

RUPTURE AND REPAIR: WORKING THROUGH CHALLENGES IN HELPING RELATIONSHIPS

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Rupture and Repair: The fracturing and restoring of connection between two people



Experiencing early trauma and neglect in childhood can have a significant impact on our attachments to others and the relationship to ourselves.



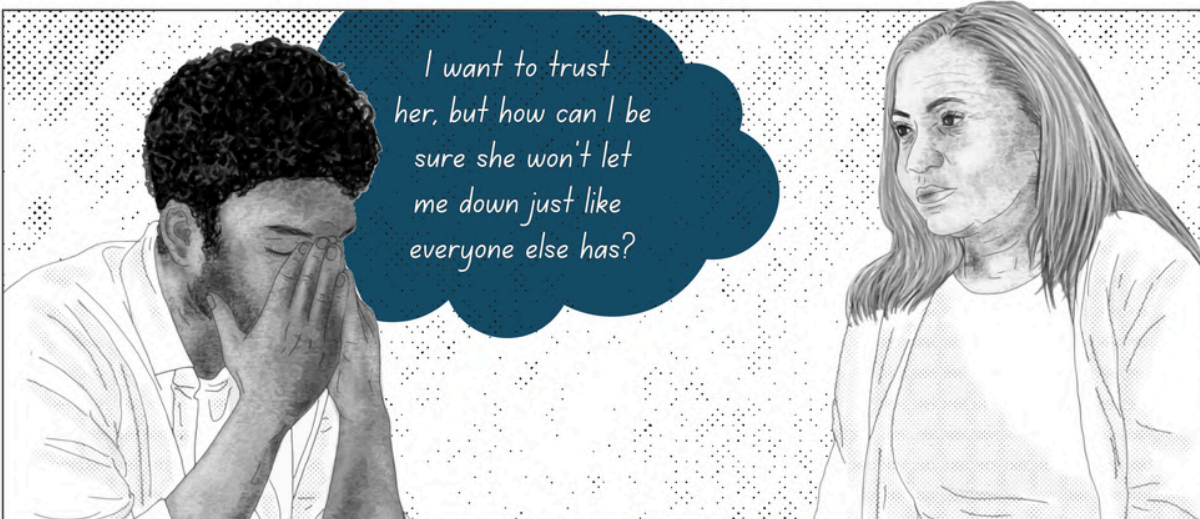
From the earliest years of our lives, we have to make unconscious adaptations in our attachment to others, to cope with instability and an unpredictability – it's all about survival.



Growing up, we may find it difficult to understand the mental state of ourselves or others and recognise and regulate our own emotions. We may also experience chronic feelings of guilt and shame. Within our relationships it might feel hard to trust others and understand their needs or motivations.



Additionally, we may have a profound fear and expectation of mistreatment, neglect and abandonment and feel shame towards the part of us that wants to attach to others, which we may experience as needy.



As we become adults, these attachment adaptations and interpersonal difficulties within relationships are likely to show up in therapy, or in 'helper' relationships. This can be challenging and can create ruptures.




They've forgotten to pick me up again

Relational psychotherapy places great emphasis on the role of real experiences with another – in the past and in the here-and-now of the therapeutic relationship.



They've forgotten to reply to my email



"Thank you for sharing how you felt when I didn't return your call. Whilst it wasn't my intention to upset you, I can understand what that must have been like for you. You felt that I didn't care and couldn't make time for you and given what you have been through before, it's understandable that this is the conclusion you would have reached. I'm really sorry this happened"

It explicitly acknowledges the role the therapist plays and working through these inevitable ruptures without re-traumatising people is an integral part of the therapeutic work. We have to be willing to stay with the discomfort of processing the here-and-now rupture and our part in it, before we can move on to explore if something else might be happening.

SOME CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO A RUPTURE IN THERAPY

"You said that April is always hard, why is that again?"

Therapist forgetting details that feel important

"I'm still not clear about why this has upset you so much. It sounds as though they were trying to be helpful."

Not feeling seen, validated or understood by the therapist

"It sounds as though you felt a bit upset, but I understand that the person has said sorry."

Perceived minimisation by therapist of client's distress

"I have to cancel our session today as I'm unwell..."

Unplanned missed sessions by the therapist

Sometimes when people hurt themselves, it's a way of getting other people to notice

Interventions by therapist that feel triggering, shaming or judgemental

"Your holiday was really bad timing for me"

Telling the therapist that they have been hurt or let down in some way.

"...and what is the purpose of doing this exercise?"

