

Q. This client doubts I can work with her issues competently. Now I'm doubting too.

A. Find a way to step back from her doubt-system. It's uncomfortable in there. Remember that "doubting" is just one of her issues. Even though it triggers a doubt issue in you, her doubting has nothing to do with you. In session, every moment you believe the client's perception of you (as opposed to your own perception of you), there is no therapist in session—just two confused people.

This woman is correct about one thing, though. *You* cannot work with her issues, completely or otherwise. *She* is the person who has to work with her issues. Your job is to suggest ways she might do that, and to shine a light on her processes as she does or doesn't experiment with your suggestions.

So back up and re-balance yourself. Get centered again. Breathe. You probably have enough issues to work on already; you really don't need to take on the neuroses of somebody else. And here is the good part—once you can get yourself separated from her thought-system, you will be free to work with her transference.

It sounds as though she perceives you as less than she wants you to be and then uses that perception to justify her resistance to her work. Notice that I didn't say she was resisting *you*. She's using her perception of you to resist *herself*.

First, she focuses on you then refuses to do what she needs to do unless *you* change. That's all okay. That's what she's good at. That's how she protects herself. Don't stand in her way. Instead,

□ Join her by validating, not her doubts, but her doubting process. After all, doubting is a good way to protect oneself from being bamboozled.

□ Invite her to explore the doubting part of herself—the part who has been talking to you in the room. Then ask her to access the part of her who does the opposite of doubting. It will not necessarily be a part you expect.

☞ "Be the voice of the part of you who doubts things...Describe yourself,

Doubting-Part. Explain how your issues need a high level of therapeutic competency in order for you to work them through.

☞ "Thank you. Now be the voice of (or switch chairs and be the voice of) the part of you who doubts the Doubting Part—y'know, the tiny part of you who agreed to come here today."

□ Invite her to introspect and connect with herself.

☞ "I have an idea. Put both feet on the floor. Close your eyes. Relax. Breathe. Say those words again and pay attention to yourself as you do. Notice your experience as you talk."

☞ "What do you notice about yourself now that you've told me that?"

☞ "Say those words again and allow an image to form itself in your mind..."

□ Make a guess and invite her to work with it. Remember that it doesn't matter if your guess is correct or even close to correct. It is only an intervention, an invitation for the client to connect with and learn a little bit more about herself. Pay attention to and prepare to work with her response, whatever it is. You might start by silently wondering for whom you are a stand-in. (Let me think now, who could it be? Oh. Oh. I know, I know—Primary Object!)

☞ "Imagine your mother is sitting here in this chair. Tell her...oh, I don't know, 'You were never very competent in your job as mother and now I'm stuck with a therapist who's possibly the same.'"

□ Invite her to say some version of, "No," "Wait," or "Let me think about that," whenever you ask her to do something she is either confused about or doesn't want to do.

☞ "I agree; don't trust me. Pay attention to and trust yourself. Let's practice. I'm going to ask you to do something and you respond either by complying or telling me 'No, I'm not going to do that.' Here goes. So, put these three objects over there in the corner of the room... Let me have one of your shoes...Give me your purse, I wanna look at the stuff you have in there!..."



☞ "So tell me how you knew you didn't want me to take your purse..."

☞ "Okay, I'm going to try to get your purse again. This time pay even more attention to how your body responds when I try. Here goes. Give me your purse, I wanna look at the stuff you have in there!...What just happened?"

The idea here is to encourage her *not* to look to you for protection, but rather to experience how she might take care of herself in your incompetent presence.

She thinks (and I wonder) that because I haven't had the same life experiences, I won't know what she's talking about.

Do you mean you have not experienced fear, loneliness, confusion, shock, desire, grief, joy, loss, anger, rage, embarrassment, shame, emotional pain, physical pain, betrayal, anxiety, oppression, jealousy, low self-esteem, wonder, awe, sexual or psychic hunger, uncertainty, love, concern, unwanted changes, disbelief, resignation, hopelessness, existential or moral dilemma, restriction, imminent threat, pressure to do something against your will, celebration, exhaustion, amusement, bereavement, disappointment, terror, disbelief, external disapproval, empowerment,....?

It makes sense to me when a beginning therapist assumes that a first-hand acquaintance with the behaviors, responses, or lifestyle decisions common to a particular traumatized group of people might be helpful in session. Thinking she "knows" something, the beginner might be more apt to trust herself during the treatment process.

Remember, however, that you may not have experienced the same *intensity* of felt sensations as the next person, but if you are normally conscious and have lived more than a few years as a human being on this planet, you still "know" what the Other Guy is talking about or referring to, most of the time. Your mirroring neurons work just fine; trust them.

