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Broken Boundaries: The Challenges of Containment in Trauma Work

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By Morit Heitzler. Published in International Body Psychotherapy Journal (2013). This article explores the specific challenge of maintaining therapeutic boundaries in trauma work — where the trauma itself constitutes a fundamental breach of boundaries, and where the therapeutic frame is constantly tested by the client's need to re-enact the boundary violation as part of the healing process.

KEY THEMES

— Trauma as fundamental boundary violation

— The therapeutic frame under pressure

— When containment breaks down and why

— The paradox of necessary boundary flexibility

— Recovering from ruptures in trauma work

Trauma and the Violation of Boundaries

Trauma, almost by definition, breaches people's normal boundaries. It is as if life drives a bulldozer over people's normal sense of protection, sense of safety, and sense of self. This has a significant impact not just during the traumatic event itself, but carries lasting effects on the psychological organisation of traumatised people.

Those who suffer from PTSD live in emergency mode, constantly ready to flee or fight. Their experience has told them that the world is not a safe place and that people are not to be trusted. They oscillate between extreme levels of hyper-arousal and dissociation, as the ability to self-regulate is impaired.

Those who suffer from developmental trauma and complex PTSD carry life-long relational scars, as the people whom they were meant to trust and rely on most have been the very ones who invaded and abused them. This creates a particular kind of relational difficulty in therapy: the therapeutic relationship is supposed to provide the safe haven which was absent in early development, but the client's entire relational history tells them that people who offer safety are also the people who will ultimately violate it.

The Frame Under Pressure

The therapeutic frame — the structures of time, place, confidentiality, and role that constitute the container within which therapy takes place — is not merely a technical requirement. For trauma survivors, the frame represents something that was not available in their early experience: a relationship with reliable, consistent, non-violating structure.

But the frame is also inevitably imperfect, and the client's trauma history makes them exquisitely sensitive to its imperfections. Small ruptures — a cancelled session, an unanswered message, a moment of inattention — that another client might barely register can be experienced by a trauma survivor as a repetition of the original violation.

The therapist who tries to maintain a perfectly consistent frame in response to this sensitivity may inadvertently create a relationship that feels more like a controlled environment than a genuine human encounter — which has its own counter-therapeutic implications. The therapist who relaxes the frame in response to the client's pressure risks real frame violations that could re-traumatise.

The Paradox of Containment

The containment that trauma survivors need most is not the containment of a perfectly maintained frame, but the containment of a genuine human relationship — one that can survive rupture and repair, that can acknowledge mistakes and misattunements without defending against them, and that can remain genuinely present even in the face of the client's most intense enactments.

This requires the therapist to develop a relationship with their own capacity for error — to be able to acknowledge when they have fallen short, to repair ruptures with genuine accountability rather than defensive self-justification, and to use these moments of repair as therapeutic material in their own right.

The paradox is that the most robust containment is not the most rigid. A frame that can flex in response to genuine need, while maintaining its essential structure and the therapist's genuine presence within it, is more containing for a trauma survivor than one that is technically impeccable but humanly distant.

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