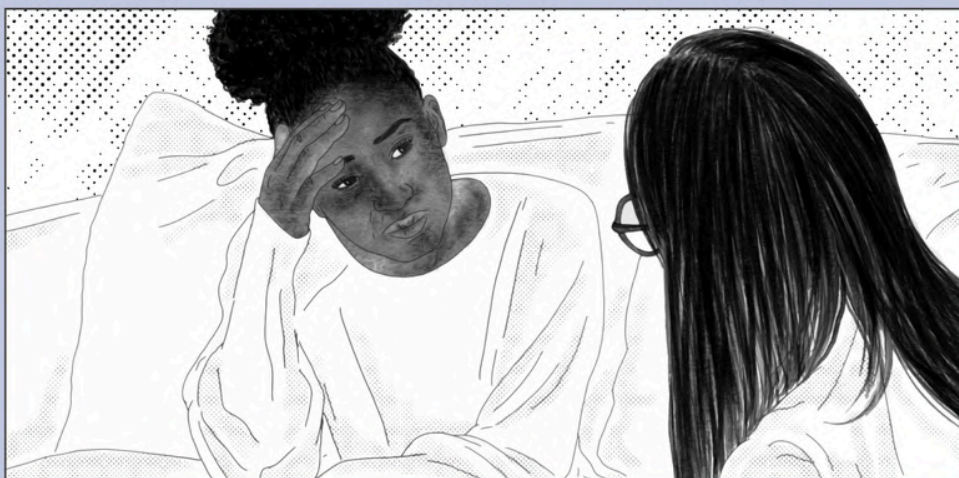
Being critical of the therapist's approach

"I don't get compensated when YOU cancel a session last minute, so why do I have to pay when I do?!?"

Difficulties around payment and cancellation policies

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

ACTIVE ATTENTION



As your therapeutic relationship develops, it is important to stay present and alert to signs that a rupture may have occurred.

This might be overt: for example, an angry or upset response to something you have said, or it may be more covert, like a subtle shift in energy or a change of facial expression.

Let the person know that you have noticed that something has changed and begin to enquire about what may have just occurred:

"I'm wondering if something may have happened during our session today? I notice that you are very quiet and it's making me curious about what's happening for you?"

"Have you noticed any changes in emotions or physical sensations?"

"Has something I've just said evoked a particular thought or mental state?"

It seems as though what I just said is having an impact on you. You may be experiencing some strong feelings in response to this. It's okay to let me know, whatever it is. You may want to speak now or take a moment and let me know when the time feels right for you. I would like to understand how this has affected you"

If the change is overt, then let them know that you can hear or see that they seem upset and/or angry and you would like to make space for them to express this and explore their feelings further.

GENTLE ENQUIRY



ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

It may be helpful to let them know that sometimes the interpersonal challenges they experience in other relationships can and do show up in the therapeutic space. It can be helpful to reassure people that this is a natural part of the process in therapy.

"There are times when the kinds of things we experience in our relationships in the wider world also show up in therapy. We may feel misunderstood or invalidated at times. It would be so helpful if you could let me know if you feel this is ever happening between us. Given what has happened for you in the past, it may feel pretty scary to let someone know that they have upset you and to be honest about your feelings but I want you to know that it is absolutely okay to let me know if anything I say upsets or annoys you"

GENTLE ENQUIRY CONTINUED



ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

AWARENESS OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION



Be mindful of your body language, tone of voice, eye contact and other non-verbal communications that the person may pick up on.

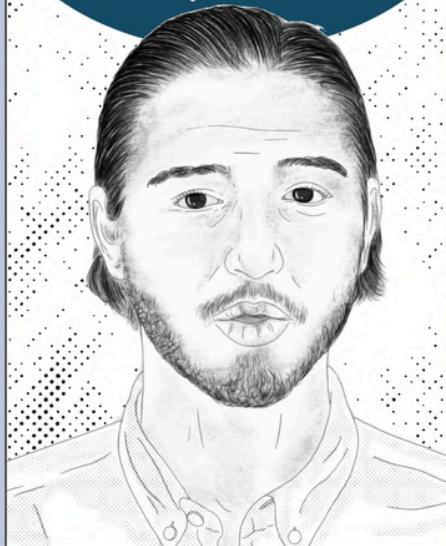
You may need to soften your tone, adapt your eye contact or lean forwards to let the client know that you are with them.

Ask whether it feels okay to try and explore what has happened. Ask if they can let you know whether they feel able to talk about what they are experiencing or feeling.

"Does it feel ok to spend some time exploring this?"



