ARTICLE SERIES · 2015

What Supports the Sustainability of Our Practice as Therapists?

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A four-part series exploring the conditions which support sustainable practice as a psychotherapist — attending not to self-care as a set of external practices, but to the internal, bodymind conditions which allow the therapist to continue working effectively and with aliveness across the challenges of the therapeutic endeavour.

KEY THEMES

— What actually supports sustainable practice
— The therapist's capacity to 'compost' emotional impact
— The habitual position and its shadow
— The wounded healer archetype in contemporary practice
— Enactment, bodymind effects, and sustainability

Part 1: The Implicit Relational Stance and Sustainability

The most critical factor in the sustainability of our practice is not any external self-care practice but the internal bodymind conditions from which we work — specifically, the awareness and spaciousness around our habitual therapeutic position.

The therapist's habitual position — the characteristic way of inhabiting the therapeutic space — is both the foundation of effectiveness and the primary source of blind spots. It is also, I am arguing here, the primary factor determining sustainability. A therapist who inhabits their position with some degree of spaciousness and self-awareness — who can observe their own relational patterns without being entirely identified with them — will be much more able to process the emotional impact of the work than one who is rigidly identified with their position.

Clients unconsciously scan and test for the robustness of the therapist's position from the very first moment. The working alliance critically depends on the perceived outcome of these tests. Just as importantly, the therapist's capacity to process the accumulated emotional impact of therapeutic work depends on the flexibility and aliveness of their habitual position.

Part 2: Composting the Emotional Impact

The therapeutic relationship generates an enormous amount of emotional material — projective identifications, evacuations, somatic communications, unconscious role assignments — which the therapist absorbs and carries, often without fully knowing it. The phenomenon of 'vicarious traumatisation' or 'compassion fatigue' reflects the accumulation of this material beyond a threshold which the therapist's system can manage.

Rather than treating this accumulation as a symptom of faulty self-management, I want to suggest that it is an inevitable consequence of taking the therapeutic work seriously — of genuinely opening to the client's reality rather than maintaining a safe professional distance. The question is not how to avoid absorbing emotional material, but how to process — or 'compost' — it effectively.

'Composting' is my term for the metabolisation of absorbed emotional material into usable form — the transformation of what began as overwhelming, chaotic, or disturbing bodymind experience into integrated awareness, understanding, and renewed capacity for presence. This is not a cognitive process but a bodymind one: it happens primarily

through the therapist's own somatic processing of their experience — through their capacity to stay with difficult bodily states long enough for them to move and transform.

Parts 3 and 4: The Wounded Healer and Sustainable Practice

Because there is no way for me to take a therapeutic position without it constellating and triggering my own pain, woundedness, and existential issues, I consider the archetype of the 'wounded healer' as central to sustainable practice. The question is not whether the therapist's own wound will be activated by the work — it will — but whether the therapist has a sufficiently alive, spacious, and self-aware relationship with their own wound to allow this activation to become generative rather than depleting.

Specifically, there is no way of allowing myself to be used as an object (in Winnicott's sense) without that touching and triggering my own previous experience of being treated as an object. Developmentally, being used as an object tends to create a painful internal split or separation. If I want to be therapeutically available — to allow myself to be constructed as an object by the client's unconscious while remaining genuinely myself — I need to have a working relationship with my own experience of objectification. This is ongoing personal and professional work, not a destination.

Practising an impossible profession generates considerable tension, distress and bodymind stress — all the more so because the bulk of the field operates without acknowledgement of that underlying impossibility. Sustainable practice, therefore, is not practice which has solved the impossibility but practice which has found a way to inhabit it — with awareness, with self-compassion, and with the capacity to use the difficulty itself as a source of learning and renewal.

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