

The ABC's of Counter-transference

By Maria Klein, LMFT
www.mariaklein-mft.com
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My feet hurt. Often times during therapy sessions I take my shoes off. Stockings make my legs itch, so I don't wear them. Ever. The result is I'm often bare-footed while working with my clients. One day a client I had been seeing for over a year said, "Do you want to know why I continued seeing you after our first session?" Yes, I did want to know. "Well," she continued, "you took your shoes off, and I figured you were comfortable with yourself, so I could be comfortable with you too." I was stunned. All I could think of was; how many clients have left me after the first session because they found my bare feet to be rude and disrespectful? This incident clearly illustrated to me that I do not have control over how my clients view me, nor how they respond to what I say or do in therapy. I am solely responsible for what I put out.

An often overlooked dimension of counter-transference is our attachment to our client's response to therapy. Do we want them to think we are helpful and wise? Do we want to see positive changes in their lives? Are we worried they may think we are clueless, and no help at all? Do we feel discouraged when they continue to struggle and to resist us? Our responsibility is to do our job the best we can, given our life experience and our training. We do not have control over how our clients will respond to the work we do. When we need our clients to respond positively in order to feel like we're doing a good job, then we are trapped in counter-transference which will interfere in our client's healing, and cause us to burn-out on our work. We're also in danger of becoming manipulative in order to get our clients to view us, and therapy positively.

I have come up with an ABC's of counter-transference. My hope is to shed light on areas that we may be invested in our client's response to therapy. If we can identify these areas we will free ourselves up to be more creative and relaxed. We will also free up our clients from having to "get better" for us.

A is for Attitude

A is also for Attachment

We speak to our clients in our attitude: "I love you just the way you are. I do not need you to change for me." Everyone else in their lives wishes they were different in some way. We aren't going to join the crowd who needs them to get-their-act-together. The environment we provide is with open hands. No attachment.

B is for Beside

I walk beside my client. I am not in front leading the way, nor am I behind giving them a push. We are on a hike together. My job is to point out the scenery: mountains, valleys, storm clouds, meadows. My client decides the direction and our pace. I walk beside them.

C is for Choice

The choices my clients make are theirs. They ultimately will figure out what's best for them. Do they want to go over those mountains, or down to the sea? Do they want to pick some flowers in the meadow, or head toward the clouds? I do not know the way they should go. I can only point out what I see, and let them choose.

D is for Do your job

What psychotherapeutic model do you speak in? Are you a behaviorist, a Jungian analyst, a family systems therapist, a narrative therapist, experiential, Gestalt? Your model expresses who you are, and how you think people heal. Do your job to the best of your ability. Some clients will like your style, and others will not. Our clients are learning to "be themselves" and it's our responsibility to be ourselves.

E is for Evaluate yourself: What is my job? How am I doing at it?

Here's a short list of questions that help me to critique my work. Make your own list of what defines your work, and the questions you might ask yourself.

Was I present?

Or was I daydreaming and bored?

Was I honest?

Or did I bite my tongue for fear they wouldn't take it well?

Was I compassionate?

Or did I feel judgmental?

Did I stay connected to myself, and to my client?

Or did I abandon myself and need my client to approve of me?

Was I listening to both their spoken words, and body language?

Or was I formulating in my head what to say next?

We want to come home to ourselves to critique our work.

F is for Freedom

We are free to be ourselves, and our clients are free to be themselves. We are not trapped in trying to manage our clients' perceptions, behaviors, opinions and attitudes. We are not invested in the choices they make. We are not tied to impressing them with our wise insights.

G is for Guts

Have the guts to be honest. We are being paid for our insights. Our responsibility is to share our insights with love and not with condemnation. Interns come to me and tell me all the dynamics they notice going on with their clients. I ask them, "Did you tell your client that?" The answer is generally, "Well, no." We have to get up the guts to tell our clients what we see. We have to learn to trust ourselves. We have no guts when we are trying to get our clients to feel safe with us. They will feel safe with us when we have the guts to be honest. They can choose to listen or not. Either way will be fine with us.

H is for Humility

We don't need to have the answers for our clients. We only have to open doors for them to find their answers. Clients come to us with a medical model: here are my symptoms, now what do I do? Quite frankly, we don't have a clue as to what they should do. If we buy into their desires for us to fix their problems then we are counter-transferred. Sometimes we feel uptight because we don't share life experiences with our clients. Maybe we don't have kids and we are counseling parents. We are young and our client is old. We are old, and our client is young. We've never been raped. We've never lost a child. We've never been married. We've never been divorced. Our clients will always come in with experiences that we haven't had. We are tempted to feel like we can't help them if we haven't been in the same place. Connect with your client's feelings of loss, fear, grief, anxiety. We all have those in common. Be humble enough to know you don't have the answers, and you aren't supposed to.

I is for Illusion

What are the illusions you carry in regards to providing counseling? Do you think you are the knight in shining armor, or the angel of mercy swooping down to rescue your clients? Are you disappointed when you realize you are simply another human being, limping along with all your own faults and short-comings? Many times I find myself saying things to my clients that I need to listen to. This morning I told a controlling mother to let go of micro-managing her child, while inside I remembered how just a few hours ago I was nagging my daughter to take her gym shoes to school. We teach what we need to learn. Have no illusions about that.