"It's okay if you don't want to share your thoughts with me right away. I understand. We can come back to this next time or whenever you feel ready to let me know how you feel about this"



Don't push if they cannot talk about what has happened – gently let them know that you are aware that something may have changed and that when they feel ready, you would like to make space to explore this together.

Be aware of triggers and trauma responses – can their response be understood as fight or flight or dissociation? This may help them name and understand their experience. It may also help to reduce any shame they are feeling.

It may be the case that keeping quiet was the most adaptive way of managing strong feelings when you were a child. It can be scary to let someone know that you feel let down by them. I get that"

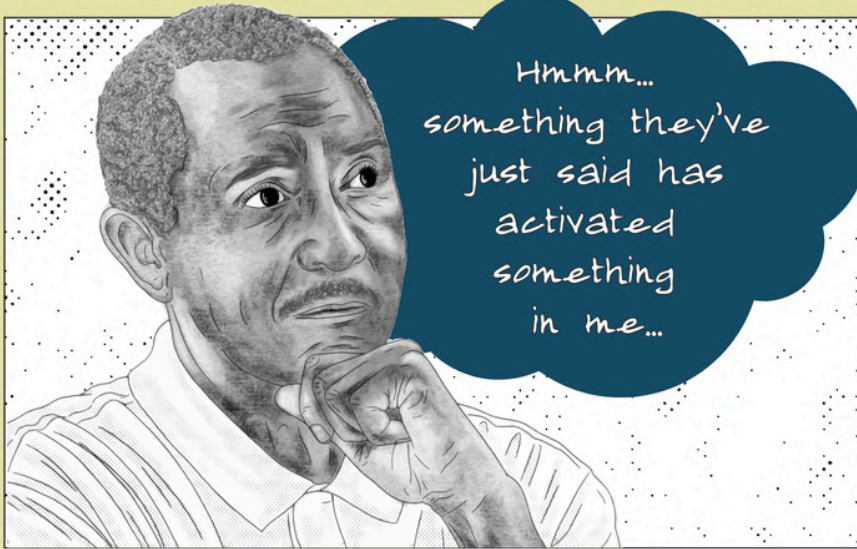


INVITE EXPLORATION

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

ACTIVE, NON-JUDGEMENTAL LISTENING AND CURIOSITY.

Be mindful of what you are bringing in. Suspend your own judgement and any urge to rescue, repair, explain or defend until their experience has been fully explored.



Ruptures can trigger our own anxieties and we can rush to either rescue and fix the rupture, or respond in a way that is defensive when we feel attacked. This prevents us from authentically exploring and safely staying with the other person's experience. Be alert to any sign of shame.


GENEROUS USE OF EMPATHIC ATTUNEMENT



Attunement describes what happens when we are in touch with someone else's emotional states. It is the capacity to be present emotionally in such a way that the individual has an experience of feeling seen, of being understood and accepted.

Attunement may not come naturally and may be a process which requires work, active attention, curiosity, open mindedness and non-judgement.

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

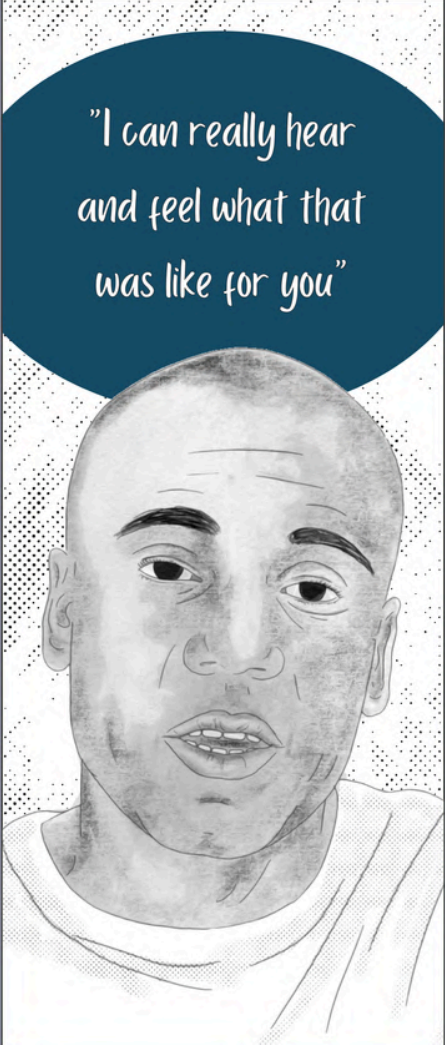


"I'm fully aware that my break felt like a total abandonment to you. That must have been really painful to think that I may not come back and to believe that I wasn't thinking of you at all. I really do know how hard it was for you to begin to trust me and I know it may take time to build this back up again".

