

When a therapist's therapy implodes: Relational reflections on a case of terminal impasse

Helen Laurenson

Private practice, Cape Town

Abstract

Terminal impasse in psychotherapy is an uncomfortable topic, yet broken therapeutic relationships may be more common than is acknowledged (Elkind, 1992). Impasse is potentially more disconcerting when the patient is herself a therapist. This paper presents a case, in which a therapist's own long-term therapy broke down irreparably, from the standpoint of the patient and of her subsequent therapist. A relational perspective, combined with the insights of an impasse consultant working with troubled therapeutic dyads, is used to illuminate the material. Strategies are suggested for arresting the process when impasse threatens. The paper considers the relevance of the patient's identity as therapist, the position of the second therapist in taking on such a case, and the implications for the therapeutic community.