I is also for Invite

We invite our clients to connect with themselves. We invite our clients to a party called Well-Being. We invite our clients to change attitudes and behaviors. We invite our clients to express themselves. I often hear, “I just want *to get* my client to open up; to talk; to tell; to relax; to trust.” We don’t want *to get* our clients to do anything. We simply invite. We keep inviting even when the response is no. Think of inviting your friends to a party. You know the food will be delicious and the band is hot, but they may not know that. If our friends can come to our party, great. If not, that’s okay too. We can always invite them again. They can choose to come or not. Our clients can choose to open up, to talk, to trust, or not.

J is for Judgmental

Judgments are the value labels we use to determine good-or-bad, and right-or-wrong. Get rid of value judgments on yourself and on your clients. You are both a sum of all your various experiences, beliefs and feelings. Clients get stuck in the judgments they have taken on from others, we don’t need to add any more. If we begin to judge ourselves (I’m doing a great job with this person/I’m doing a terrible job with this person) then we are counter-transferred. Judgments keep us all trapped.

K is for Kindness

Be kind to yourself. Be kind to your clients.

L is for Love

No matter what, we do it with love. Love is a choice on the part of the therapist. It is not a natural feeling that springs from familial-love, nor the love of attraction and desire. Our job is to see our clients; to really see them. We connect with our clients and we choose to love them the moment they walk in the door. They do not need to earn our love. We don’t have to get-to-know-them before we can love them.

M is for Money

The money our clients pay us balances the scales. We make an even exchange. My time, my attention, my insights, my experience, my unconditional love, my voice, my ear for your money. Unfortunately money can be a major contributor to counter-transference. We need the money our clients pay us. It’s how we earn a living. We may find ourselves tempted to try to keep clients so we don’t lose the money. “I can’t afford to have this person quit therapy.” whispers to us. We descend down the slippery-slope of trying to get our clients to like us, to think we are worth it. We hold on to our client. We may stop telling the truth for fear of offending them in some way. We compromise ourselves and we disrespect our clients the moment we become dependent upon their money. To

prevent this we may need to diversify our sources of income. Teach a class, provide supervision, rent out your office, get a day-job. Whatever it takes.

N is for Never

Never have sex with your client. Never barter your services. Never lie. Never cheat. Never steal.

O is for Opportunity. O is also for Open.

We provide our clients with the opportunity to grow and to change. We open doors for our clients. They can choose to walk through those doors. They can choose to stand at the threshold looking in. They can choose to run through. They can choose to go back-and-forth. They can choose to put one leg on either side of the doorway. They can slam the door shut.

P is for Praise

Praising our clients may seem like a loving, supportive thing to do. Our clients are often hungry for praise, and they want us to pat them on the back. But praise can put us in a parental role. It sets our clients up to please us so that they can get our approval. Our clients need to struggle with their own worthiness. Ultimately they will need to give and to receive praise. Instead of, “Wow, you did a great job.” we can say, “How do you feel about the way you handled that situation?” Praise that comes from within our clients rather than from external sources is the praise that praises.

Q is for Quiet

Keep your mouth shut. You don't have to talk. You don't have to come up with anything. Seeds grow in silence. Noise never made a flower bloom. Make peace with silence.

R is for Ready

Be ready for your clients. Keep yourself well fed, well rested, well read, and spiritually nourished. When we are stifling a yawn or concealing a growling stomach, then our focus is on ourselves. We wander into thoughts of what's for dinner, and how can I stay awake? Nourish your spirit with the things that fill you up and calm you down: meditation, prayer, yoga, hikes in woods, exercise, good books, gardening, cooking, shooting baskets. If you don't know what feeds your spirit, then find out, and do it.

S is for Stuck
S is also for Stop

It's okay to be stuck. We are mirrors for our clients. When we feel stuck, they most certainly are stuck too. So get up out of your chair and do something different. Walk around the room. Exchange chairs. Grab paper and crayons. Pull out the sand tray. Admit that you are stuck. If you are worrying about what your client thinks of you, you will undoubtedly be stuck. Stop worrying.

T is for Tools

We have many tools to offer our clients, based on the model of therapy we use, and on our various life experiences. Our job is to offer the best tools we possibly can. Our clients can take those tools and build a French chateau, a Spanish villa, a California ranch, a country cottage, a modest home in suburbia or an outhouse. They can also let those tools rust in the grass. It's none of our business what they do with the tools we give them. The quality of those tools however, are entirely our business.

U is for Understanding
U is also for Underestimate

Being understood is in itself healing. Don't underestimate it.

V is for Vanity

Dig it out. Do whatever it takes to reveal it in yourself. Of what are you vain? Your designer office? Your religion? Your clothes? Your life experiences? Your degree? Your fee? Your reputation? Leave it all outside your office. It will serve neither you, nor your client.

W is for What if

What if my client doesn't change? What if my client doesn't come back? What if my client is attracted to me? What if I'm attracted to my client? What if I start to cry too? What if I look like a fool? What if my client says bad things about me? Well, what if that's so? It's all about what you make of it.

X is for Xmas

No, we don't send our clients Christmas cards.

Y is for Yelling

Yelling in my office is okay, as long as it's my client. If we are uptight about what the neighbors are going to think, then we inhibit our clients who need to howl out their distress. The neighbors' comfort is not our responsibility. Get soundproofing if you have to, or find a different office, or different time to work with your client.

Z is for Zingers

Every now-and-then, no matter how long you have been doing this work, a client will throw out a zinger. Rather than catch it in the heart, move to the side and watch it go by.