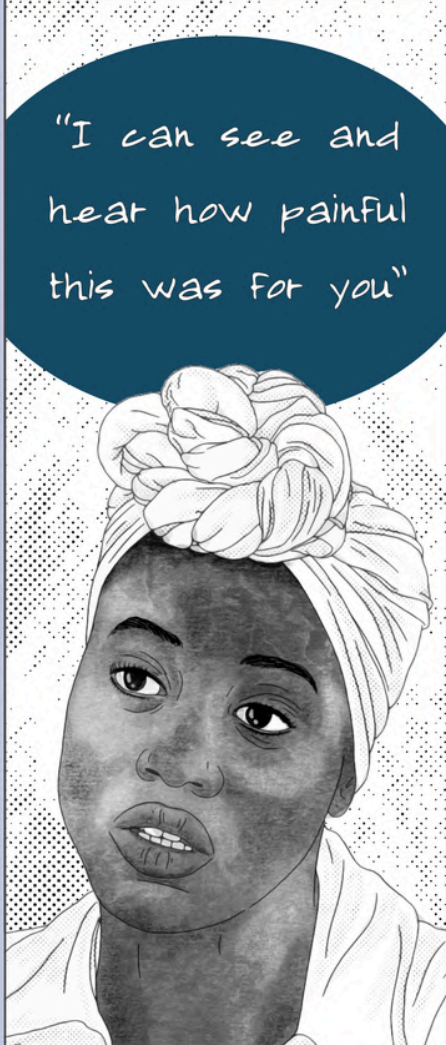
Empathic validation is the foundation of working through a rupture.

A therapist may need to stay at this stage for some time after a rupture has occurred and return to it repeatedly. Without empathic validation of someone's state of mind and experience of the rupture, it may be difficult for trust and safety to be restored to the relationship.

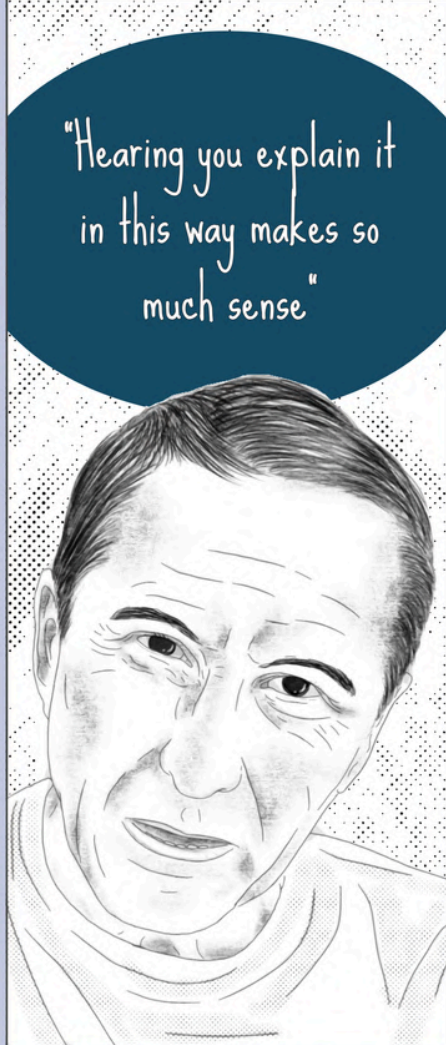
The therapist may need to to put aside their own subjective experience for the time being, to try and listen and fully understand the persons experience of what happened. Reflecting this back and letting them know that you have understood how the experience has affected them:



"I can really hear and feel what that was like for you"



"I can see and hear how painful this was for you"



"Hearing you explain it in this way makes so much sense"

EMPATHIC VALIDATION

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

It is rarely enough to just acknowledge that it wasn't your intention to upset or offend someone. It is vitally important to acknowledge the impact it has had.

When the therapist responds to someone in a way that shows that they understand the rupture from their perspective, validates the associated thoughts and feelings and demonstrates that they understand the impact this has had, then the other person will feel more stable in their sense of self and anxiety and other overwhelming feelings will become more tolerable.

