

## Reflections on the relational challenges of holding, containing and boundarying in practice

In everyday life we hold, contain, boundary and control our actions and particularly difficult emotions. We may do this through medication, meditation, creative activities, deflection, repression and even straight avoidance. Therapy offers another possibility: one where clients can go into a space that feels safe and protecting and where a judicious balance of acceptance, empathy and challenge provides the basis for movement into new ways of being.

Holding, containing and boundarying are dynamic relational processes, not events, and that they intertwine. For both clients and therapists, boundaries provide a safe psychological and ethical frame for holding and containing. As therapists, we hold our professional boundaries to contain the client's process, ourselves and what emerges relationally.

The therapist will be focused on the client, themselves and the emerging relationship. In this space, the therapist who is working relationally attunes to and resonates with the client while maintaining their own presence and solidity and sensing the needs of the relationship. This elusive three-dimensional focus involves a fluid dance where the focus concurrently shifts back and forth. This is a co-created dance in which influence flows back and forth between client and therapist, both of whom take a risk when they move beyond themselves in the holding. Hycner makes this point describing our 'relational artistry':

By "relational artistry," I mean the therapist demonstrating *meticulous*, even "exquisite" *attunement* to the client, while concurrently embodying her/his realness—an emotional centeredness and solidness, *along with* a flexibility and fluidity, in order to respond *instant-by-instant*, to the ongoing and ever-shifting relationship *between-client-and-therapist*.

Together they form this "third reality"—an *ever-shifting* relationship—that re-defines *both* participants: Within this relationship, the focus is always *primarily on the client's experience*—and *must be*—yet concurrently on the therapist's response to the client's experience—the client's response to the therapist's response, etc. We are always impacting each other—we are incessantly inter-experiencing. (Hycner, 2017 personal communication)

These processes are not things we *do to* clients. Holding, containing and boundarying are not about controlling the client; they speak to a co-created way of being with one another. It follows that we can't just decide to 'hold' the client. The client needs to be receptive and accept the holding; they need at some level to take in our witnessing and containing presence, they need to *feel* held. And, in turn, when they accept (or resist) being held, how does that impact on us? How do we respond back to the client? Ideally, we work *with* clients on how they might *regulate themselves*. Therapists who set out to 'hold' or 'contain' by fostering dependence run the risk of becoming manipulative and even abusive.

The most artful judgments therapists ever make concern exactly how and when they engage holding-containing-boundarying and how this process unfolds within the relationship. Sometimes our professional decision-making results in intuitively pushing at, if not crossing, boundaries. The key is to do so in respectful, attuned, sensitive, thoughtful and responsive ways. Each therapeutic relationship is different by virtue of being shaped to a specific individual and shared within a co-

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created relational context. Just how we achieve this will be explored over the course of the chapters that follow. As will become apparent, the relational 'challenge' is a source of much professional heartache, headache and soul-searching. But it is also replete with wonder, offering nourishment for both client and therapist.

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