

HELP FOR THE HELPER: THE PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY OF COMPASSION FATIGUE AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA

By: Babette Rothschild with Marjorie Rand

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This is a long-needed book for recognizing and highlighting the importance of the impact of psychotherapy on the therapist. Babette Rothschild explains, defines and analyses in depth the range of different factors which can affect a therapist, even when they are not aware of it.

The aim of the book is to equip all practitioners with tools to increase their awareness of and reduce their vulnerability to phenomena such as burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. She explains these at three levels; that is, brain mechanisms, arousal regulation and clear thinking. A variety of ways to manage these effects and perhaps even prevent their occurrence in the first place, are also provided.

This book is for all therapists, whether they are new to the field of psychotherapy or have much experience in the field. Regardless of the particular therapeutic approach or orientation they may have, all therapists will find invaluable information in the book. Therapists who read her book should not necessarily change their way of working, nor assume that all the strategies suggested would be effective for them in particular. They need to make choices for themselves, according to what proves to be most effective for them and their problem.

Babette Rothschild is very open minded and offers choices and options to the reader. She has obviously devoted much time to understanding the mechanisms involved in producing the problems such as compassion fatigue, etc. In researching into the three different levels of the human brain and body involved in creating the problems (as mentioned above), she has gained much knowledge which she can pass on to others. She has also devised many ways of managing the problems, and she can back up her conclusions with evidence from some pilot research.

The book is clearly written and very readable and practical, and the author invites the reader to experiment and evaluate for themselves the various ideas and strategies she presents. Many examples are provided of therapists under her supervision who had problems of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue or burnout. The dialogue between the therapist seeking help and herself is very revealing and of great practical value both for the therapist involved and the reader.

It makes interesting reading, provides much food for thought and gives invaluable advice and insight into the therapist's problems and ways of preventing them. Even in describing the most complex responses of mind and body, Babette Rothschild manages to present them clearly and simply. The reader is almost tempted to say 'Why didn't I

think of that before?’ In fact, at the beginning of the book, she states that it is all really common sense and her preface is entitled ‘Using common sense’.

Chapter 1 is devoted to defining and explaining the terminology. The problems she describes arise from the relationship between the client and the therapist, and can surprisingly emerge from the therapist’s assets, such as empathy. Empathy is a vital tool for the therapist, but may go too far, and become a risk for the therapist. This can happen particularly in dealing with trauma cases who have post traumatic stress disorder. Figley (1995) wrote about compassion fatigue; and vicarious traumatization was recognized by Terr (1985). Here the therapist vicariously experiences the effects of the client’s trauma, to the extent that it feels as if it happened to them. Burnout is the effect of overload of work, such that the therapist turns negative in their outlook on life. Projective identification, which is part of psychoanalytic theory, and involves the therapist experiencing emotions similar to those the client is experiencing (or they may be blocking off) is also included as a factor in the cause of problems.

In Chapter 2, Babette Rothschild addresses the mechanisms of both body and brain which are involved in the experience of empathy. She rightly emphasizes the role of the central nervous system, the autonomic nervous system and the body in the emotion of empathy. This important mind-body perspective is also seen in her previous books on trauma treatment: *The Body Remembers* (2000) and *The Body Remembers Casebook* (2003). She refers to Antonio Damasio’s ‘Theory of Somatic Markers’ (1994) in which he states that the experience of emotions is composed of body sensations that are elicited in response to certain stimuli, including the stimuli of empathy. These sensations are encoded and stored as implicit memories associated with the stimuli which evoked them. Empathy is therefore more than cognitive and emotional, as it involves body processes. Somatic empathy can therefore be a danger if one is not aware of it. Rothschild provides exercises and guidance that are needed to become aware of it.

Chapter 3 concerns the arousal levels and includes the neurophysiology of arousal. High arousal levels play an important part in compassion fatigue, burnout and vicarious traumatization. Body awareness is necessary to prevent all these conditions. Much practical advice and exercises are given in this chapter, which is not only related to matters within a session, but behaviours and habits outside the session in everyday life. There are also examples of therapists who needed help, with full details of the approach used for their problems. The dialogue between the author and therapist during consultation are also given for the reader’s benefit.

In Chapter 4, skills in thinking clearly and making decisions wisely are described. The author reminds the reader that decision making is not just a cognitive exercise, but involves feelings and emotions too. The neurology of the amygdala, the hippocampus and the pre-frontal cortex, which are involved, are then explained. Babette Rothschild also addresses the problem of self care, and invites the reader to write their own history in order to see where a client may have impacted on them. Being familiar with your own past can maintain clear thinking, and enables you to distinguish your own feelings from the client’s feelings. This is like having a hidden observer or dual awareness which facilitates clear thinking too.

The final chapter, ‘Concluding reflections’ summarizes the main ideas and theories put forward in the previous chapters. One of Rothschild’s most important messages is ‘sit in your own chair’. The therapist needs to be in control of how they process information from the client. To understand pain you do not have to feel it. Objectivity on the part of the therapist is required in order to help the client properly. Increasing awareness and control are emphasized and strategies for attaining this are offered. What is now

required of the reader or therapist is to experiment with the strategies and to evaluate them, and find the best interventions in order to 'keep in your own chair'.

To summarize the main message of the book, Babette Rothschild's final words are important and clear. She states that 'empathy is the connective tissue of good therapy' (p. 208). She adds that it facilitates trust in our clients, helps our insight and intuition and complements our theoretical knowledge. However, 'when the mechanisms of empathy are not in our awareness or under our control, we find ourselves in real trouble. . . . our capacity for empathy can turn back on us in a vengeance' (p. 208).

This book provides the most comprehensive study of these phenomena within a mind-body perspective. In addition, it offers solutions to the problems, and should also be considered an innovative and effective practical guide for all psychotherapists, however inexperienced or experienced they may be. I would recommend it as a necessity on their book shelf.

References

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