



Taking Therapy To The Next Level

When you stop to think about it, a very large proportion of the distress we experience is to do with either our relationship with ourselves, or our relationships with the other people in our lives. Family members, colleagues, partners, potential partners, ex partners, friends, even strangers. What they do or say, how we feel about that, and what we do in response. What we suspect they think or feel. How to balance what we want with what they want, how to balance what we think or feel with what they think or feel.

We are relational creatures and it's no surprise that we need to use support sometimes to help us navigate this minefield of relationship. And especially if our early relationships were difficult, painful or confusing in some way. After all, where else did we learn "what other people are like" and how to manage relationships with them? This is why therapists are always banging on about your childhood experiences with your primary care givers and siblings if you had them. It's just a simple case of programming. It's natural to live with unchallenged assumptions about what all or most people are like and how to relate with them based on our early relationships. It's often these unchallenged assumptions that are getting in the way of healthy ways of relating with the people in our lives now. But with the support of a therapist we can explore whether our current beliefs about people in our lives now are actually being polluted by what we learned early on and which isn't actually applicable.

As an aside - we can say the same about our outdated beliefs about ourselves too. One client of mine came up with this great idea – that it's like our sense of who we are and what we're like gets "laminated" at an earlier point in our life (and she and I agreed that it's often from somewhere between 8 and 15/16) and we carry that around like our internal ID card without realising that we've really changed and grown since then.

But working with a therapist on our current relationships with people, and linking it to our early lessons in relating, is only one part of the work, and I've come to realise that it's a relatively diluted part of the work, compared to the alternative, which can be like the "extra strength" approach to therapy.

Which is looking at the relationship between the client and the therapist.

Again, if you think about it, if one of the biggest things that we struggle with is managing relationships with other people, then it would be odd if the same things that we struggle with “out there” don’t eventually start happening “in here” with the therapist. And if they don’t, that’s probably really important to look at. How come? I would bet your session fee that if you could work out the reason for that, it would be a really important piece of information for you about something that is hard for you and needs looking at with kindness.

As with all relationships, there is often a honeymoon period where the relationship with your therapist is simple and you’re glad to go and feel supported and listened to. Maybe he or she has some important insights that help you see things differently, and you start to get a feeling of being cared about and that maybe you’re actually ok and not a freak or bad in some way. There’s somewhere you can go regularly where you can just focus on you and start to get some clarity about what’s going on, and let out some of the pain and not feel so alone or overwhelmed. This is such a precious time, and it’s usually essential for building a bond and establishing trust. Which if you let it, is going to be needed for the extra-strength work to come.

Which is allowing some sessions to shift focus from “out there, then” (then last week, or then 20 years ago), to right here, right now, between you and the therapist.

There will probably always be things going on “out there” that you need to talk about and get loving support with, and it can feel really frustrating when you have an idea of what you need to talk about but your therapist seems to be hung up on something that just happened between you and her that seems inconsequential, or just unfortunate or a misunderstanding.

And worse, when your therapist starts to bring your attention to something going on recently between you and her (or even worse, right now!), it can feel for all the world like she’s “having a go” or telling you off, rather than it being an attempt to explore something really important in just the same way you explore together your relationships with other people.

We’re really not used to someone saying something to us about how we’re being right now, without it being the start of an argument or in some way selfishly motivated and because they’re angry or hurt. And then suddenly we want to either make it better or defend ourselves. It’s not familiar to stop and be curious about what’s happening as a source of data, because the person we’re relating with is actually paid to help us look kindly and supportively at how we relate. Including with them.

And yet, your therapist should be trained and experienced in noticing patterns in how you relate with her, that will inform her without words about the difficulties that come up for you with other people. If she’s doing her job well enough, and despite the fact that of course she will also from time to time have perfectly ordinary human relationship reactions to things that happen between you, she should only bring up things that are perhaps getting “tricky” between the two of you because she thinks it’s a really good opportunity to work with something that is a pattern for you that needs loving attention and examination.

A metaphor I love is to do with my motorbike.

My mechanic is a very important part of my life because having a working motorbike is now pretty much essential for my mental good health! Now, if my bike starts making a weird noise, I can send Dave a text and try to describe it. Or I can call him up and let him hear it over the phone. But if I can get the bike to the shop and let him hear it while it’s happening, he’s going to have a much better chance of working out exactly what the problem is and helping me fix it.

Likewise, I can tell my therapist about things that go on between me and someone else in my life that I want help with, and she can do her best, based on my account, to get to the bottom of what might be going wrong. But she's only ever going to get a bit of the picture that way. But if she is also always monitoring how I actually relate with her in the room, then she can get a much clearer picture of what goes on for me, and maybe for the other people in my life, based on her own experience of being in relationship with me. And if I can allow her to bring that information into the room then POW – we're right there where the stuck painful bits are and we can really get our sleeves up.

And don't forget, my reactions to her doing this – my absolute conviction that a) she's taking up my session with her own agenda or needs, b) she thinks she knows better than me, or c) she's getting angry with me, judging me or misunderstanding me – and if I can tell her that that's what I think and feel – again, I'd bet you your session fee that that's a really important piece of information that you two need to look at kindly together. Because it will be part of something familiar for you, maybe from a difficult relationship in the past that you have unresolved feelings about.