Acknowledging both past and present is helpful:

"Your lived and shared experiences have been lifelong and deeply wounding. It really makes sense that my comment would have been hurtful. It definitely wasn't my intention to cause pain, but I can see this has happened and I am deeply sorry for that"



This step will be **especially important** when working with ruptures that have been experienced and felt as 'micro' aggressions. (*We acknowledge that 'micro'aggressions are not small and prefer the term racial aggressions.*)

IMPACT OVER INTENTION

ACKNOWLEDGE AND OWN YOUR OWN CONTRIBUTION TO THE RUPTURE

"I have thought about this too. I should have been much clearer with you about the potential that I may need to cancel our session last week. I kept thinking that I probably would get back in time, but I knew there was a chance that I wouldn't and should have given you much more notice of this. Cancelling the session at short notice had a big impact on you I can see that"



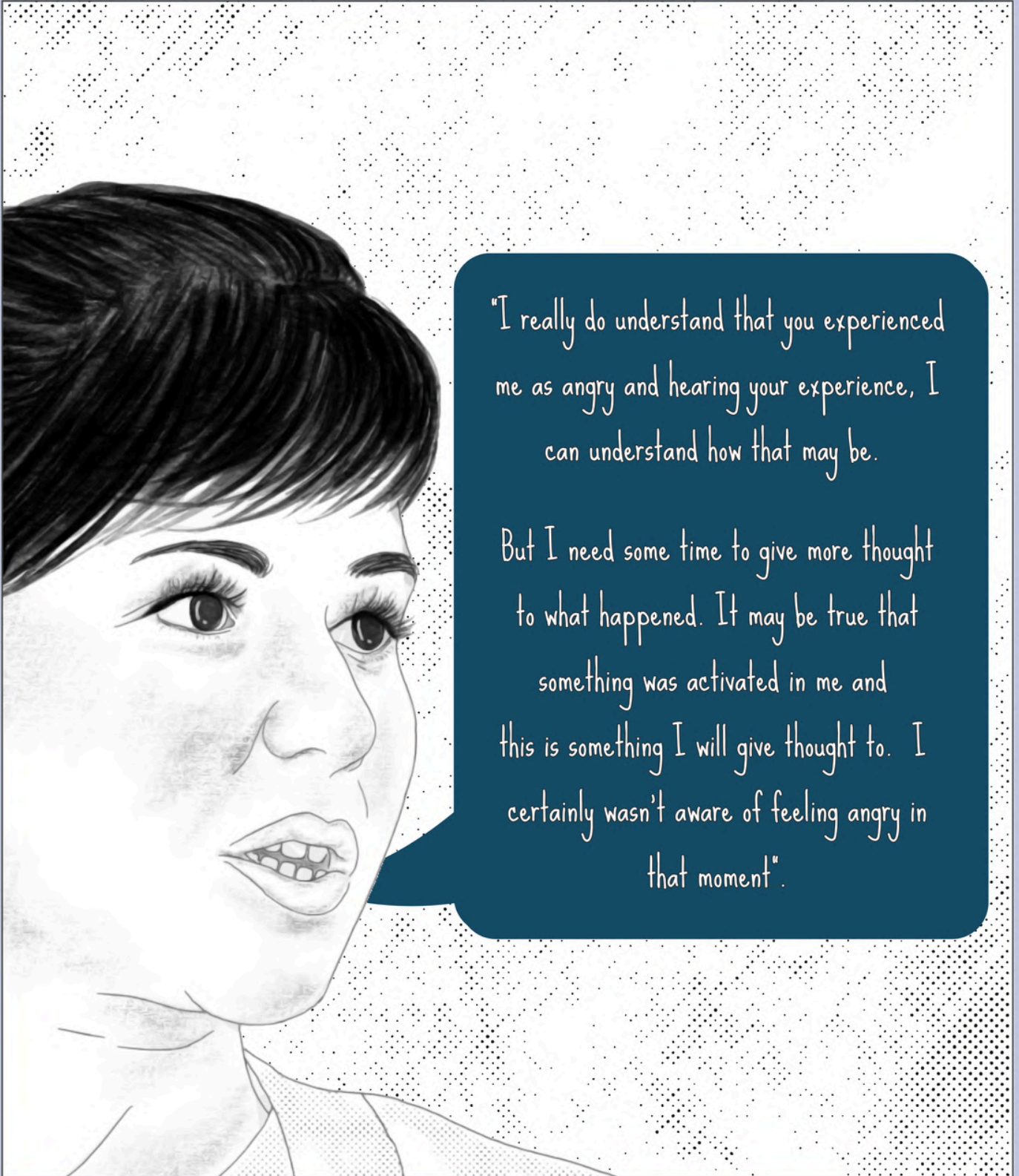
Acknowledge your own participation in what has broken down. Listen to what the person is telling you about their experience of you in the here-and-now.

