

For your toolbox

The Therapeutic Alliance

Building, Protecting, and Making Constructive Use of Therapeutic Relationships

A. Why tending to the therapeutic relationship is so important:

1. Meta-analysis of research on therapeutic outcomes (**see scottdmiller.com**) has repeatedly indicated that the most important variables associated with positive outcome in therapy are not what model we use, or how rigorous we are about diagnostics or procedures. Rather, the most powerful ways we can enhance positive outcome relate to our skills and abilities at creating a positive therapeutic alliance. This involves helping our clients feel deeply cared about and understood and making sure they know their goals and needs are heard and honored.
2. **Carl Rogers** was one of the earliest therapists to recognize the degree to which the therapeutic relationship is the primary healing force in therapy. Relationship is the medium and the method for positive change. He was bold and rigorous in fine tuning what he found to be the “essential and sufficient” ingredients for therapeutic change:
 - a. **Warmth**: Unconditional acceptance and positive regard. He also referred to this as “prizing” or “non possessive love”.
 - b. **Empathy**: deep emotional attunement and rigorous understanding conveyed through active and on-going reflections.
 - c. **Genuineness**: Showing up as an authentic human being who is honest, responsive, and congruent.
3. **Diana Fosha**, speaks for many attachment therapist in her recognition of the primacy of the therapeutic alliance. She clarifies that the experience of aloneness in the face of overwhelming emotions is at the root of trauma and subsequent difficulties. Being with a trusted other with whom we feel safe and known is fundamental to calming our nervous systems and allowing us to heal. “Undoing aloneness” is at the heart of our work. The therapist needs to lead with “empathy, care, concern, validation, and authentic emotional presence.”

4. **Richard Schwartz**, who developed the Internal Family Systems model has spoken eloquently about the importance of whole hearted therapeutic presence. He has identified that when we can show up for our clients with our most grounded Core Self (calm, compassionate, curious, confident, courageous, connected, and clear) that our clients begin to show up for themselves with this same quality of Core Self and this is transformative.

B. Tools for building a strong/safe therapeutic alliance:

1. **Embody Therapeutic Presence (attunement, empathy and validation)** to communicate:

"I get it what you are up against. I am here to understand and support, not to judge. I'm with you. I see you. I care about your feelings, your longings, and your pain."

2. From the beginning, situate yourself as an **appreciative ally**:

"I see your strengths and recognize your constraints. I want to serve as a collaborative partner, not to criticize, diagnosis, or 'fix' you. But to support you to recognize and become your best self."

3. **Be a real person.** Thoughtfully share your genuine emotional responses and thoughts and use humor, openness, and self-disclosure to convey:

"This is a safe place, we share a lot in common, we all struggle and make mistakes."

4. Be continually responsive. Tune into the clients feedback and level of engagement. Notice what brings them alive.

5. Clarify up front that the **therapeutic relationship is a priority**:

"A lot of what makes therapy effective is the experience of a safe, caring, and authentic relationship. I hope you will let me know if anything feels confusing or hurtful or off in our relationship so that we can address it."

6. **Let clients know that they matter** to you:

"I was thinking about you this week and wondering how the job interview went." Or "Your story last week inspired me get out and hike."

C. Tools for maintaining, protecting, and repairing the relationship:

1. **Check in regularly** to assess trust, connection, fit:

- *"How do you feel about the way we are working together?"*

- *“Are you remembering you are allowed to make mistakes and this is a shame free zone?”*
 - *“How are you feeling about our connection?”*
2. **Apologize/process/repair** when there are moments of disconnection or breaches of empathy:
 - *“I want to apologize again for being late last week, I really value your time, and our time together and don’t like the thought of you having to wait like that. It must have been frustrating not knowing what was holding me up or when I would show up. What was it like?”*
 3. **Clarify boundaries and intentions:** *“I’m hearing that you really wish we could do social activities together, and I want to let you know that while I care deeply about you and really enjoy our time together, I believe it is very important to protect the therapeutic relationship by keeping boundaries around it and not slipping into friendships or other types of relationships that could make it very complicated and get in the way of our whole purpose which is for you and I to keep our focus on helping you resolve xyz.”*

D. Tools for using the relationship:

1. Invite clients to lean into the relationship, to notice and trust your presence, and to openly explore the feelings that come up:
 - *“How does it feel to be sharing this with me?”*
 - *“Can you take a moment to just notice right now that I am here caring about you and you are safe in this room?”*
 - *“What feelings come up for you when you let yourself feel that I understand and I care?”*
2. Explore patterns that come up in the relationship:
 - *“I’m noticing that when I compliment you or say something caring, you often make a joke or shift the focus to something else. What do you think that is about for you?”*
3. Inquire about how outside patterns might show up in therapy,
 - *“Have you noticed ways these issues we’ve been talking about (e.g. your frustration with authority) come up in our relationship?”*
4. Normalize and discuss intense feelings that come up in the relationship,
 - *“It is totally expectable that these core feelings of self-doubt and fear of rejection would come up here with me just as they have in other important relationships in your current life and your childhood. I think this gives us a valuable opportunity to explore, understand, and resolve them.”*

5. Other ideas for using the relationship.....