"Knowing," in session is not a cognitive knowing-about. In session, "knowing" is the understanding which broadcasts itself to you from the non-cognitive part of your brain. My suggestion to you and to anyone else who works psychotherapeutically is to quiet your cognitive mind, then turn on and pay attention to your inner receiver.

Join her by addressing her consumer concerns.

☞ "You're right, I'm not (exactly the same as you).

☞ Let her know that you have more to offer than knowledge limited to your personal experience and/or to something you read or have been told. What you have to offer this client is the art of inviting her into and through her therapeutic processes toward the resolution of her unfinished developmental, existential and traumatic issues, and the re-construction of more functional conclusions about herself.

Let's go back to the beginning—after she told you she doubted you, but before you started doubting yourself. Here are some other ideas.

Ignore the content of her confrontation and work with her process at the time.

☞ "So, how old were you when you learned that it was safe to stand up for yourself like you just did with me? Describe the circumstances."

☞ "Who else in your life do you doubt? Here they are, sitting in this chair. Tell them now."

☞ "Who else in your life do you need to stand up to? Here they are; do it now."

Use yourself in session. Tell the truth about yourself, then invite the client's attention back on herself.

☞ "When you said you doubted me, I noticed that I began to doubt myself. How does my response mirror the responses of other people in your life?"

☞ "Who is it that *you* have trouble with sometimes—in separating your thoughts from theirs?"

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Q. I suspect him [young adult male] of being an infant, developmentally, at least socially. He has many crises and generally takes advantage of me. Recently he said he felt bad about always forgetting appointments, then asked me to call and remind him to come to session.

A. I invite you to consider that this issue is not about your client. Your stress is about how you allow yourself to be taken advantage of and what you do to support dependent behavior.

Well, he clearly needs special treatment. After all, if he is socially behind, then it is normal for him to want Mom to remind him and/or to take care of things.

Wanting Mom to remind him or take care of him is normal. What's not normal is Mom actually doing it.

Provide an environment where this six-foot tall infant is invited to take care of himself. Ideal Parent does this by—

- Setting clear limits, not for the child but for herself.
- Not taking the child's rage and grief personally,
- Rewarding appropriate behavior, and
- Keeping the boundaries or limits she has set for herself.

The hours he works vary from week to week. He often doesn't show up and hasn't called. I am annoyed and frustrated.

Again, you are not taking care of yourself. Your frustration has nothing to do with him, it has to do with yourself. When you acknowledge your part of the problem, you can begin to take action on behalf of your part of the solution. Your responsibility, here, is to make and keep a boundary for yourself.

Repeat after me: "*My boundary for myself is, if he does not call before the specified time, I will not see him that day, not even one time. It isn't that he can't come to the office, it's just that if he does and he hasn't called before the agreed upon time, I will make myself unavailable to see him that day.*"

What if he comes anyway?

Client: Hi, I'm here. Sorry I didn't call, but here I am.

Therapist: Oh, rats. And I was looking forward to our session. Well, there won't be a session today. Next week, call before the time we

agreed upon. Then there will be session. I need to excuse myself now. See you next week. (walks away)

Here's another idea. Start by immediately discontinuing the on-going appointments with this man. Set a limit, not for him, but for yourself.

☞ "I'm changing my approach to making appointments. From now on, I'll be available to see if I can schedule an appointment in any week in which I get a call to let me know what works for you that week. When I don't get a call by X-day at Y-o'clock, then I won't be available for an appointment that week. And that will continue to be my new method every week from now on."

A major element of psychotherapy is the re-parenting that goes on underneath all the talking, emotions, and problem-solving. Some patients choose to work out a number of their issues within their relationship to you, sometimes (as in this case) without ever entering the therapy room.

Parenting is way more fun when the parent makes limits only for him/herself and makes every effort towards an outcome where all discomfort or consequences for the child's misbehavior are experienced by the child only, and not the parent.

Here are some other limit-for-myself-possibilities you might consider making agreements with yourself about:

Make that particular hour of the week no longer "his." You'll be available to see him at that time, only if no one else has claimed it. And, you won't be initiating communication to pass that information between the two of you. You'll respond only to his calling you and saying that he'd like a session—each week.

Another one you might consider, is to arrange for his hour to be the last session of that particular work-day, so if he hasn't come by x o'clock, you get to go home early! And charge full fee as well.

Another limit you might have for yourself in regard to all clients is that you charge full fee every time a client doesn't call to cancel within the time frame the two of you decide on. (I do this, and in fairness, if *I'm* the person who doesn't call to cancel or who doesn't show up, the next session is free.)