Later, when the rupture has been repaired, you can be curious about whether it relates to experiences in the past, or can be viewed as projection.

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

It can be helpful to model your own process to help the client gain understanding of how you reflect on different mental states. You could let them know that your own understanding of what happened may still be a work in progress:

BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT YOUR OWN PROCESS



"I really do understand that you experienced me as angry and hearing your experience, I can understand how that may be.

But I need some time to give more thought to what happened. It may be true that something was activated in me and this is something I will give thought to. I certainly wasn't aware of feeling angry in that moment".

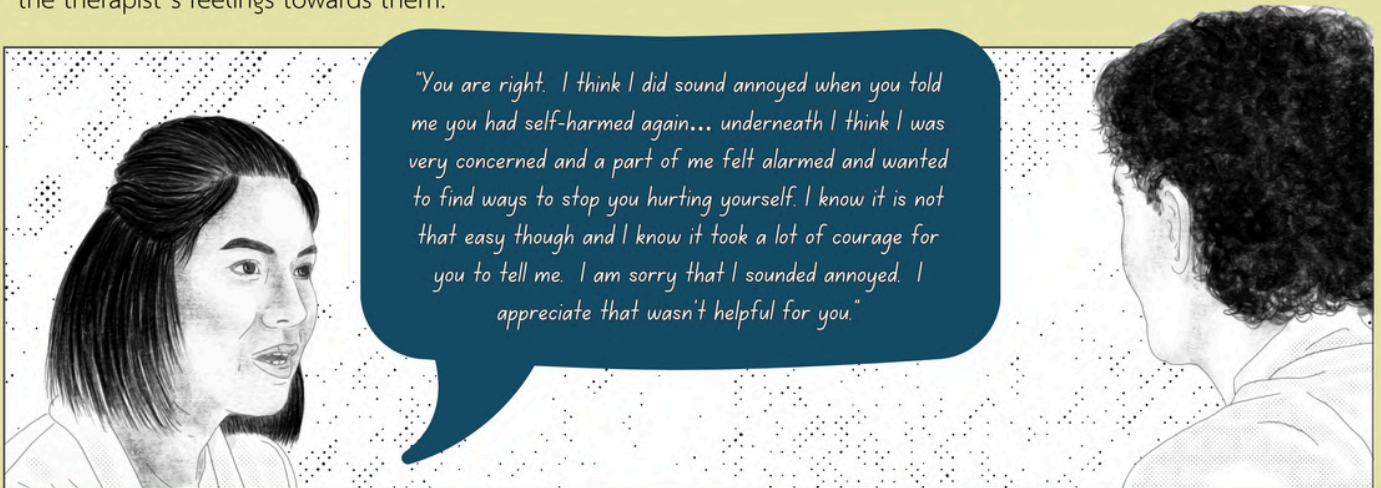
Only after the initial rupture has been repaired and enough safety has been restored, will it be possible to consider a truly intersubjective understanding of what happened between therapist and client and to introduce other perspectives and ways of thinking about what may have happened. (Click [here](#) to read our free resource about intersubjectivity.)

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

“Judicious disclosure can and should be used as an option to resolve therapeutic impasses and reinforce the mutual, if not symmetrical, nature of the relationship, as part of a more authentic, less hierarchical treatment” Kuchek.

The relational model of therapy sees everything we do and don't do as a form of self-disclosure and therefore favours use of judicious self-disclosure. At this stage of the rupture and repair process, transparency of states, thoughts and ideas may be helpful. This is not to suggest that it is helpful to share details of our private lives or our own difficulties. Any disclosure should always be in the client's best interest.

In both relational psychotherapy and mentalization based treatment (MBT), it can be very effective for the therapist to show some transparency about their thought process, their experience of the other person and their feelings in response to what the person is bringing. This is especially true if the person is accurately picking up something about the therapist's feelings towards them.



TYPES OF SELF-DISCLOSURE THAT MAY HELP WITH REPAIR:

“I think I may have taken your silence as an indication that you wanted some space, but I now understand that this wasn't the case and it would have been more helpful for me to check this out with you first. I think I missed something here”

Acknowledgement of an error or mis-judgement

“I think what may have happened is that I didn't fully understand how affected you were by what happened. I can see how painful this is. It would have been such a relief for you if I did understand it, without you having to explain it to me”

Acknowledgement of a misunderstanding

“I think you may right. Perhaps there is something going on today and I am not able to focus in my usual way. This means I may have indeed misunderstood what you just told me.”

