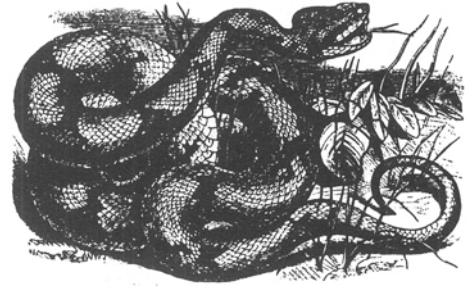


approach whilst not avoiding the serious issues raised. I wonder if it would be possible to promote review and mediation as a preferred response, akin to those described in the following pieces, which would free up both client and worker to explore what went wrong in their interaction. Exploration, rather than complaint and retribution, might help us to create a climate where all but the grossest infringements might find a chance of resolution.

I wonder, too, if it might be worth considering, in the specific context of the examples offered below, whether 'abuse' is the most useful word to describe them. Not only is it a very emotive word (which doesn't encourage the exploration of such

behaviours), but I suspect that it blurs the distinction between considered acts of cruelty and violation and non-intentional, lesser acts, which have their roots in areas more readily amenable to growth, learning and healing.



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## ***When Therapists Fail Their Clients***

*Fiona and Emily*

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**T**his article is about therapy going seriously wrong. It is not a diatribe against therapy itself — on the contrary, our subsequent therapy has been very healing. Our intention is to relate how our therapy with two particular therapists failed, and to raise questions about how this could have happened.

It took years for us to realise that we had been badly served. We thought that noth-

ing like this had ever happened to anyone else, and felt responsible for a shameful failure. We were therefore amazed to hear of a weekend entitled 'Workshop for women who have been emotionally abused by a therapist' run by two accredited therapists. It was a revelation for all of us. For the first time we felt our experience was being validated. There were many similarities, both in the form of the abuse we had suffered,

*Fiona and Emily are two members of a women's client support group which was formed to explore the ways in which its members had been failed by their therapists. To preserve confidentiality, names and some identifying details have been altered.*

and in its results. We wanted revenge, explanation, reparation, a refund — in short, justice. Two of us decided to write about our particular experiences, both from our need to be heard, and in order to go some way towards redressing the apparent failure of therapists in general to acknowledge this subject.

### *What is emotional abuse within therapy?*

The therapy relationship is an unequal one, in which the therapist has enormous power. Clients, especially vulnerable and inexperienced ones, credit therapists with superior expertise, and also have to cope with issues of dependency and power that result from going through an intense experience with someone. The abuse of this power has many parallels with child abuse and neglect. We would not define confrontation, minor mistakes or occasional clumsiness as abuse, but we recognise certain circumstances which can lead to blatant cruelty. When a therapist has difficulties with a client's issues, for example, a destructive countertransference may arise. In abusive scenarios this remains unacknowledged; the therapist is either unaware of it, or believes she can handle it. A therapist who maintains a fixed opinion about a client can become so frustrated by the client's 'stubborn refusal' to accept her interpretations that she behaves in an increasingly aggressive way. She starts trying to 'win', rationalising her behaviour as being 'for the client's own good'.

We experienced various types of abuse from our therapists: denial of our reality, rigid, limited and wrong interpretations, bullying, cruelty, misuse of the concept of

transference, disrespect for our values, and an obsessive harping on one or two areas to the detriment of other crucial issues. We also both felt, much as they denied it, that they simply disliked us. How can anyone flourish in such an atmosphere?

### *Denial of reality*

Reframing by one's therapist can be very liberating; denial of one's reality is not.