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Q. I want him to pay his child support. Is that countertransference?

A. Your *preference* that he do a certain something is not countertransference, but *wanting or needing* him to do a certain something, is. If you are not sure of the difference, pay attention to yourself when he does not-do something you want him to do. If you have a personal response (positive or negative) or are invested in the outcome in any way, then yes, you are/were countertransferred.

Countertransference often comes from a dependent place. For example, to the degree you feel frustrated because he does not pay his child support, he has control over your felt experience at the time of your frustration. You are frustrated; you are not neutral. You want him to be different so that he will act more in line with your values. In that moment, *your* emotional state is dependent on *his* outside-the-office behavior.

In your personal work, move in the direction of differentiating yourself. Become very clear about the difference between these two things: where you stop and where the Other Guy begins.

□ In the meantime, countertransferred or not, you might use your self-described “wanting” as an intervention.

☞ “Part of me wants you to pay your child support. What happens when I say that?”

☞ “Well, I changed my mind. Good idea. Forget the kid. It’s okay if he is poor, underfed, and unhappy. What is your response when I say that?”

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Q. If I were completely neutral as a therapist, wouldn’t it be completely fine with me whoever was coming in? The truth is I dread some of my clients, like Ms. Depressed followed by Mr. and Mrs. Bicker.

A. Your experience of dread implies you are doing something you do not want to do. In this case, one of your internal voices is emphatically saying, “No” (by invoking dread). Take time to explore your response. Perhaps you think it is your responsibility to cause change to occur. Maybe you are just working too late in the day. Maybe you need to purge your practice of fighting couples and depressives. Consider exploring the depressive, bickering, dreadful side of your own personality.

Whatever your personal challenges, one of your primary tasks in session is to provide, for all clients, an environment of unconditional positive regard. Work towards doing that or, as a last resort, transfer the clients to someone who can.

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Q. A teen’s older brother is coercing him to recant allegations that a mutual foster parent molested him. The boy is a placater.

A. Enact the process.

□ In a role play, direct him to take over the brother’s coercive role while you be voice of your client. Then switch.

□ Invite him to look at you and repeat the word, “No” over and over while paying attention to his physical and emotional responses.

☞ To accelerate intensity, say, “Yes” each time he says, “No.”

□ Ask him to do something he doesn’t want to do, such as, “Give me your shoe.” Encourage him to introspect as he responds in different ways.

□ Give him a basket of small objects. To represent a violation of his boundaries, reach in. Take away one object at time. As the basket gets emptier and emptier, invite him to connect with his experience. When the basket is empty, invite him to admit that you really did not take all the objects. (This is an enactment of the older brother’s coercing him to recant.)

□ As you talk with one another, each of you hold one end of a tissue. By pulling slightly, keep your end taut. Work with his response. For instance, since he is a placater, he may keep moving his end of the tissue in your direction, feeling pressured to do whatever *you* want, no matter how uncomfortable he is—never complaining or saying a word. Direct him to introspect. He may discover that he gives in so as not to experience the pain of being ripped apart like a tissue.

□ Brainstorm assertive responses for him to learn and practice. Invite him to practice with you, in session.

□ For now, invite conversations between the part of him who wants to please his brother and the part of him who wants to honor himself. Your job might be to encourage the two parts to understand each other’s position as opposed to arguing about or defending their differing points of view.

☞ Invite each of the above parts into a conversation with *you*. Assist each part to explore its concerns, its worst fears, and what it hopes for.

While a client is engaged in polarity work, do your best to stay in neutrality. Let go of wanting one part to win. Usually each part feels satisfied when it perceives it has thoroughly been heard and respected by the executive personality who, by definition, is the part of a mentally healthy person who will eventually make the final decision.

Placaters usually present as “nice” because, underneath, they really *are* nice. Often, the placater, out of a loving, nice-guy perspective, volunteers for family sacrifice-duty out of a position of caring. His underlying implicit belief is—

Love is allowing abuse.

Introspection, awareness, permission, and practice in connecting with his experience in the moment may eventually demonstrate to him that another perspective exists and might be learned:

If I cannot love myself enough
not to let you abuse me,
maybe I can love *you* enough
not to let you abuse me.

□ Suggest this boy enroll in Aikido. Their philosophy encourages respect and love for one’s attacker while not allowing oneself to be hurt in any way.

I think it was Virginia Satir who commented that every time a placater placates, he stores a additional chunk of anger in that backpack of rage he carries around with him at all times.

