



Heart Wood Certificate Level Training Course 2025 Delivered by Rab Erskine and Chip Ponsford

Six residential weekends throughout Spring, Summer and Autumn 2025

The **Heart Wood Certificate Level Training Course** is a 100 hour Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training course for qualified (humanistic in orientation) practitioners who are keen to gain experience and knowledge of working with individuals and groups outside the counselling room, based in natural surroundings.

The primary client group focused on within the course curriculum are adults who experience complex and enduring poor mental health, and adults where it cannot be assumed that there is an ongoing level of psychological contact.

Any course offering this level of training needs to be robust enough to be valuable and sufficiently professional in its depth and breadth. We believe we have such a course and after piloting three of the weekends in 2021, the fourth in 2023 and, in 2024, along with Sue James, we started offering the full six-weekend training out to counsellors and therapists.

Heart Wood has learned an enormous amount from working with individuals and groups since 2018. Rab has been developing this approach since the mid 1980's and is a Certified Trainer with the Pre-Therapy International Network. Chip has been working outside the counselling room in natural settings, with clients experiencing levels of contact impairment, since 2010 and is member of the Pre-Therapy International Network. Both Chip and Rab are very keen to share their experiences and learnings during this training.

As mentioned above, in 2021, Heart Wood offered a series of three CPD weekends for individuals who were based geographically close enough and interested in working for Heart Wood. Five practitioners attended with three choosing to complete the weekends. Those three practitioners have since worked alongside Chip and Rab in delivering the Heart Wood groups. Two more practitioners joined the weekend we ran in 2023 and both have gone on to continue to remain involved with, and train with Heart Wood.

This initial phase of offering this certificate level training course provided us with a clearer, more thorough understanding of:

- the extra training needed,
- the experience and support required,
- and the additional learning and support necessary to

work competently in a natural outdoor environment with individuals and groups with adults who experience complex and enduring poor mental health.

Working to support the five additional facilitators who have chosen to stay with Heart Wood, has helped us to identify how much energy and commitment it has required and how



complicated it has felt for the new facilitators to develop the necessary level of competence and confidence as they have experienced the enormity of the differences in terms of exposure, different ways of contracting, different ways of holding and engaging that working with groups for Heart Wood and/or working one to one in natural settings has demands, compared to the one hour per week, one to one, indoor (counselling room based) model of offering therapeutic engagement.

The time needed to pick up the basics of the approach and begin to orientate to the 'way of being', alongside the very different working context needs a thorough course as well as a supportive learning community.

There are several primary areas of learning which are offered during this training:

- Introducing the skills and physical experiences of working in a natural context,
- holding the wider and much more exposing therapeutic connection,
- learning the necessary tasks and way of responding to an activity-orientated group,
- working in a very non-directive, contact orientated way.
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Extended Certificate in Pre-Therapy (Contact-Reflections).

Working with 'Contact' is something that the Pre-Therapy International Network (PTIN) has been developing and publishing material on, for over forty years and recently has begun to create dialogues which begin to describe how this model works with clients who would be described as 'high end, grey zone functioning.' In 2008 PTIN developed a document detailing the 'Essential standards for training in Pre-Therapy and contact work'.

The Heart Wood Certificate Level Training Course includes a minimum of 6 days of input in Pre-Therapy, Contact-Work and working in a 'Contact-Orientated' way.

This aspect of the course deepens the learning of the participants as well as offering a valuable therapeutic structure when working with adults who could be describes as: 'experiencing complex and enduring poor mental health'.

Course participants wanting to receive the "Extended Certificate in Pre-Therapy (Contact-Reflections)" will need to meet the requirements of the Pre-Therapy training component.