

What is Intimacy?

I have a wonderful analogy of Intimacy that I learnt from a therapist that Matt and I were seeing.

She described it as **“in-to-me-you-see”** and it has helped me to delve deeper over the years. This is a key idea for every therapist, but it is very personal and sensitive. At the start, a client can feel guarded to share their intimate feelings with the therapist and this can create a sense of awkwardness and messiness as both the client and the therapist can become entangled as they try to find a safe protective space where honesty is possible. As Totton and Priestman explain when this happens **“there is an aliveness between myself and the person I am working with.”** (pg19).

This theme reflects Rogers’ person-centred approach which explains that the client is at the centre of the therapy and the role of the therapist is to promote that sense of intimacy. Having said that, it is also important to understand that a sense of vulnerability will be experienced by the client when starting therapy. Some may view this phase of vulnerability to **in-to-me-you-see**, as a difficult phase to surpass in order to build the trusting relationships; but at the same time it acts as a gateway to empower the client to look into their deepest vulnerable feelings.

As said by Brene Brown, **“tell the story of who you are with your whole heart”**, where she further explains that vulnerability is absolutely at the core of fear, anxiety and shame with very difficult emotions that we all experience, yet at the same time vulnerability is the cornerstone of courage, resilience, and problem-solving.

Maslow also addresses the needs of the individual through the hierarchy of needs. For example, the first being the physiological side. **“The longer a person grows without food, the hungrier they become”**; although this talks about the first need under the hierarchy, the need for intimacy is very much part of the 3rd of Maslow’s tiers – ‘Love and Belonging’. Assuming the client already has their Physiological and Safety needs met, they will likely seek intimacy if it is missing, and the therapist provides this opportunity. This idea also leans onto the key concepts of Gestalt therapy which promotes a sense of “awareness” for the client. The individual is encouraged to become aware of his or her own feelings and behaviours, and their effect upon his environment in the here and now. However, as such openness again emphasizes a sense of vulnerability, interruptions to contact may entail. The way in which he or she interrupts contact with the present environment is considered to be a significant factor in creating and maintaining dysfunctional patterns of behaviour. Therefore, the therapist should try to get the client to focus on how contact-making occurs or is disturbed and in doing so, new insights can be made and the fluid process of adequate contacting is resumed.

The Process of achieving Intimacy

'When we are trying to be intimate with someone, a good deal of awkwardness, clumsiness and messiness generally ensues' (Totton and Priestman)

Getting intimate is messy, in all walks of life, not least Therapy.

As already shared by Stacey, there is a journey that takes place to develop trust and intimacy. It's a journey of discovery, as client and therapist try to find a safe protective space where honesty is possible.

- How have you built intimate relationships in a social setting? What has been needed?
 - Trust?
 - Sense of equal-ness?
 - Disclosure/sharing?
- How does this differ in the context of Therapy and what do they look like?
 - Can you build trust without equal measure of self-disclosure?
 - Does there need to be equal-ness in the therapeutic relationship?

*'Our wounds become the vehicle through which exploration and illumination occur'.
'Our woundedness and fallibility can be of great use to us in our client work'*

(Totton and Priestman)

- How does this happen? How can our wounds help?
- Does the authenticity that comes with revealing these parts of us, enable greater intimacy / trust, and as a result, provides the environment in which clients feel able to share and explore more freely?

'This requires a lot from us: to be un-defensive and genuinely comfortable with our own limitations' (Totton and Priestman)

Nick Totton and Allison Priestman suggest that, our becoming more aware of and relaxed with our own relational patterns, particularly around the issues of making better, being helpful, being good enough, being seen as good enough etc, are key to us becoming more useful to our clients.

- What are your biggest challenges to achieve this?
- Is this achievable?
- Are you ready to not have all the answers, and at times to *'..feel confused, thrown around and lost'* (Totton and Priestman)? How might this help or hinder the relationship with your client?
- Do you have Needs that might surface during the therapeutic practice and in so doing, affect your effectiveness as someone's therapist?