□ Invite him to become more aware of and explore all his emotional experiences as they occur in session, whatever they are.

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Q. A young boy is very angry. I want to encourage him to get more angry.

A. You can invite him to be more *angry*, or you can invite him to be more *connected* to the anger he already has. The distinction is important. To invite him to be more angry, you might try beating him up, picking away at his self-esteem, abandoning him, or maybe embarrassing him in front of his friends.

Alternatively, to invite him to connect with his anger, you might encourage him to learn how to release his anger through experiencing anger as physical sensations as opposed to releasing anger through physical, verbal, or psychic violence.

Oh. Yah, but shouldn't I wait until a person feels safe enough with me to encourage his anger?

If you want to guarantee that someone will *not* feel safe with you, here are three easy things to do:

- Try to get him to do something.
- Expect him to do it, and then,
- Take it personally when he doesn't.

"Providing a safe container" means making sure that *you* are safe, whether the client feels safe or not. For physical safety in session, make sure you set and keep clear behavioral limits for yourself. For emotional safety, make sure you are free of judgments, in session at least.

□ Without being invested in the outcome, invite this boy to connect with his experience as he goes about his business in the psychotherapy session. Your task as a psychotherapist is to invite a connection with Self-in-the-moment and then to work with the response whatever it is.

☞ "If you like, you can beat up Big Bear (or a pillow) over there. There are three rules. It's not okay to break things on purpose. It's not okay to hurt yourself. It's not okay to hurt me. Other than that, I wonder what you will do."

☞ If he should hurt himself, even slightly, even by accident, even emotionally, stop the work immediately. You can stop it for three minutes or you can stop it until next week. You be safe and he will be safe.

So you work until they trust either you or themselves enough to be angry?

Just because you invite something doesn't mean the client has to do it. You do your work and let him do his. Your work is to invite; his is to respond. When he trusts *himself* enough, he will connect with his anger. Until then, he will not. Let go of needing either one to happen.

Q. They look to me to do stuff in session. How do I get started?

A. Stop a minute and ponder this: by asking me how you could get started, you are enacting the family's process exactly. You are being toward me, the exact way they are being toward you.

Oh yeah, huh? (laughs)

Not only that, but as you describe them,

the family has already started. They even set up an enactment for you.

What enactment?

Everything that transpires between therapist and the client is also an enactment of the client's work. One cannot know for certain, but the way you portrayed these folks, it looks like they are enacting their current problem: "*We look externally for direction and purpose. Please co-behave us.*"

Everything that transpires between therapist and the client is also an enactment of the client's work.

□ Intervene by working with their looking-to-someone else process.

☞ "I notice all of you are looking at me. My guess is you want me to do something. Is that true?"

☞ "So what do you want for yourselves tonight?" Realize that by asking any version of that question, you are telling them, "I respect you enough to believe that you know better than I do, what it is that you want."

□ Give them a task to do. It does not matter *what* task. It doesn't matter whether they do the task or not. Pay attention to and work with the responses, whatever they are.

☞ "Draw a family picture."

☞ "Discuss the problem."

☞ "Decide how you are going to spend the weekend."

☞ "This object represents the family. What do you want to do with it?"

Whatever they do with your suggestion, pay attention to *how* they do it or *how* they not-do it, rather than to *what* they are doing or not-doing.

They'd probably be silent.

□ Use the silence as an enactment.

☞ Be silent, yourself, until something happens.

☞ Find a way to be comfortable with their silence. Slow yourself down, inside. Let go of any agendas or expectations you have.

□ After awhile, wonder stuff out loud, such as:

"I'm wondering which one of you usually starts things happening in your family?"

"Which one of you wants something right now but isn't saying it?"

(to the parents) "How old were you when you learned that it's best to look to others for direction, that showing-up is the same as showing-off, or that the best way to be safe is to be invisible?:"

"If I were to give a \$1000 prize to the family member who could wait the longest for someone else to initiate something, which of you would win?"

"Which one is the most annoyed that I'm not doing my job right now?"

What job?

Apparently the one where you are the person who is supposed to do stuff to get them started.

Q. A boy, sixteen, hits his brother, eleven and gives as his reason that the littler boy doesn't obey him. When I ask, "Is he supposed to?" it brings the older boy up short, but nothing changes. The parents won't come in. The boys come together.

A. There are a number of issues here. One is that the parents are not doing their job. Their job, in case anyone is unclear, is to protect their children. Disregarding the parents' work right now because they are not available to change, let's consider how you might work with the boys only.