*Emily: I never knew if my perceptions, whether about myself, about Sue, or about our relationship, were accurate. She didn't answer questions, and usually contradicted anything I perceived. Thus if I noticed she looked angry I was told that it was my anger she was feeling. Many of my innocent actions were interpreted as aggressive, and I searched assiduously to find the anger in me which she assured me was there. 'Could I be angry without knowing it and without a reason?' I asked her at one point, grasping at straws. Once when I said I was frightened of hurting her, Sue asked 'Not me hurting you?' Yet three weeks later, according to my diary, when I tell her I am frightened that she will hurt me, she suggests the opposite — that it's I who am scared of hurting her. I couldn't win.*

### *Rigid interpretation*

When the therapist rigidly insists on her viewpoint, any dissent from the client can easily be interpreted as projection, resistance or transference. These concepts, valid in themselves, can be a very convenient smokescreen for denying the therapist's own negative countertransference and inability to work with the client.

*Fiona: The most obvious issue with which I came to therapy in my early twenties was*

*compulsive eating. From the start Vera espoused the theory that too much eating is a substitute for too little sex. I had no partner at the time and she would say, almost like a formula, 'you're repressing your sexuality' and 'food equals sex'. The sex she spoke of was an impersonal bodily drive, devoid of any context in relationship with self or other. I spent much of my time with her trapped in this issue, unable to go deeper, trying to resolve the dilemma I had between what Vera was telling me, trying to 'do it right' for her, and what felt right for me in terms of my sexual expression. I entered a strange space where my previous experiences in relationships seemed to belong to another existence. I only extricated myself from this confusion in subsequent therapy, when I was able to uncover childhood experiences (and their repercussions), including sexually and emotionally abusive dynamics in my upbringing. None of this came to light with Vera.*

*Two years after I left Vera I found a self-help group for people with eating disorders, and learned that these problems had some very basic causes. In a pattern common to many binge-eaters, I was actually often under-eating, and dividing food into 'good-permissible' and 'bad-forbidden' categories. I then found that when I ate enough at mealtimes and relaxed my judgements about foods, the binges diminished dramatically.*

Only some topics were interesting to our therapists. They rewarded us by responding more strongly to some of the subjects we raised — such as sex and anger — while anything they considered irrelevant was missed, belittled or met with a punitive silence. They also rewarded certain behaviours. All this helped us to feel that we had

the wrong personalities, that we had to change in accordance with what pleased our therapists.

*Emily: The rules were never made explicit, and I uncovered them only by unwitting transgression. Even my language was censored: 'I don't want to know what you think; I want to know how you feel,' she told me early on. I learned to say 'responsibility' rather than 'fault' or 'blame', and that silences were my responsibility, despite feeling punitive to me. I found that if I expressed myself non-verbally or used imagery there was more chance of being heard. I tried to squeeze myself into the pigeonhole she made for me.*

## *Neglect*

*Fiona: As well as what she did there were all the things she neglected to do. She failed to address my anxiety and depression, preferring to speak more brusquely of repressed sexuality and victim/persecutor dynamics. She belittled my negative associations to sex, dismissing them as mere resistance to my cure. Comparing her now with other therapists, I am astonished at how crass and aggressive she was — how lacking in empathy and compassion.*

*Emily: In the last months I often told her how frightened I was by what therapy was doing to me. She would either ask me if I was angry with her, or would not respond at all. I faced what felt like annihilation of my self, because all she could see was anger. Two sessions from the end she finally did seem to take my fear on board. 'I didn't realise,' she said. 'But I told you. Lots of times,' I said in amazement. Subsequent therapists allowed me to examine and work on my terror, rather than dismiss it.*

## Disrespect for the client's values

Fiona: Her rigid approach to my problems led her to disregard my moral values and emotional make-up. For a while there was a man around me in a professional setting; we found each other attractive. She suggested I go ahead and have sex with him. 'But he's married — with children!' I exclaimed. 'So?' she replied with her unique logic. 'It wouldn't be a relationship — it would be sex.' I wonder what she would have said if I'd tried that with her husband.

## Role confusion/abandonment

Fiona: At times she abandoned her role of therapist. Once, responding to something I had said, she answered: 'After the birth of my second child I felt so depressed that I wanted to throw myself out of the window. Perhaps it was a chemical thing, I don't know — that's just how I felt.' When I didn't respond sympathetically, she told me that she felt 'really dumped', and that she 'wouldn't have told that to just anyone'. In fact I had felt disorientated by her statement, and that she had lost what I had originally said.