Acknowledging that someone may have accurately perceived something about the therapist (even if the interpretation of that perception is incorrect)

“I am really curious to think more about what may be getting in the way of my understanding today, but I will need to take some more time to reflect on this”

Self-disclosure as a way of modelling your own processing

ATTENDING TO RUPTURE

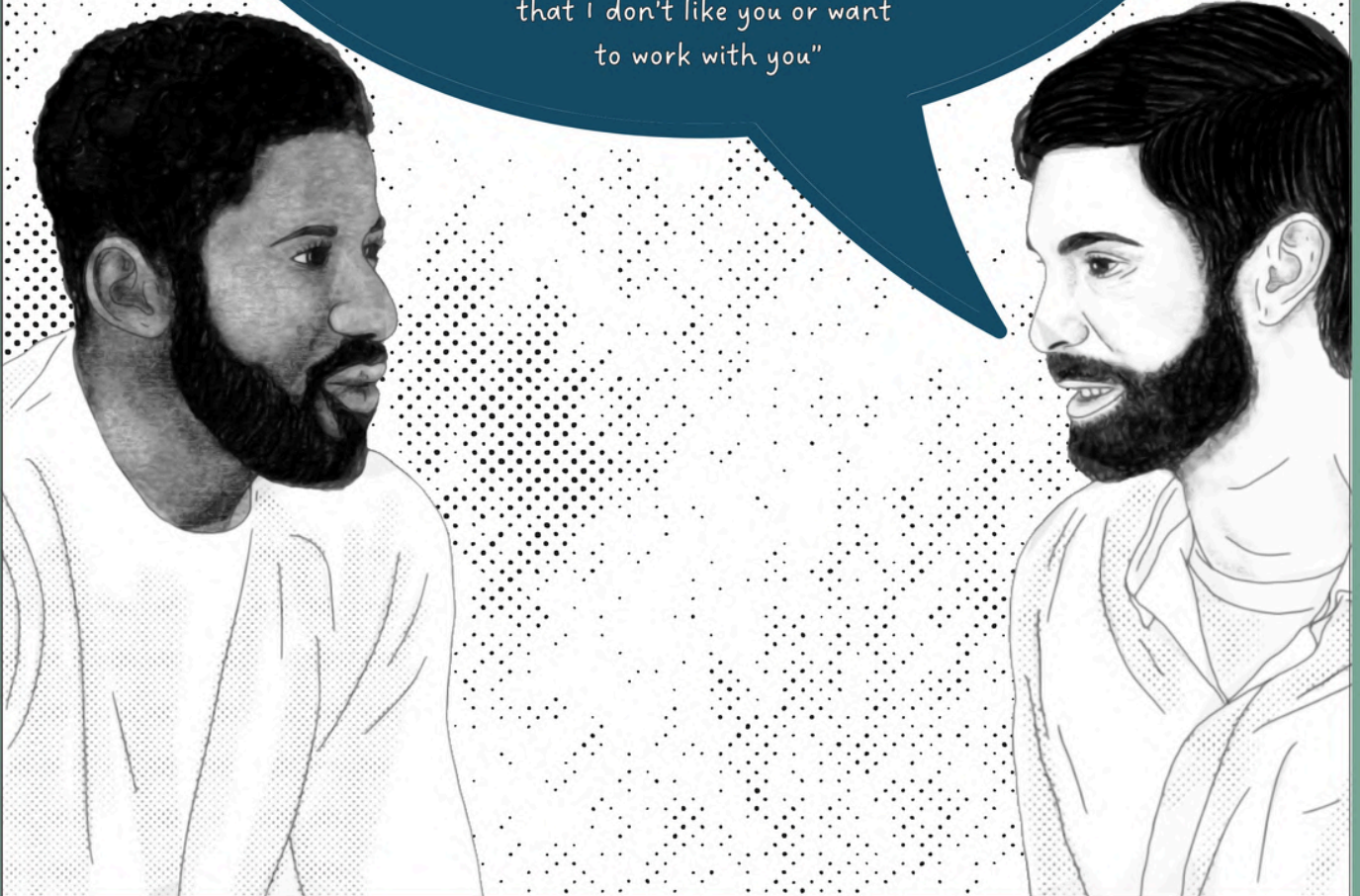
Using self-disclosure demonstrates to the people we are working with that how they experience you, and how they interpret the intention behind your actions, may not always be completely accurate.

This then allows more space for exploration that there could be multiple ways of understanding or perceiving ruptures with others – but only after their initial experience has been validated.

