

'Emigrating can be a traumatic experience'

Midge Seymour-Roots

Immigration is a complicated thing. The majority of the Irish emigrants who come to the UK do so to make a better life, and to forge identities that would not have been possible in the Ireland we left behind. We come with positive aspirations, yet some have experienced hostility from the host community, and anger from those we have left in Ireland. This experience can leave the immigrant in a vulnerable and isolated place.

The impact of emigration on the internal psyche cannot be overstated. It can be a traumatic experience, undermining the sense of who we are and putting into question the resilience we thought we once possessed. Every emigrant has to mourn the loss of the familiar, a shared cultural understanding and a common language. Sometimes it can be experienced as if a part of the self has been lost, never to be recovered. It can present itself as a deep and unfathomable sadness.

The Irish Forum for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IFCP), which celebrates its 20th birthday next year, is of a group of Irish counsellors and psychotherapists with Irish connections all around the UK. The group is mostly made

up of first-generation Irish with direct experience of immigration, but some of us are second-generation, with parents who came to the UK in the 1950s and 60s.

The idea for the group originated in 1995 (then called the Irish Counsellors Forum) through recognition of the need for a support structure for Irish practitioners working with Irish clients in the UK. Initially conceived to support practitioners working in isolated areas, it developed into a group where topics relating to the experience of immigration and its consequences could be discussed and explored.

What have we learned about the experience of being Irish in Britain? Although Ireland has a long and deep-rooted relationship with Britain, it has been a fraught one. As therapists, we have found this complicated history comes alive within us when we make that journey across "the pond" and encounter "the other" over here. Irish immigrants have encountered consequences of colonialism and the troubles that the Irish in Ireland have little knowledge of and are unable to identify with. This experience can be very difficult for emigrants to talk about with those "back home".

As a result, many emigrants are left with feelings of shame and humiliation. For many of those we work with, this can cause them great anguish and pain, leading to destructive ways of managing these feelings. We are all aware of the stereotypical image of the drunken Irish immigrant or the

person who constantly gets into fights and arguments. Although this form of behaviour can be unhelpful to us, we hold onto it like an old friend. Sometimes it is very hard for our clients to give up these familiar ways of behaving.

Through our work as immigrant therapists, we endeavour to make sense of these severed relationships, communities and ways of behaving with our clients. This can lead to a new understanding and ways of relating with others. We have found our clients can reintegrate their sense of self and forge a new Irish identity that is unique to them and their sense of being "over here".

As Freud has pointed out, it is only through mourning the past that we can move onto the future.

To find out more about the Irish Forum for Counselling and Psychotherapy, see www.irishtherapistsforum.com or [@IRISHTHERAPISTS](https://twitter.com/IRISHTHERAPISTS) on Twitter

This article forms part of a [series on Irish emigrants in Britain on the Generation Emigration blog this week](#) to coincide with the President's historic State visit. For full coverage of the events, including live blogs by our correspondents in London, galleries, live videos and more, see [The Irish Times State Visit subsite](#).