Physical fighting, in lieu of the cerebral ritual of talking, is a common way for young boys in our culture to conduct their intimate relationships with one another. However, a nonabused sixteen year-old does not normally need to continue over time trying to establish rank with someone who is clearly smaller.

□ Encourage role plays where these boys can explore and practice alternatives to their abusive behavior.

□ With both boys in the room, and later with them individually, enact what "obey" and its opposite look like. The opposite will not necessarily be "disobey." Explore the benefits of both concepts from the different perspective of each boy.

□ One idea is to set up bouts of slow-motion fighting. This is where the participants are instructed to pantomime a fight but all movements are made verry sloowly—even slower than that.

☞ One boy, for example, slowly, slowly brings his arm and fist up toward the second boy's chin, getting his whole body into the act, scrunching up his

face muscles in mimed concentration and slowly swinging his head, shoulders, and torso to support the aggressive blow. The second boy, who never actually gets touched, mimes being socked: slowly turning his face to the side as if he had been hit, grimacing as if he were in pain, staggering slowly backward, perhaps reflexively touching his chin to see if it is still on his face. Now, the second boy slowly prepares his return punch, and the drama unfolds. Any falling is onto soft objects and done verry slooowly and with full control.

A major benefit of slow-motion fighting is that it is done with consciousness. To the observer it appears to be acting-out but in fact, with practice, most boys are able to connect with their experience in the moment. Nobody is bad, nobody gets hurt; anger is experienced and released without abuse.

□ The word, "obey" may have some meaning to them that is not obvious to others. So if hitting or being hit is sexually exciting to either boy, sadomasochistic tendencies may be being reinforced. Should you have the least suspicion that the word, "obey" is linked in any way to sexuality or physical abuse, fire up your child-abuse antennae, and be very direct.

☞ "Has anyone ever hurt you or touched you in a way you did not want them to?"

☞ "Who hits or hurts you now?"

In my opinion, bullying is a learned behavior—taught to a person at an early age. Bullies are usually terrified. They often perceive themselves as victims and share many of the same issues. Provide both of these boys with an environment in which they are invited to resolve their anger and dependency issues. If they can keep coming to see you long enough, they may eventually introject your container of unconditional positive regard. My observation is that increased self-worth allows the possibility that a person will willingly explore how to protect himself in ways where nobody (me, thee, or them) gets hurt.

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Q. The father understands English but he doesn't speak it very well.

A. This will be a good opportunity for you to practice not being dependent on words in your interventions. Come from a "let's find out" stance rather than an "it's my job to tell you" position.

□ Get out the chairs and bears, wooden blocks, white board and markers, sandtray, or drawing paraphernalia. Instead of asking questions, invite representations of the problem, the relationship, the dilemma, or the whatever the father came in to explore, to allow him to teach you by *showing* you rather than by *telling* you.

What then?

□ Habituate yourself to invite the opposite of whatever you invited before.

☞ "So you have shown how it *is*. Okay. Now show what has to happen (step by itsy bitsy step) in order to change from how it is to how you *want it to be*?"

What then?

Well, if the "solution" seems incomplete to this man you might try,

□ "Let me see if I understand." (Therapist confusedly bumbles

along wondering aloud about every step while clumsily re-constructing how it is, de-constructing that, and re-constructing how the father wants it to be.)

With luck, you will get the re-constructing wrong and the father will choose to "show" you again. This time another, possibly more useful, solution may present itself to him.

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Q. A man who works hard during the day often falls asleep in my alcoholic group. I'm not sure whether to excuse him or not. Excused means he has to make up the session. Unexcused means he gets in trouble with the court.

A. When an alcoholic manages to forget or not notice the negative outcomes of his addiction such as debilitating hangovers, deteriorating relationships, or embarrassing legal encounters, there is no incentive to stop drinking.

Any time you play down the relationship between behavior and consequences, you co-behave the alcoholic's process of living in denial.

□ Think of this man's sleeping-in-session as an enactment of "I wonder what I can get away with," or "If I can just make myself invisible, this will all go away." Invite him to acknowledge his process and to take responsibility both for the outcome of his actions and for finding a solution other than doing nothing or hoping someone else will take care of it for him.

☞ Tell him he can come to group and sleep if he wants to, but he will not get credit for attending the group because his conscious mind was not there. If he chooses to sleep, protect him by directing him to a corner of the room. You might suggest he use his jacket to serve as a blanket. Then return to your work with the others. By doing nothing, you invite him to resolve the problem himself. When he is ready, or sick of making up sessions, he will find a way to arrange his life so he is awake during group. When he does not like the consequences enough, he will change his behaviors.

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Q. A quiet teen draws pictures of clothes while we talk. I think she is getting what she wants, but the Mom wouldn't approve.

