

The Helplessness in Therapy

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A few years ago, during a psychotherapy training, we were observing a therapist practicing therapy techniques in a role-play session. It was a tiring 30 minutes for me. My body desired to check out and quit that space.

I saw the therapist panicking when he was not able to communicate with the client. He started lecturing and persuading the client to agree with him. The client just nodded without any words. The session was stuck. The helplessness was intense, from both the therapist and the client.

The therapist looked frustrated while failing to deliver his message to the client. The client looked helpless in getting help. What is the role of a therapist? What does therapy serve? These are the two questions I constantly contemplate.

When I began my career in conducting psychotherapy, sometimes I would bring up my confusion about cases to my supervisor when clients were circling and not going anywhere.

My supervisor asked me once, "What is scary to you if clients are not progressing? Anything about this situation feels threatening to you?"

I said, "I am afraid that I am not doing a good job." "Therapists' job can be exaggerated as we are rescuing clients, but we are not. In the dialogues between a therapist and a client, how far the work can go is determined by the limitations of how the client can struggle with themselves. Therapists are providing a structure or a space where clients can step in and hopefully connect to the truth in themselves.

Clients are free to struggle on their own and build the capacity to help themselves. Therapists are there to offer possible support for clients to go through the process and achieve that. They might fail, and they can fail." Later, as I studied more and gained more experience in psychotherapy, I realised that therapists can experience difficulties of being with our own frustration and pain when working, which is very common.

When we are eager to fix or change the clients, we are avoiding feeling the anxiety of helplessness in us, and then it's not about our clients anymore.

Like the therapist in that role-play session, he got stuck with his reactions and lost focus on the client. It seemed so exhausting as he might be battling with his fear of helplessness. Learning to acknowledge and stay with our pain during work, not judging it, being honest with it, is a necessary lesson for all therapists who want to hold the work rightly.

I remember in one therapy session, a client looked at me and said, "I always feel that to be loved, I have to do something. If I don't offer any value to others, I as me isn't worth love. Now I am hearing myself saying this. Oh, so pathetic."

She started crying. I sat with her in silence, hearing her sobbing. Before that moment, we had worked together for almost 2 years, and her mindset about love dominated how she built relationships, which became very painful for her.

The reason why we didn't reach this point earlier was that it took lots of courage for her to admit it by herself. That day, she said, "I want to end this." That was a real starting point for her.

A confession landed. She said to me, "If you told me this a month or two months ago, I would say it makes sense. Now, after we went into this inquiry, I can hear myself saying this; it has a meaning to me."

Therapy can be therapeutic, educational, and experimental. Something that makes sense doesn't necessarily lead to realisation or insight. Until it resonates deeply and means something to us, the processing won't start. The responses come from clients, not transported from therapists.

Are therapists responsible for taking the clients to their destinations? As a therapist, I feel very cautious about defining clients' directions, because I am not in a position to define someone's destinations.

I can analyse clients' patterns and psychology, but I don't want to predict a client's journey. I cannot predict mine. I cannot predict anyone else's.

We don't know what possibilities would unfold, maybe after a moment of realisation, perhaps a glimpse of something turns out to be a pivot point, a vital choice. Helping a person go through struggles and taking someone somewhere are two different things.

The prejudice and judgment a therapist carries will inevitably influence the work space and affect the interactions with clients. If this part is not addressed, a therapist could work on fixing the client based on how she or he judges what's wrong or right.

One of my friends shared with me her therapy experience during a depressive period. Her therapist at that time, without getting to know what really triggered her depression, suggested that she should change her job and seek a new relationship.

In my eyes, that therapist went quickly into how to fix a client. It didn't work for my friend. What is harmful is when a therapist gets arrogant and behaves like an authority figure over the clients. The judgments are usually aggressive and reactive. If a client isn't affirmative of holding boundaries with such kind therapy, they can get trapped even more.

After years of working with many people, I've witnessed lots of touching moments when clients rise to meet their inner demand and kick in to change their state and living situations. Over the years, some left therapy, some stayed, but no matter what, I do have faith in my clients' strength in struggling, and I respect each person's pace of processing and growing. With that faith and respect, I am not ruled by the fear of helplessness.

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