TEACHING NOTES · 2026

How to Work when Therapy isn’t Working

Embodied Pathways Towards Resolving Impasses, Breakdowns and Enactments

2026 TEACHING NOTES MICHAEL SOTH ENACTMENT WORKING ALLIANCE EMBODIED COUNTERTRANSFERENCE

Over recent years the most exciting developments in counselling and psychotherapy have come via neuroscience, psychotherapy integration, and the inclusion of the body. Whatever psychological wounds the client is bringing into the consulting room, we will become involved and implicated with them in ways that go far beyond verbal interaction. For the last thirty years, the term ‘enactment’ has been used to describe the ways in which the therapist’s subjectivity is — inevitably and necessarily — drawn into the client’s wounding, leading to impasses and breakdowns in the working alliance.

KEY THEMES IN THIS PAPER

- Difficulties in the working alliance as relational information rather than clinical failure
- Enactment as an intersubjective bodymind process — not a problem to bypass
- Right-brain attunement and ‘implicit relational knowing’ as primary clinical territory
- Cycles of rupture and repair as sites of transformative potential
- The therapist’s embodied conflict as information about the relational field
- The ‘three kinds of contact’ as a framework for tracking the therapeutic field

When the work itself becomes the problem

> *Therapy can be a hazardous, adventurous journey. What happens for you as therapist when therapy isn't working?*

- ? When the client seems to be stuck, resistant and uncooperative — what are your tools and options?
- ? When the client's commitment is faltering or petering out, when their process reaches a plateau, stops deepening and the client cannot see the point of continuing therapy — what are your strategies?
- ? When the client gets under your skin, challenges your therapeutic position and competence, and you start feeling like a failure — how do you survive?
- ? When the client 'gets worse' in therapy, has negative reactions, threatens suicide or uses other practitioners against you — how do you respond therapeutically?
- ? When your client is too compliant, obedient and deferential, and agrees with everything you are saying, but nothing really goes in or lands, how do you break the spell?
- ? When you feel annoyed, irritated, alienated, used, mis-represented, trapped and have ideas and impulses to terminate the therapy, how do you make sense of that and cope with it?

Many counsellors and therapists interpret such problems as their own lack of therapeutic skill, understanding or competence, or as their 'own stuff'. However, such reactions fail to do justice to the relational meaning and purpose of these difficulties.

The relational purpose of impasses and enactments

The more the therapeutic process touches the depths of the client's patterns, the more the therapist tends to get entangled in the painful and problematic dynamics which bring the client to therapy in the first place. Difficulties in the working alliance can then be a manifestation of profound and necessary involvement on the therapist's part rather than a sign of incompetence.

So is there a way to transform and make therapeutic use of such dead ends, vicious circles, complications and break-downs in the working alliance?

From transference to enactment

Traditionally, psychoanalysts have spoken about unconscious processes in terms of transference and countertransference. But these ideas — as precious as they are — have limiting legacies. There is great therapeutic potential in the cycles of rupture and repair that occur in the client–therapist relationship, but much of it occurs subliminally. So if it occurs unconsciously, outside of awareness, how can we perceive and understand enactment and respond creatively from within it?

Whilst there are a multitude of ways of ignoring, avoiding, blocking and apparently counteracting enactments, there is also increasing understanding that enactment has deep transformative potential. ‘Deep’ psychotherapy — according to neuropsychoanalyst Allan Schore, for example, i.e. therapy that addresses early developmental injury, attachment and character patterns — depends on apprehending, engaging in and transforming spontaneous enactments which occur in the interaction between client and therapist, in spite of the client’s repressive and dissociative defences.

Embodiment: attending to non-verbal communication

As modern neuroscience is confirming, right-brain-to-right-brain attunement and subtle non-verbal messages constitute the central foundation of our work. Traditionally neglected and overlooked by the pervasive bias across the talking therapies towards verbal and mental communication, these realms of the relationship are usually considered inaccessible and subliminal — labelled ‘implicit relational knowing’.

But that is where most difficulties in the working alliance originate, and where our own sense of embodiment can make a radical difference. Let’s start there.

Working from within enactment as an intersubjective bodymind process

The conundrum of enactment is at the heart of what we mean by intersubjectivity and the relational perspective. But if we want to do anything other than just reflect and think about it, we need to understand enactment as an intersubjective bodymind process.

We need to bring to bear our implicit relational knowing. We need to link our embodied experience, our right-brain intuitions and our left-brain understandings and reflections. As a foundation, we need to be rooted in our moment-to-moment embodied experience, as it oscillates between conflict and flow, closeness and distance, hyper-arousal, vitality and numbing, our comfort zones and the edge of the window of tolerance.

What this material develops

For practitioners working with these dynamics, this material offers conceptual and practical orientation toward:

- Perceiving the ways in which the client's wounding enters the consulting room
- Registering significant and charged moments in the relationship
- Reading these moments through the framework of the 'three kinds of contact'
- Gathering bodymind information that would otherwise remain subliminal
- Holding the images, fantasies, scenarios and narratives that deepen engagement from *within* the dynamic
- Linking these moments to the client's habitual relational patterns
- Processing the charge and pressure impacting on the therapist
- Considering interventions for relieving or intensifying the relational pressure
- Surviving challenges to the therapeutic position non-defensively and creatively
- Approaching the client's resistances, avoidances and manipulations as relational data
- Working with 'acting out' and other attempts to undermine the therapeutic frame
- Accessing the unconscious and pre-reflexive roots of clients' relational style as well as other patterns, schemas and scripts

LIVE ENGAGEMENT

Michael also teaches this material as an online CPD workshop. Sunday, 14 June 2026, 13.00–18.00 (UK time), via Zoom. Open to practising counsellors and psychotherapists from any modality. £75 per person · £50 OTS members. To book, contact Kirsty: kirsty@theabingdonbridge.org.uk

Date note: shifted from the previously announced 24 May 2026, which fell on a UK bank holiday.

ABOUT MICHAEL SOTH

Michael Soth is an integral-relational Body Psychotherapist, trainer, supervisor, mentor and group facilitator who has been practising since 1986. For many years he worked as Training Director of the Chiron Centre for Body Psychotherapy in London, and is a frequent presenter at professional conferences.

He has been studying the significance of enactments and their therapeutic uses since the mid-1990s, and has developed a unique relational bodymind approach building on an integration of humanistic and psychoanalytic perspectives. He is co-editor of the *Handbook of Body Psychotherapy and Somatic Psychology* (2015). In 2021 he moved to Central America, where he continues to teach online and is building a regenerative rainforest refuge and retreat centre.