

Hide and seek: Challenges in holding a deprived young adolescent in therapy

Tanja Smuts

Tygerberg Hospital

Private practice, Cape Town

Abstract

This paper gives an account of a psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy process of a 12-year-old female in a state mental health setting. The theme 'hide and seek' captures the dynamics of this case on multiple levels. It describes the patient's relationship with her mother, aspects of her intrapsychic development, transference / countertransference dynamics, as well as the nature of the family's contact with the clinical setting. This case illustrates how feelings associated with early deprivation and related separation/individuation struggles become magnified in early adolescence. It shows a young person's struggle to find herself in a maze of continuously disappointing internal and external objects. It also demonstrates how unconscious, repressed, and 'hidden' feelings can be passed down through generations, and maintain severe personal and family intrapsychic and interpersonal difficulties. In this case the patient's struggle to be 'found' was unconsciously linked to her family remaining 'lost' in a history of unprocessed pain and grief. In addition, the patient's psychotherapy process points to challenges in therapeutic work when socio-economic problems complicate the possibility of consistent weekly sessions in accordance with a traditional psychoanalytic frame. The case also highlights the need for responsively attuned systemic interventions and adjustments to the frame.