## Cruelty and bullying

Fiona: Her personal agenda about me stopped her counselling me effectively. She said, 'I have an urge to persecute all my clients, but I feel it more strongly with you.' She could also be frankly rude. Once, as I spoke, she flickered her eyelids in an unmistakable gesture of boredom, a sort of crude get-on-with-it gesture. Her references to my fragile inner world were peppered with the words 'victim' and 'persecutor', and again I felt I must be wilfully engaging in these dynamics and had to stop it. Looking back I see how she defined the

most inappropriate things as 'victim' behaviour, for example, my feeling upset at seeing a bird hit by a car on a busy road.

Emily: Week after week I was undermined. It was a subtle process, like verbal water torture. One week she felt I was challenging her, the next that I was attacking her boundaries. Later, that she'd never come across anyone so needy. She was adept at picking out the shadow from anything I talked about, always reinforcing my depressive thoughts and ignoring the rest. My achievement in giving up smoking was put down as 'just another deprivation'. Four months into therapy I was clinically depressed and had fully mastered the art of seeing only the negative. All I wanted was to be a good client.

## Gluttons for punishment — did we 'want' them to persecute us?

Why did we stay with these people who behaved so unpleasantly towards us? Several factors led to our starting work with them and then kept us there. We were referred to them by third parties and might just as easily have gone to other therapists had these been offered. They worked nearby and, being new to psychotherapy, we thought them typical of the profession and as good as anyone else.

We saw them as authorities because they were therapists; we were swayed by their voices, insufficiently trusting our own which periodically told us (even in dreams) that they were wrong. We felt we had to keep going till we got it 'right'. In addition, the fact that they weren't unkind all the time, and could occasionally be supportive, was classic partial reinforcement to stay, serving as a sign that when we had

'made it' our difficulties with them would disappear. We simply didn't value ourselves enough at that time to believe that we deserved — and could get — better treatment.

Another confusing element was that some of their personality traits were appealing: they were witty, lively and seemed successful, decisive and confident — things that we too wanted to be. We felt disorganised and unreal inside, and when you are very vulnerable it is hard to cut the tie with someone who at least provides some kind of structure. In fact any soul-destroying relationship eats away at your identity and self-esteem, making it increasingly difficult to leave, binding you ever more strongly to the destructive downward spiral.

We felt we had started a journey which was scary and difficult but unavoidable, and we didn't want to have to start the whole process again with somebody new. In our inexperience, we had no idea that it was our therapists who with their own agendas were making our journey so awful. Nevertheless, we both made unsuccessful attempts to leave.

*Fiona: I left temporarily and tried a form of brief therapy which I hoped would answer some of my questions. It did clarify some things but I still needed ongoing support and so I came back to the 'devil I knew', to the one point of reference I had in the confusion I felt. It didn't occur to me that I was 'allowed' to reject Vera as unsuitable, and choose somebody else.*

*Emily: The idea of leaving didn't occur to me for a long time — there was nowhere else to go. My life narrowed into the weekly therapy hour, and between times I thought only about*

*the previous session and the one to come. My way of dealing with anything frightening had always been to do the fearful thing, so the more scared I was at the disintegration of myself and all my relationships the more I gritted my teeth and continued. But courage is a finite resource and when I ran out of it I tried to leave. In cold clipped tones of fury Sue told me that it was I who was the angry one, and that I was 'trying to kill her off'. Unnerved and confused I got no further, but from then on I withdrew myself and my co-operation and began to understand that I was not powerless.*

### *Mismanagement of endings*

Everyone in the group reported that endings were badly managed and shockingly abrupt, leaving us hanging and unceremoniously dumped.

