

The Burnout of the Therapist: Training, Professional Policies and Research as Prevention Tools

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to open a reflection on what skills are needed to be able to be close, at a professional level, to human suffering.

The existential and social condition of people today appears increasingly traumatic (loneliness, the climate and economic crisis, war, migration, pandemics). In addition to all this, the suffering and severity of patients is increasing. Mental health professionals, who live immersed in the same traumatic situation as their patients, are exposed to a high risk of burnout.

The editor of the article, in collaboration with colleagues on the editorial board, stimulated this reflection by asking some questions about how to train professionals with a solid ground; which specific skills has a psychotherapy training have to support in order to accompany patients through suffering.

We are witnessing a fragmentation of psychological skills through the proposal of brief courses for professionals with expertise in very specific areas, but often without the basis of a broader training in the therapeutic relationship. We wonder what the role of research can be, how it can help us to orient our practices and training courses,

This article is also intended to be a support for a possible dialogue between the various educational, cultural, and professional policy agencies so that there can be a creative adjustment between the new needs and the guarantee of adequate training.

The authors interviewed, all important exponents of our profession working in significant and strategic contexts such as the Council of Psychologists, the University, research, training in psychotherapy, and psychotherapy journals, gave their contribution from their point of view, helping us to find coordinates within this complexity.

Keywords: Burnout, psychological suffering, psychotherapy, relationships, research.

Therapist Burnout: The Emotional Short-circuit of the Wounded Healer

Giuseppe Sampognaro

Abstract

Like any professional in helping relationships, the therapist is subject to periods in which work-related stress can take on particularly intense dimensions, even to the point of burnout.

This article, starting with the traditional definition of Burnout Syndrome, aims to illustrate the risk factors to which the therapist – specifically, the Gestalt therapist – is exposed. Above all, it focuses on a particular recurring situation in the clinician's experience: the emotional short-circuit that arises from encounters with patients who have a marked affinity with the

therapist's background, and who therefore resonate with him/her.

To prevent and/or deal with the risk of burnout, it is desirable that the therapist remains faithful to the gestalt therapeutic mentality; that he abandons the narcissistic scheme of taking charge of the patient's salvation; that he accepts his own fallibility and – as the myth of Chiron teaches – is willing to put his own fears and fragility at the service of the Other. Finally, it is important that the therapist always keeps in mind the reciprocity of the desire to cure that binds him to the patient.

The reciprocity that characterizes the therapeutic relationship results not only in the full involvement of the therapist who puts himself in the field; but also, in the evidence that the therapist himself, during the contact experience, deconstructs himself and comes out transformed as much as his patient, in terms of increased self-awareness. The Dance Steps tool with which it is possible to describe the adjustment of the patient-therapist dyad within the session is based precisely on the reciprocity of movements, perceptions and feelings that animate the two protagonists of the therapeutic experience. This kind of improvised choreography that expresses the vitality of mutual contact is also implemented through the patient's feeling of benevolence, who tries to reach out to his therapist (and be reached by him) out of love. The therapeutic relationship is an intimate one, and this gives the term "reciprocity" a deeper connotation, one that truly places the relationship on an equal footing.

The article concludes with the presentation of a clinical example using the descriptive scheme of the Dance Steps and with the proposal to favour – among the protective and preventive factors of Burnout – the therapist's spontaneity, his ability to enter fully into a relationship with patients and the acceptance of his vulnerability.

Keywords: Burnout, wounded healer, reciprocity, emotional short-circuit, Dance Steps.

The Right and Responsibility of Self-care in a Post-pandemic Background

Romina Cagiano e Maria Mione

Abstract

The authors highlight the therapeutic relationship from a Gestalt point of view, describing the role of the psychotherapist in his abilities and limitations. The Gestalt perspective places the patient and the therapist at the center of the psychotherapeutic process as human beings who meet at the contact boundary and co-create the experiential field. Therefore, the Gestalt perspective urges the psychotherapist to maintain an integrated vision also in the gaze he directs at himself, inviting him to take care of himself.

The aim of the article is to emphasize the decline of the various skills that the psychotherapist draws on in his profession, underlining the importance of taking care of himself, because the psychotherapist has the right and the responsibility towards his patients.

Being psychotherapists at the time of COVID-19, therefore, has allowed us to obtain a great heritage or to welcome our fragility and human fallibility. Our fear of meeting patients keeping the right distance, so as to be able at the same time to help them, has continually implied adapting to a precarious ground leaning on our resilience, keeping one's senses open to continue offering the support, though unstable, keeping alive our desire to meet the other even if in different ways than in the past, to support patients in a depressed and repeatedly scary field.

