

‘My baby cries for nothing’: Mentalisation challenges in the face of negative countertransference when working with mothers who struggle to hold their babies in mind

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Abstract

This paper describes the countertransference challenges facing two psychotherapists working in a group mother-infant attachment programme, focusing specifically on the moments of collapsed thinking experienced in the face of powerful maternal projections. Most of the mothers in the group had attachment histories which included unrelenting loss, trauma and deprivation, and were considerably impaired in their capacity to reflect on their infants’ emotional states of mind. At times, the therapists experienced intensely negative countertransference responses such that their empathic attunement and capacity to think were compromised in relation to disturbing mothering practices evident during the programme. Traditional use of the countertransference as a communication to be interpreted in the group was not feasible in this time-limited programme. The therapists were therefore challenged to experience and hold a range of projected primitive feelings, thoughts and behaviours for the mothers and the babies during the group process. The relationship between the powerful countertransference responses consequent to this and the reflective capacity of the therapists is explored. One mother was particularly impaired in her capacity to hold her baby in mind. Case material relating to this specific mother-infant dyad is used to illustrate therapeutic challenges faced by the therapists and the impact of this on their capacity to be containers in this particular group context.