*Fiona: In what turned out to be our final session I began to talk about an important insight I had had about her. To my astonishment she cut me off and said that I was giving away 'dollops of power' to her that she didn't want. She began to rant, saying amongst other things that she couldn't counsel me any more as she'd built up a great negative countertransference towards me. 'Counselling is my job and I love it, but I don't love you,' she said venomously.*

*Emily: Towards the end I thought constantly about suicide, in a practical, dispassionate way, like an assassin planning to kill a stranger. Everyday items became deadly weapons: my antidepressants a lethal poison, the car somewhere to inhale carbon monoxide, a plastic bag something to put over my head. I realised suddenly that if I didn't leave I would die. I went to the next session determined not to be beguiled or frightened into*

staying. She flew into a rage and told me I was talking 'a load of histrionic crap'. I remember regarding her with no emotion at all. 'You look angry,' I said, barely interested. 'Perhaps that's what you want,' she snarled back. Hours later I realised with sudden shock that if she thought I would enjoy her anger she had never understood the first thing about me. I was an adult making an important and difficult decision, but she persisted in reacting as though I'd made the whole thing up in order to hurt her.

### *Aftermath*

The results of client abuse can be severe and long lasting. For some women in the group it had been over ten years ago, yet they were still confused, traumatised and suffering. Therapy can exert an enormous influence which eclipses almost everything else in the client's life. Like sexual abuse survivors, we experienced our abuse as a loss of part of ourselves, variously described as loss of our innocence and ability to trust, our courage, resilience, compassion, our soul. We felt that some toxic burden had been imposed upon us.

We tried repeatedly to understand and resolve. Like children unable to accept that an abusive parent could be wrong, we blamed ourselves, not our therapists. Were they like this with other clients? What if we had acted differently or 'tried harder'? We felt that if they hated us then perhaps we were intrinsically hateful people.

*Emily: I found it easier to blame myself rather than her because if it was her, not me, there was no way I could stop her doing the same to other vulnerable people.*

Several people in the group had found that

complaining was a tortuous process. We were often told that we should go back and sort things out with our abuser. We discovered in the group that all of us who had returned, even with a support person, found it a harmful, not a helpful, exercise.

*Fiona: It was years before I could think about officially complaining, and then there were many obstacles. Vera's original training institution no longer existed, so I wrote to her ex-supervisor and one of her old tutors. The former was hesitantly sympathetic and offered no further advice; the latter wrote me a very kind letter back saying that she was sorry I'd experienced this but misguidedly advised me to contact Vera and try to resolve things that way; she was not in a position to take any action. I even contacted a place at which she'd done some further training, and although they were not responsible for her behaviour to me I was told that they would have a look at my complaint. However, the person I spoke to botched the handling of my initial enquiry. I reluctantly decided not to proceed.*

*Emily: It felt as though I'd crawled out from a car crash and I needed a better ending, so I went back a month later for a single session. Sue was as cold as ice and had developed amnesia. 'Why were you so angry?' I asked. She gazed at the ceiling as though trying to remember. 'Was I?' she said vaguely. Had she really forgotten raging at her client a scant four weeks before? Was such a scene so normal and unremarkable for her?*

It was often hard for us to find someone to help us move on — many therapists dislike having to clean up after another practitioner. It was a classic *Catch 22* situation: we still needed therapy for our original issues, plus all the therapy-induced ones, but when we sought it for these latter problems

we all experienced resistance.

*Emily: There was Mary who told me that I would do exactly the same all over again but with her, and after meeting me once suddenly found that she was completely committed for the next four months. There was Hazel who silenced me by becoming hostile and defensive every time I brought up the subject, and James who thought it was funny. And Paul: on our first meeting I told him explicitly what I needed to work on and he agreed. In our second session I tried three times to talk about it. Twice he changed the subject. I pointed this out to him and tried again. He interrupted me a third time. I gave up, silenced.*

*Fiona: One therapist informed me that I must avoid being 'blamey'. A second remarked how 'fascinating' my account was — and said I should try to feel sorry for this 'poor, deluded woman'. With a third I felt stonewalled every time I tried to talk about the abuse. I wondered if it was my imagination, until one time she was honest enough to say that she found dealing with the subject very unpleasant because she didn't like to think that a member of her profession would behave abusively.*