The historical-social context of recent years and the contemporary one call for a renewal in the ways of taking care of oneself, which finds the best solution in the individual and group supervision and in the personal psychotherapy. These spaces are a common background from which figures emerge in a process of constant co-construction and which, for this reason, become a place of meeting, dialogue, learning and transformation for the single psychotherapist.

Keywords: Self-care, contact boundary, supervisory group, psychotherapist skills, being fallible.

“The Cost of Caring”: Relationship between Burnout Syndrome and the Psychotherapist’s Experience. A Systematic Review from a Gestalt Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years, research on psychotherapy has focused on the psychotherapist's experience and ability to respond to the client's needs. However, no study has addressed the relationship that may exist between the psychotherapeutic profession and the possible development of symptoms related to burnout syndrome from a gestalt perspective.

In relation to this, the main objective of the present study is to identify variables related to burnout syndrome in the psychotherapist through a systematic review of the literature.

The review was conducted according to PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021), with a time frame from 2012 to January 2023. The final selection resulted in the inclusion of 20 articles found in the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocINDEX with Full Text, Education research Complete, APA PsycArticles (EBSCO); PubMed and Scopus databases. A narrative approach to synthesis was used to discuss the results of the articles (Popay *et al.*, 2006). The adoption of this approach allowed the identification of some key themes related to the results. In fact, from the studies reviewed, some predictor variables of burnout emerged: the area of emotions including emotional over-identification, good emotional regulation, empathy, and self-compassion; in addition, in terms of protective factors, variables such as good resilience skills, adequate training during training, personal psychotherapy, and supervision emerged.

Among the major findings that emerged from the review is that the variables “empathy” and “bodily resonance” seem to be factors of fundamental importance in order to be able to establish a better quality of the therapeutic relationship. This result is fully in line with data already obtained from Gestalt psychotherapy research on therapist responsiveness and intuition (Spagnuolo Lobb *et al.*, 2022a). Consequently, a better quality of the therapeutic relationship predisposes to a good perception of one's quality of life in reference to the work aspect. In conclusion, a common goal to be achieved to mitigate the potential negative effects of stress in clinical settings could be to implement professional development activities from intervention and clinical supervision, supporting aesthetic and field resonance (Spagnuolo Lobb *et al.*, 2022b).

Keywords: Gestalt therapy, burnout, systematic review, supervision, wellbeing.

Afterword of Erving Polster's Book. "Enchantment and Gestalt Therapy. Partners in Exploring Life"

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

Abstract

The afterword to the book *Enchantment and Gestalt Therapy. Partners in Exploring Life*, by Erving Polster, one of the world's most respected psychotherapists, begins by going through the evolutionary line of his publications. Erving Polster is recognized as one of the most significant authors of *Gestalt Therapy*, in his writings he has always revolved around certain fundamental concepts while always bringing out new aspects, which could be summarized in three: fascination, now for next and life focus groups. To capture the making of experience, Polster uses aesthetic registers, primarily fascination. His leitmotiv focuses on the making of experience in the here and now, the intentional charge that directs people in contact with each other (the now for next) and the self-regulating effect this has at the community level. The aesthetic curiosity toward human relationships that has always characterized him empowers, in this publication, a new perspective that represents a necessary epistemological shift in a world in which a pandemic has made us realize how biologically interconnected we are and how no one can save himself alone: change is generated by the possibility of feeling the magic of being together, by the enchantment that is created among people united by a common experience. Thus, even in the area of human relationships, we must shift the focus from the process of organism-environment contact (centered on the dyadic relationship) to the community process, understood as shared movement toward a common goal. This is the triumph of overcoming individualism, expressed through a book that generates action in the reader, not introjection.

Keywords: Enchantment, groups, interconnection, phenomenology, aesthetic gaze.

Psychopathology of the Situation: The Phenomenological and Humanistic Roots of the Text Edited by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and Pietro A. Cavaleri. Preface to the English Edition

Scott D. Churchill

Abstract

The article is the preface to the English edition of the volume "Psychopathology of Situation" edited by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and Pietro A. Cavaleri. The goal of the author, Scott D. Churchill, is to invite the reading of this text, which is an interesting

contribution to the renewal of the classical ideas of Gestalt psychotherapy. The book emphasizes the change taking place in Gestalt thinking which, from its more classically understood "client-centered" foundations, has over time moved increasingly toward a focus on the encounter itself as the primary ground for psychotherapeutic understanding and change.

The author delves into the concept of "situation" by revisiting the thinking of the phenomenologists, Heidegger and Sartre.

Keywords: Situational psychopathology, Gestalt psychotherapy, encounter, situation, phenomenology.