A. So what's the problem?

I get the feeling I should be doing more. I am an approval junkie and I fantasize that should I tell Mom what we do in session, she would say, "This isn't therapy."

On Becoming a Psychotherapist
We teach what we know, so...

Teach yourself to recognize the projections of others and acknowledge the projections of yourself. Consider the following possibility: "It takes one to know one."

If that is true, *one can only see oneself.*

See-er: "That's such a beautiful painting."

Translation: "As I look at that painting,

I experience a connection
with my own inner beauty."



So what is therapy?’

Oh, no! Don't ask me that! Okay, it is a place where people can be okay just the way they are.

Anything else?

It's also where people can introspect, look at themselves and become aware so they can heal.

And are you providing this teen with that kind of environment?

No. I should be inviting some projective work.

Then trust yourself. Chances are, when you think you should be doing something more, you should.

□ Try an experiment with yourself. Next session, pretend that “Mom” is in the room, watching. Find ways to intervene that meet your imaginary mother’s expectations, as well as your own.

- Maintain an attitude that this teenager is okay just the way she is.
- Create opportunities for her to become aware of herself if she chooses.
- Offer projective work for her subconscious.
- Extend opportunities to introspect, and invitations to heal once she is aware.

As you do this, by your own definition, you will be providing a therapeutic environment. And once you satisfy the Mom *inside* of you, you will not be so concerned about the Mom *outside* in the waiting room.

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Q. She lied. I want her to admit it.

Q. A teenager has not returned something that belongs to me.

Q. I have to confront a girl. My fear is that I will accuse, she will deny, the issue will not get resolved, we will both be angry, and I won't get what I want.

A. One day a student took a personal book off a teacher’s desk. The teacher was ninety-nine percent certain that a particular boy was the culprit. She called the boy into an office and talked with him about twenty minutes. Her strategy was to repeat, more or less, the same phrase for the entire time. That phrase was, “When am I going to get my book back?” Here is sort of how it went.

Teacher: So when am I going to get my book back?

Student: What book?

Teacher: I don't want to talk about *what* book. I just want to know when I'm going to get it back.

Student: I didn't take your book.

Teacher: I don't want to talk about that. I just want to know when I'm going to get my book back.

Student: (Angry response)

Teacher: I understand that you are angry. And what I want to know is when am I going to get my book back?

... (Time passes.)

Student: (Accusing, sad, pleading, scared)

Teacher: I understand. However, all I want to know is when I'm going to get my book back.

... (Time passes.)

Student: (Sullen and uncooperative)

Teacher: I know this is hard for you. However, I'm planning to do this with you each day until I find out when I'm going to get my book back.

... (Time passes.)

Student: (looking scared) Okay, I took it. It's in my locker.

Teacher: Well, I don't want to know about any of that. I just want to know when I'm going to get it back.

Student: I'll go get it for you right now.

Teacher: Great. I'm going over to the lunch room. You can leave the book on my desk.

In order to implement this assertiveness technique, you have to commit *not* to allow yourself to be seduced away from your path. You also have to know what it is you want. It is most helpful to want something you can actually get.

In this case, if what the teacher wanted was to “*get* the book back,” she would have decreased her chances of getting what she wanted. But by wanting to know *when* she was going to get the book back, she increased her chances of getting what she wanted.

Even with the negative answer, “never” she would have got what she wanted, since what she wanted to know was “when?”

So what if it turned out that someone else had stolen the book? Or what if he never would admit to taking it?

She still would have gotten what she wanted. At some point the conversation would have gone something like this—

Student: I didn't take your book. I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have your book.

Teacher: So what you're telling me is that I'm not ever going to get my book back?

Student: As far as I know.

Teacher: Okay. Thank you. Our conversation is over.

No damage is done. No one accused this boy of taking anything. The teacher just wanted to know when she was going to get the book back. If he did not take it, the worse that has happened is that he thinks she is a little crazy. And if he did take it, even if he does not return it to her, he probably will never take anything else of hers again, ever.

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Q. Privately, the woman told me she is having an affair. The man has made it very clear in session that his wife's extra-marital sex would not be okay with him. I am uncomfortable with this triangulation.

A. A number of processes are unfolding at the same time: successful triangulation, deception, secrecy, getting-away-with-something, and testing-the-therapist, among others. The sexual aspect of the lying and secrecy is not the problem. Sexuality is only the stage on which on which lying and secrecy are played out. Find a way to disentangle yourself from this couple and their holds on one another.

Not only is the subject matter charged for me, but I am going to be very uncomfortable if he asks me a direct question about her affair.

