newer people are cared for"*.

There could be: *"Volunteers ... to ensure that buddying and support is actively offered"*.

*"A person to check they are in a support group or have a buddy"*

*Several people related the support of newcomers to the trust/safety team:*

*"Couple of volunteers to support the trust team"*

*"Most helpful - maybe rather than just trust people, more people designated as being available for help in a variety of practical ways"*

But there were concerns about the way in which support is offered:

1. How it shouldn't be:

*"Don't want us watching in a nanny way"*.

*"I don't want us to be rescuing though"*

*"Yes to support, no to inappropriate rescuing"*.

*"Sensitive responding to needs rather than rescuing is the order of the day"*.

2. And how it should be:

*"I love the education into learning to ask for what I need"*

*"They are in charge of requesting support, sessions"*.

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## ***Summary***

There is a difference in expectations and needs between the majority of experienced attendees at co-counselling residentials and the minority of newcomers. This is evidenced particularly with regards to the green ribbon scheme and the validation wall. There needs to be enhanced communication between these two groups if new people are to stand a chance of being more than tolerated and being actually welcomed to what is effectively a longstanding, tight knit group of people. In order for a whole group culture to

flourish there needs to be an increase in awareness of the group dynamics surrounding whole group integration issues i.e. the principle that as a group we are only as well informed as the least informed.

There is much good will and many good ideas about how to do this, and I hope firstly that the existence of this questionnaire has drawn some attention to the issue, and secondly, that people will want to take action to enhance integration.

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## ***In conclusion***

I have enjoyed compiling this questionnaire, I eagerly read all the replies, and hopefully have reflected the current state of thought and practice regarding the integration of newcomers to co-counselling residentials.

I hope that your understanding will be enhanced by access to all these various, and often contradictory, thoughts and opinions expressed in these pages.

I'll finish by sharing two pertinent comments:

*"I think that it's much harder now for people attending their first CR than it was for me then, because CRs now are overwhelmingly attended by people who've been to lots of CRs"*

*"SO many of us are old hands and maybe we have lost sight of what is needed to be inclusive"*.