In the context of Therapy, *'For Therapists, it means a loss of status and an acceptance of fundamental equality with our clients'* (Totton and Priestman). In Gestalt Therapy there is widespread agreement that a characteristic of the Therapist-Client relationship is a non-hierarchical structure, and an emphasis on full and genuine engagement between patient and therapist.

- How do you feel about not being 'The Expert' ?
- Are there instances where the client is looking for an expert? What impact would it have on the relationship to discover that their therapist isn't one?
- Are there instances where the client DOES need an expert? (check out 'Stutz' on Netflix - he has interesting views on this)

The Practice of Grounding

‘We are always interdependent, we are not separate beings, we are all entangled with one another. How can we become more comfortable and discerning about the creative and healthy ways to be entangled? Like trees roots interconnected through the mycelial networks.’ - Nick Totton + Allison Priestman, How To Be A Bad Therapist

It's this particular quote from Totton + Priestman and the imagery of the trees roots as a guide, that links us beautifully to the practice of Grounding. Grounding is a way of mindfully re-centering and connecting ourselves to the present moment and to our own energy. With self trust and consistency, strengthening this muscle could be a particularly supportive tool for us as both therapists and human beings as we navigate intimacy, disclosure, mutuality + enactments. Connecting to our own root force through grounding practices invites us to explore becoming rooted in the body while simultaneously opening, connecting and entangling with others on a deeper, energetic level - creating our own mycelial networks. As Audrey would say, ‘Letting the words fall away...’

Grounding connects us to our own first energy point located in the base of the spine. The Sanskrit name for this energy point is ‘Muladhara’, meaning root and support. Just like a tree, your root is what grounds you to the Earth, creating the foundation on which you build.

‘Maybe you are searching among the branches, for what only appears in the roots ’- Rumi

The root energy point is associated with feelings of safety and security, both physical and metaphysical. This includes basic needs, (Maslow) such as food, water, and shelter and emotional needs. Root energy relates to survival instincts, the fight or flight responses. An imbalance of the root can lead to feeling profoundly insecure, restless,

without energy, this can manifest as physical pain or discomfort in the legs, hips and pelvis area. This imbalance can manifest as anxiety, depression, rage, low self-esteem, resentment, and ultimately a deep fear of connecting with self and with others. Through the gestalt lens of interruptions to contact, an imbalance of the root could show up as desensitising, projecting, confluence or wherever feels most true for you on the cycle.

‘What does it feel like to be grounded? Feeling connected, connected to the Earth. The Earth that is offering abundant support. The energy that allows you to thrive in the presence of this next moment, regardless of content. – ’Ram Dass

There are many different ways to connect to your root and ground yourself; using meditation + visualisation, using the physical senses, using breath work or yoga are just a few of them, with nature forever being our greatest guide.

A personal mindfulness practice can support how we show up authentically in the therapy room and in the world. It is a gentle yet solid way to build awareness and self trust. Grounding can support those of us who identify as empaths or a-sensitive people, as we start to become aware of any moments we may be disconnecting from ourselves and leaning heavily into others energetically, physically + or emotionally. This could lead to burn out, imbalance, exhaustion while also not being for the greatest good for self or others. Equally personal practice can help us to become aware of any moments we may be detaching or blocking connection, leading to built up emotional, physical and mental tension. It’s normal for top dog or inner critic to pipe up when starting to practice, below are some resources for if/when they do ~

Teachers I’ve found for further knowledge of grounding practices are Ram Dass, Angel Kyodo Williams, Adrienne Mischler, Mooji, Thich Nhat Hanh, but you are encouraged to search in your own way, in your own time.

Mantras to Help Strengthen your Root Connection

- I am safe and secure.

- I have deep roots.
- I am grounded.
- I trust
- I'm here
- I am open to all possibilities.

Journal Prompts :

- ~ What does the word grounding mean to you or bring up for you?
- ~ What is your body telling you or not telling you when you connect to your root?
- ~ What external thoughts or judgments are coming up for you in this practice?