The emotional charge you experience may be your unresolvedness about extramarital sexuality. If you are unable

Oh, Grandma! Get over the Dang Math!! by Amanda Morgan

SD complained that her granddaughter, B, age “12-and-three-quarters,” never does her math homework. She’s got straight A’s in all other subjects but refuses to do math. S got so mad at B this week that she threw her video game and broke it. S expressed anger at B’s stubbornness. B sat stubbornly resistant to participating in this therapy nonsense at all.

As the hour unfolded, and I listened to the initial complaint, I observed body language and nuance of tone of voice. I saw two very stubborn women, like two puppies fighting over a food bowl.

I’d picked up threads of B’s moving in with grandma 3 years ago, after having lived with other grandma for 7 years (mom died when B was 3; dad AWOL), threads of B’s hoarding food and wrappers in her mattress, threads of trauma when older brother drowned in a pool in front of B. I reiterate: threads.

Each of these seemingly essential issues was mentioned almost as a side note, a pesky annoyance second to the F’s in math.

“Patience,” I said to myself, 100 times in that hour. Now I was the puppy, ready to pounce on B’s double, if not triple, trauma, the hoarding, the hidden anger at the world, grandma’s feeding B’s fire. Math. Okay. I can start here.

I reviewed homework rituals, tried to notice when their fights are triggered, wondered how expectations color how the ritual plays out, even negotiated behavior changes between the two. They seemed appeased and willing to try. “What was that?” I thought when that 1st session ended. “Is this therapy? Really?”

Am I just mommy to two stubborn kids?

Well, that’s what it was today...let’s see how this plays out.” They came back the next week reporting that they had followed “my advice” (although I don’t recall giving them any... I merely elicited from them what they each wanted and asked what they’d be willing to give in order to get it), and that B had gotten A’s in math this week.

I felt very strange. Do they think therapy is over? Is it?

With their problem “solved,” I had no idea what to do with the 45 remaining minutes of our session. There was a lot of awkward silence. Finally, I asked, “when exactly did math become a problem in the first place?” B answered, “In 4th grade.” “What else was going on in your life at that time?” I wondered. “That’s when grandma tricked me into moving in with her,” she answered, spitting fire at grandma, who rolled her eyes and rolled up her sleeves.

While they argued about the circumstances surrounding the move, my internal dialogue continued, “Whoaaa...how can grandma not see the connection between B’s negative idea of her move and the refusal to do math?”

Ok, empty, empty...maybe there is no connection.

Of course there’s a connection! Well, maybe it’s more to do with the 2 significant deaths: B’s mom and brother, not to mention neglect of father. Maybe there’s a learning disability? Pissed off at grandma? At the world? Need to control due to chaotic upbringing? Come back to the present: whatever the causes, here is a girl who suffers, and a grandma who doesn’t get that the girl suffers, and vice-versa. I chose to speak to the adult: “We’ve talked a lot about math

and moving; I wonder if there is anything you two enjoy doing together?” Both S and B shook their heads. Nope. Now what? Wow, this all seemed so “obvious” to me, a complete outsider who couldn’t possibly know what was going on with these two. Silence. Wondered if grandma “got it”—B angry about moving, won’t do math. No happy time together, only arguments.

I used the silence to let go of—to breathe away—my hope that grandma would make the connection and suggest a solution and instead to invite in curiosity of how it is for her that there is no happy time together. Nothing. So I asked, “how is it for you that there is no happy time together?” Tears. Grandma “can’t be happy” because she’d been laid off from her job, has to sell her house, is getting old and is fat (her words).

Now, I am overwhelmed. There is so, so much richness to these women; again, I let go and stayed with what was present. It would all come together, I trusted. On their schedule, not mine, if even ever at all. In the end, I remembered Yalom’s advice, “teach empathy,” and asked each to share their reactions, thoughts, feelings, about what the other had shared, pausing them when they switched from “I” to “she.”

At this point (only 2 sessions), I have no master plan—I intend to help unearth what truth is possible, help each gain a little understanding of and respect for the other, and find more joy in themselves so that they may experience joy if not in each other’s company, than at least in spite of each other’s company!

to totally free yourself from your sexual agendas for other people (no easy task), perhaps you could act as if the sexual nature of the secret were simply the content. Treat the subject matter much as if the wife had told you that she sneaked away every afternoon to watch her favorite soap operas. In that case, that she watches her programs would probably not be problematic for you. You’d be more able to focus on the fact that she has to sneak, that she is afraid, and that she needs to tattle on herself.