“Now that you have explained, it makes sense to me that you experienced me as critical of you. I can see that and whilst that wasn't my intention, perhaps the wording I used wasn't the best way of explaining my concern. I do see why you were upset with me and I'm really sorry this happened between us.

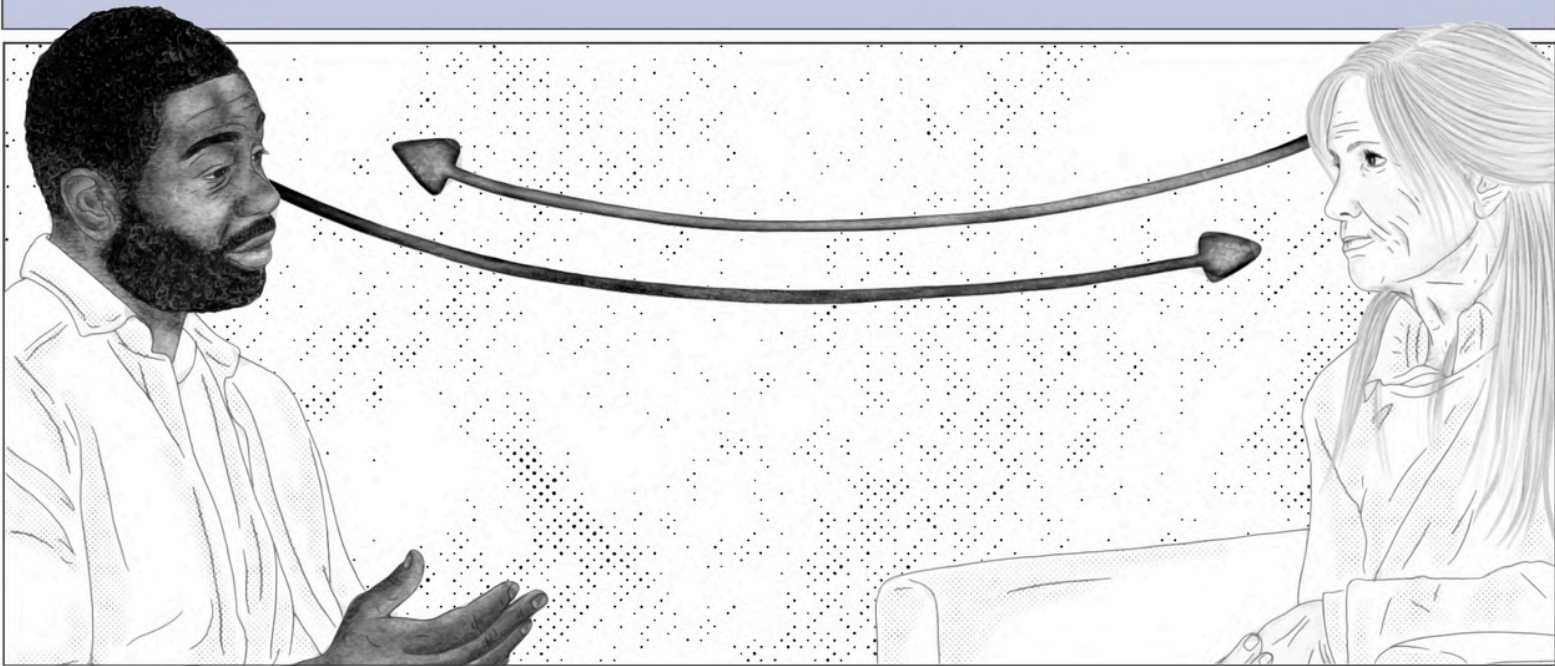
I also want to let you know that I have thought about this and I don't think it's true that I don't like you and don't want to work with you. You seem sure this is the case, but that doesn't resonate with how I feel. It makes sense to me that if you feel someone is being critical then they don't like you. In my case I would say I do sometimes have concerns and that may come across as critical. But it really isn't the case that I don't like you or want to work with you”

INTRODUCING A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE TO BE CONSIDERED



INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND MUTUALITY

Successfully working through rupture and repair, especially if this involves both the therapist and person processing their own experience of this, can lead to a greater tolerance for the mind of another person. It can help the person mentalize both their own experience and give them an awareness that what they interpret about the mental states of another person may not always be entirely accurate.



Jessica Benjamin talks about relational psychotherapy as cultivating “mutual recognition”. Each person feels more able to connect to the other’s mind while accepting their separateness and difference. Relating to another person’s subjective experience, without losing our own.

Safely held and compassionately navigated rupture and repair is an integral part of the therapeutic journey to healing.



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