

MODULE 7: CLIENT-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIP

LESSON 1: THE PRACTITIONER AND THE CLIENT

'The breathworker is not the healer or the one doing the healing, rather we are supporting the activation of the healing response that is inherent in each of us.'

As a breathwork practitioner, the relationship between the client and practitioner is a sacred and unique one. Unlike conventional therapy, where the relationship between a coach or psychologist is based on verbal communication, the breathworker is the guide, catalyst, the conduit and space-holder for the process of healing, growth and transformation to happen through the breath.

Through the breath, we are also intimately connected to our clients and are constantly in a process of deepening our relationship with ourselves. However, by the very nature of it being a relationship, human dynamics will invariably play out.

The work of transformation is always to bring the unconscious to the conscious, making old wounding and patterns available for healing. Breathwork sessions offer both ourselves, as the practitioner and client to work through these dynamics through the breath, keeping the space clear for the work to happen. As a practitioner, these unconscious patterns are often only revealed to us through relationships and often through our relationship with our clients. A skilled practitioner is in a constant process of bringing awareness of these dynamics and working them as opportunities to grow.

As practitioners we need to acknowledge and respect the intimate nature of the breathwork experience. The breather is in a space of intense vulnerability and it is our responsibility to hold that experience with deep reverence and to stay clear.

In this lesson, we will explore some of the dynamics that often reveal themselves in the relationship between client and breathworker and which ultimately can stand in the way of the healing experience.

The Wounded Healer

When we experience the power and magic of the breath in our lives, it is very natural to want to share that experience with as many people as possible. It almost feels like a calling and a path that one has no choice to which to fully commit. The beauty of the breath, however, is that it acts as a floodlight, revealing to us our deepest fears, limiting belief systems and patterns of thinking. Often, the closer we get to living from our 'truth' or essence of who we are, the closer we get to facing our most entrenched belief systems. We will face our fear of rejection, fear of not being good enough, fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of abandonment and deep ancestral wounds. Everything comes up and becomes available for healing. The more we get to know ourselves, the less we will project onto our client. We are called to constantly work at inner development.

'Wounded healer' is a term coined by Carl Jung who believed that the healer or analyst is called to healing because of his/her own wounding. Some people respond to a trauma or wounding by feel disempowered or victimised, while others gravitate to helping others.

However, if we are not willing to face and work through our own wounding, the risk is that we avoid or "bypass" it through constantly seeking the "high" of the spiritual 'feel good' experience or we constantly project our wounds onto our clients without fully integrating for ourselves.

The constant process of healing and growth that happens on the path of the breath requires our constant active engagement and own practice.

Transference

It was Sigmund Freud who first identified the psychological process of transference and projection and brought it into what is now modern-day psychotherapy.

The official description of this phenomenon is "the redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object".

This plays out unconsciously in many situations. For example, your boss at work reminds you of your authoritarian father, so you feel anxious around him all the time. Often it plays out in our relationships.

It may play out in a therapeutic setting where client transfers their unresolved wounding from a previous parental or romantic relationship and unconsciously recreates the wounding within the sessions.

Transference is a normal aspect of any relationship, but the therapeutic relationship intensifies it and brings it to the surface.

"Romantic transference" is where the client develops romantic feelings for the therapist. Often, we work with clients who have been severely wounded, rejected and misunderstood. When we create a space of love, compassion and safety, the desire to connect with a caring person in a meaningful way is completely valid. But acting on it in any way, particularly sexual, is inappropriate, unprofessional and unethical, and once again an opportunity to transform sexual energy into heart energy.

The role of the breathworker is to use the breath to stay clear, to support the release of these patterns through the breath and be aware of not re-creating the trauma of the wounding.

Countertransference

Countertransference, which occurs when a therapist transfers emotion to a person in therapy, is often a reaction to transference.

Countertransference can be used in both healthy and unhealthy ways. Many contemporary psychologists openly share their own feelings with the people they are treating and may use countertransference, in a conscious manner, to understand differences between their own experiences and the experiences of the person in therapy.

On the other hand, countertransference can be harmful when a therapist uses a client to meet personal psychological needs.

Countertransference can manifest in different ways, such as excessive self-disclosure on the part of the therapist or an inappropriate interest in irrelevant details from the life of the person in treatment. A therapist who acts on their feelings toward the person being treated or that person's situation or engages in behaviour inappropriate to the treatment process may not be effectively managing countertransference.

Projection

Projection is a psychological defence mechanism and occurs when we attribute characteristics that we unconsciously find unacceptable in ourselves to another person.

For example, a husband who has a hostile nature might attribute this hostility to his wife and say she has an anger management problem.

While the dynamics of projection, transference and countertransference are normal and can be used in a healthy way, they can become harmful and interfere with the healing process if we as the practitioner are not working with them consciously.

Often this is not easy. We need to always stay in integrity with our work by constantly working on our own process. It is helpful to have a mentor or supervisor who can help bring our attention to these dynamics when we can't always see them.

The most important thing to remember is to always return to the breath to stay clear, grounded and open.

The breath opens our understanding and awareness of the wounding but is also the way through to return to wholeness.