□ Develop a conditioned response to handle the answering of one person’s questions about another.

☑ Say some version of, “You will have to ask *her*. I make it a policy not to talk about one person to another.”

Make no apologies about your “policy.” Put the focus back on the question-asker. If you are unable to resolve your discomfort, refer this couple to another counselor.

In the future, consider narrowing the limits of confidentiality so they do not include family secrets that, in your opinion, may impede the counseling. Let future couples, and families, know about your policy before counseling begins.

Q. He was molested and yet he won’t work on the molest. How can I get him to address the molest issues?

A. All his issues are molest issues. You can neither get-him-to nor stop-him-from addressing his molest issues.

How he relates to you in session, how he resists, how he experiences himself, how he talks, listens, reflects, or moves around the room, what he chooses to do, as well as what he refuses to do are all manifestations of his identity, belief systems, behavior patterns, personality, past unresolved trauma, incomplete developmental issues, and general attitude.

Invite introspection. Invite him into his experience. Anytime he introspects and connects with even the smallest part of his experience in the moment, he is working on his issues. So no matter what this person does in session, if he is therapeutically engaged, he is moving toward the resolution of his molest.

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Q. I find that teens often engage in a yes-no struggle with me. They ask for advice and then reject the answer.

A. Therapy is an opportunity to create an environment that is different than what they get at home or with their friends. Since teens normally seek out or create things to go up against and struggle with, the therapist who participates in yes-no or yes-but dialogues offers the same environment that the teen experiences in his everyday life. Find a way *not* to offer more of the same.

Initiate nothing. Respond only to what they do or say.

When asked for advice:

Don't give any. Encourage the answers to come from inside the teen rather than from an external source. If there is struggling to do, let the teen do it with himself.

Get in the habit of responding to all questions with at least four separate solutions: one silly, one good, one bad, and at least one on the extreme of somewhere.

Direct the teen to sit in your chair, imagine he is wise, and tell himself the advice. Then ask him to switch chairs and tell his Wise Part why he isn't going to take his own advice.

Adopt an approach of, "I have no idea; let's explore that."

Invite the use of diagrams, sandtray, humor, art, three dimensional sculpts using objects in the room drama, or polarity work.

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Q. Uncertain whether she was molested as a very young child or not, she does know that she felt shamed and humiliated.

A. Regardless of cause, under the blanket of humiliation and shame are issues of anger, grief, and dependency. For this woman, being "certain" may turn out to be a treatment issue, also. Divest yourself of expectations and agendas and encourage her to explore both her suspicions about the past, and her contemporary emotions.

As with most issues, start by inviting her to become familiar with the skill of being aware of her right-now experience, being able to name the experience and, at the same time, being able to consciously follow it wherever it goes and whatever it does.

"Notice your experience. Allow it to be. Be curious about it. Breathe. Follow your experience. Notice your experience of shame. Describe it (to anchor it into her awareness). Allow, without judgment or censorship, any feelings, thoughts, memories or pictures that surface as you feel what you feel. Stay with it...What's happening now?"

Molest is about many things—sexuality, oppression, and betrayal are most common. So,

Once she is has some experience with following her somatic experiences with both sides of her brain, you might start by inviting her to recall a time when she was oppressed in some way—physically, psychically, developmentally—anything which reminds her of shame or humiliation will do. Use the images she creates to invite her to work with each of its parts. This may take one session, or weeks, or months.

But she doesn't know if she really was molested.

Invite her to imagine she *was* molested. Use the picture she creates and work with each of its parts. Molested or not, any picture she creates represents, in some way, an issue she is working on, in therapy.

Isn't that putting ideas into her head?

As a psychotherapist, you are not in the business of discovering The Truth. Her uncertainty, shame, and humiliation are part of her child-mind's experience.

If her shame and humiliation stem from incidents when she was an infant or a toddler, there is no hope for the Absolute Truth. The cognitive side of her baby-brain was developmentally nine months behind the part of her brain which, at the time, stored memories more as impressions, than anything else.

Any adult imagery of a infant's molest will only be a metaphor for her to use while

exploring whatever it was that her child-self responded to.

So, if you are concerned about putting ideas into this woman's head, trust yourself and invite her to imagine she was *not* molested. Use the picture she creates and work with each of its parts. Molested or not, any picture she creates represents, in some way, an issue she is working on, in therapy.

Your job is, from a frame of neutrality and fascination, to invite her to work with any metaphors that she comes up with, as you would invite work with any dream, photograph, sculpt, sandtray, imagery, or other projective piece.

If discovering whether or not she was actually molested becomes important to her healing, she will do that when she is ready.

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