Maybe there was someone important who took up all the space in the relationship and never saw or heard YOU. Maybe there was someone who always had to know better and put you in your place. Maybe you regularly felt judged, misunderstood or were on the receiving end of someone else's anger. If so, as a kid it wouldn't have been safe for you to say that that's how you felt, or to ask that person to treat you differently. You knew they wouldn't hear it, or understand, or be sorry, or take responsibility for their bad behaviour. And you needed to keep quiet and be good so that they kept looking after you, liking you, loving you. So, you bottled it up. And have bottled it up ever since. With that person and with other people. And now it needs to come out. If your therapist is doing her job, she'll give you the most precious opportunity, to tell her, and by association, the person from your past, exactly what it's like and how much you hate it and how scared, angry, hurt, confused, self-doubting, you feel.

This is extra-strength work and healing. And this is what's meant in every day terms when words like transference are used. A person is transferring an experience with someone from the past onto someone in the present and assuming that all the same conditions hold true now, especially in terms of what the other person is thinking and feeling, what their motivations are, and how they're going to react to you. Transference is really just unchallenged, experience-driven expectation, full of conviction.

One really useful thing to remember about “transference” – and I love this phrase – if you're transferring, the person you're transferring onto has probably provided you with a hook to hang the transference on. Meaning that in general we don't just transfer onto anyone, for no good reason whatsoever, because we're smarter than that and we'd catch ourselves out too easily. So there may be a grain of truth in your interpretations and expectations. And a good therapist will be willing to take responsibility for her part in something tricky going on.

The last thing to say is that I know, from experience as a client as well as a therapist, that it is really frustrating when you know that there is a perfectly good reason for why you did what you did that now your therapist wants to focus on. To use an example, a client of mine regularly had genuinely good reasons for not being able to come every week even though that's how we'd agreed to work. He's a freelancer, trying to grow his business, some of his clients are out of town, he needs to make sure he isn't overdoing it because he's had burnouts in the past, he's been moving house, and sometimes it was just better to skip a session or do it over the phone.

Because of what I know about his early life, I already knew that trust and intimacy with others are difficult for him. He was so badly let down, given so little space, the people who were supposed to look after him either vanished suddenly or were in and out of extreme episodes of mental illness, he was even attacked by a person he also loved and needed to protect him. Who wouldn't tend towards withdrawing and being self-sufficient? Who wouldn't decide it was safer not to need people and to keep them at a bit of a distance?

But of course, when after a little while of observing, I brought our attention to the inconsistent nature of our relationship, he rightly pointed out that there were really good reasons, every time, for the missed sessions or phone sessions.

And this is the thing that it takes a while to really understand about the power of the unconscious and the layered reasons why we all do things. Like I said before, we're smart, and we'd catch ourselves out if we were obvious. My client is committed to his work in therapy and he really checked in on himself and just honestly couldn't find any feeling of not wanting to come to see me or being afraid of opening up more. He really did have perfectly good circumstantial reasons for what I thought was a pattern.

But because he's really committed to the work and growing his self-awareness, he breathed into his experiences of frustration and impatience and of being misinterpreted and we kept exploring the issue with loving curiosity, remembering all the time that *if* there was unconscious avoidance going on, it would only be because he was protecting himself from something in the best way he currently knew how.

This session turned into one of our most powerful sessions to date, when he stumbled on the phrase of "just not needing" me right now. He'd been in acute distress at the beginning of our work, and he was really starting to thrive now because he'd done so much to turn his life around. We worked deeply with this idea of what it is to need someone, of when we're allowed to need someone and actually have our needs validated and met. For him, we discovered, "need" was confined to acute situations of distress. Like needing an ambulance, as opposed to needing air all the time to live.

By the time we'd gotten to the end of the session, he'd started to try on a new perspective on closeness and support – not as something he could feel ok about needing and receiving when he was in crisis, but as something that he deserved and could expect all the time. Given his childhood experiences, pretty much the only time he could be sure of being seen and responded to was when something was wrong. The rest of the time he was likely to be left to his own devices. As he processed this realisation, he felt a stab of grief in his heart and choked back some tears. He had carried this understanding of the way relationships work all the way into his adult life, unchallenged. And he was starting to feel the weight of having to operate like that, of keeping any desire for more vulnerability and support out of his awareness.

Because of course that's what we do. If there's a need that we're pretty sure isn't going to get met, eventually we're going to just shut down our experience of that need and we will absolutely end up believing it just isn't there. Why would you want to keep feeling a need for something if you were sure it wasn't going to get met? That would be awful – and unbearable for a child. So we suppress it.

It wasn't the case that my client's out of town travel, and careful management of his energy levels, weren't true or necessary – the conscious motivations for the pattern of our sessions were absolutely real. And yet – when we tried on for size, kindly and with curiosity, at least the possibility that something else was going on as well... Or even bigger, that maybe there was a totally unconscious driver behind him ending up with the kind of career he had, that kept him moving around at unpredictable times with big peaks of high intensity busyness and therefore often unable to

experience consistent unbroken connection with me and others... Which is also not to say that there aren't also wonderful reasons for him to do the exciting work that he does and which suits him so well and which he's brilliant at. These things are much more mysterious than that! If we're brilliant in a certain way, and need to protect ourselves in another certain way, you bet your session fee that you'll find the perfect marriage of the two.

So that is the last important thing to say about taking therapy to the next level. A good therapist will detect potentially unconscious patterns and bring them up for exploration, and if we can understand that our conscious reasons can be true, whilst there also being something deeper going on that we're not yet aware of, and if we are willing to explore gently and with curiosity, then many hidden wounds may be revealed and become available for extra-strength healing.