### *What can therapists do to help?*

It can be shaming and frightening to accept that therapists can damage as well as heal, and it is often much easier to 'blame the victim'. There are many ingenious ways of doing this. Here are just a few we have heard: 'Some people just don't benefit from therapy — they can't use it'; 'Why didn't you go back and sort it out?'; 'It was all transference'; 'You chose them to abuse you'; 'You gave away your power'; 'You could have left'; 'Are you sure

she meant that?'; 'This is *your* truth, of course'; 'You've taken isolated incidents out of context'.

We suggest most importantly that therapists do believe their clients. It does all sound unbelievable, and we can't produce proof because abuse in therapy is a private act, like rape. It is one person's word against another's. We would also warn against using transference as an excuse for an inability to meet the client in an appropriate way. In *Between Therapist and Client* Michael Kahn writes: 'Sometimes I discover that I am caught by destructive feelings toward the client . . . I have to remind myself continually that it is simply not true that there is one person in this room doing transference and one maintaining a firm grip on objectivity.'

Supervision is clearly important, but only if used honestly.

*Fiona: Years later I discovered from Vera's supervisor that during my time as a client Vera had never brought my case to supervision.*

As we explained at the beginning of the article, we were both fortunate in finding a good therapist — eventually.

*Emily: It was a long while before I found someone who'd work with me at all, and five years before I found someone willing to work on what had happened between me and Sue. It's challenging work and demands courage, though probably no more than is demanded of clients. For me, issues of trust and power were magnified and I was no longer a co-operative, willing client. I was very angry. I needed certain things now from therapy, and Tim gave them. It was vital to be believed and to receive unconditional affection, acceptance and support. I also demanded authenticity*

and an awareness of power issues. He was careful never to use his power or to set himself up as the expert. I remember once in despair saying I didn't know where to go next, and him cheerfully saying he had no idea either. He was a fellow traveller, not the expedition leader, keeping me company rather than pointing out the way.

I wanted openness, space and flexibility, a willingness to start where I wanted, rather than where he thought we should. Clarity was important; like several other women in the group I needed to understand what had happened and why. What was my responsibility and what wasn't? Whose issues were whose? He helped me through this process of disentangling my own issues from those of my ex-therapist. His courage helped me find mine again.

### *What can training institutes and professional associations do?*

Jenny Fasal, a founder of the Prevention of Professional Abuse Network (POPAN) has remarked on the bitter hostility that she aroused when asking fairly innocuous questions of training institutes about ethics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that although training establishments take the subject of *sexual* abuse within therapy seriously, the same is not true of *emotional*

abuse, perhaps because the latter is subtler, more insidious and far harder to define. We would like to see the subject included on courses: how it happens, what signs to look for, what to do about it.

Supervision is widely thought of as a safety measure but, as we have found, is easy to avoid. It is difficult to gauge how prevalent emotional abuse is, and probably much goes unreported. There are enough individual stories, books and articles by ex-clients, and use of organisations like POPAN to show that it is not rare. More discussion is needed, and more willingness on the part of therapists to examine the subject. In our experience many therapists have preferred to shut their eyes to this kind of abuse. Michelle Webster, in her article later in this issue of *Self & Society*, makes a number of recommendations that we would support wholeheartedly.

The best therapy may well be self-help. After the workshop we met as a group for a while. The two of us have been meeting every two or three weeks for the last six months, telling each other what we went through. It has been a kind of deliverance to be able to talk to someone who knows how it was. With each other's support we have worked through much pain and anger, and have found the courage to publish this article.

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### *Further reading*

Jenny Fasal, 'Keeping an intimate relationship professional', *Openmind* 57, June/July 1992

Michael Kahn, *Between Therapist and Client: The*

*new relationship*, Freeman, 1997

Ernesto Spinelli, Afterword to *Folie à deux: An experience of one-to-one therapy* by Rosie Alexander, Free Association Books, 1995