

- WESTERN CANADA MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT -

# IMPROVING SKILLS & COMPETENCIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH & EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 24, 2023 – FRIDAY, MAY 26, 2023

Best Western Premier Calgary Plaza Hotel & Conference Centre

1316 33 St NE, T2A 6B6, Calgary, AB

**ROBERT T. MULLER PH.D., C. PSYCH.**

## WORKSHOP #21 & 26

Trauma and the Struggle to Open Up: Relational Strategies to treat  
Challenging Trauma Clients

Day Three | 8:30am - 4:00pm



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## Trauma & the Struggle to Open Up: Relational Strategies to Treat Challenging Trauma Clients\*

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Founding Editor, The Trauma & Mental Health Report

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## TRAUMA AND THE STRUGGLE TO OPEN UP

*From Avoidance to Recovery and Growth*

ROBERT T. MULLER




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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- How trauma shuts you down
  - How?

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- What trauma therapy is:
  - ...a path to help people open up
    - For some, opening up about the trauma
    - For others, open up to life
      - Experience
      - Relationships
      - Their own bodies
      - Their own histories

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

"You have to pass through the trauma, through the biggest pain, to continue normally...(more or less normally)...with life."

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- What trauma therapy is:
  - Phase-based (Herman, 1993)
    - Safety
    - Remembrance & mourning
    - Reconnection
  - Paced... Pacing is critical
    - "simply telling" yields humiliation soon

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- What trauma therapy is:
  - Growthful... post-traumatic growth
    - A reckoning that confronts elemental questions of life
    - Changes to identity
  - Mistake some make re post-traumatic growth:
    - convincing survivors to look on "bright side"
    - looking for "silver lining"
    - "Strength in face of adversity"
    - Such cultural narratives invalidating to survivors

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- What trauma therapy is:
  - For therapist
    - Meaningful work
    - Risky work... trauma clients ↑ risk
    - Uncomfortable work... distressing, triggering

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- What trauma therapy is not:
  - not Cookbook approach to tx
    - Many unpredictables
      - in path to recovery
      - in tx relationship
  - not Infantilizing
    - Some clients seek guru
    - Position of not knowing

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- Why use attachment theory in trauma tx?
  - Trauma affects attachments
    - 3/4 abuse survivors insecurely attached (Muller, 2001)
    - 2/3 general pop. securely attached (van IJzendoorn)
  - Trauma bonding
    - Children protect (even abusive) caregivers

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- Tx relationship fundamental to trauma work...Why?
  - Trauma affects relationships
- Tx relationship can make or break trauma tx
  - In trauma, tx rel. central...navigation is key
  - Case example

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## Overview: Themes covered in workshop

- Tx relationship can make or break trauma tx
  - Bringing rel. into room made possible:
    - Safety in tx rel.
    - Rel. repair
    - Corrective emotional experience

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Family secrecy suppresses trauma stories
  - E.g., Craig Taylor's play

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Why the silence & secrecy??
  - Secrecy protects:
    - From the truth (dangerous)
    - Relationships
    - Image to outsiders
    - Family's/Institution's narrative... stories we tell ourselves
    - Status quo

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Loyalty suppresses trauma stories
  - Family loyalty, institutional loyalty
  - In military.... Military sexual trauma (MST)
    - Group loyalty ↑
    - Secrecy about sexual abuse

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Survivors suppress own trauma stories
  - Use self-deception
    - Rationalize... "Back then, all parents hit their kids."
    - Intellectualize
  - Avoid trauma memories
    - "forget about it"
    - Dissociate
  - Cut-off affect, neutralize memories
    - "yeah but, I wasn't abused"... (Berger)

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Survivors suppress own trauma stories
  - Case of Annette

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Sometimes therapists collude in the silence
  - Mutual avoidance
  - Re-enacts "bystander" dynamic

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## Staying silent about the trauma

- Some survivors don't suppress trauma stories
  - Secure trauma survivors
    - "Earned" secure
    - Can engage in balanced, honest narrative (about traumatic past)
    - Secure attachment rare (1/4) in trauma
    - Case: "Earned Secure"
      - AAI: Asked if rejected as child

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## Opening up about the trauma: A Relational process

- How do trauma stories appear in tx?
  - AAI, brief description
  - Case of Nicholas... mom as "good"

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Well . . . my mother tried to abort me. Oh, the story is actually cute and funny. You see, she and I became very good friends later on. My mom said to me, "I used to jump up and down trying to get rid of you." Well, I just thought that was really funny. Can't you just picture that? . . . Her pregnant and jumping up and down?!

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## Opening up about the trauma: A Relational process

- Trauma stories appear in fragments
  - Notice trauma fragments
- Trauma stories told with ambivalence
  - In part, avoidance; in part, want to open up
  - Survivors only want to stay silent so long
  - Notice ambivalence to face trauma

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## Opening up about the trauma: A Relational process

- Therapist discomfort with client's trauma story
  - Mutual avoidance
  - Shuts client down
  - Enactment... this trauma is bigger than both of us
- Case of Nicholas

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## Opening up about the trauma: A Relational process

- I got drawn into an enactment (mutual avoidance)
  - Notice your discomfort with client's trauma

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## Opening up about the trauma: A Relational process

- Starting to open up stirs dependency, vulnerability
  - When Nicholas "lost it like a baby"
  - Bring tx relationship into room early on
    - What was hard about crying just then?
    - What was hard about crying with me?
    - Socializes client to tx rel. as focus of tx
  - Ask about client hx of opening up to others?
  - Ask about client hx of relying on others?

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Why do client's rush into trauma stories?
  - "This secret is a burden"
  - "Telling will fix everything"
  - "If I don't tell now, I never will"
  - "Therapist seems nice enough" (defenses are down)

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Problem:
  - Too much, too soon.... overwhelming, humiliating
  - Tx rel. isn't ready
  - Case of Anaya

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Containment first
  - Confidence in tx relationship
    - Is it a holding environment?
  - Confidence therapist can hold my trauma
    - "Will my trauma overwhelm/frighten her?"
    - "Is my trauma too powerful?"
    - Case of David Morris

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Containment first
  - Confidence therapist can hold me
    - "Will you abandon me?" (if I push you away)
    - "Will you punish me?" (if I push limits)
    - "Will you give in?" (if I cross boundaries)
  - Is therapist capable in regard to client?

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- When client's rush into trauma stories:
  - Containment first
  - Case of Canadian pilot

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Containment: Slow the process down
  - Honor the telling
    - Refocus from "trauma details" to telling of story
      - Is this the first time they've shared this?
      - What does it mean to them... having shared this (secret)?
      - Having shared, what are they feeling now?
        - If "relieved," pay attention to varying feelings thru the week

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Containment: Slow the process down
  - Honor the telling
    - Convey awareness of story's magnitude
      - "I imagine this has had a big impact on you"
    - Convey sense of your responsibility
      - "This is an important story you told me"
      - "What does it mean to you... having shared this with me?"
      - Conveys you're taking story seriously

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Containment: Slow the process down
  - Flag the topic for therapy
    - Unpacking the story will be part of our work
    - "Let's flag this as s.t. we'll explore together"
    - Engage the 'low burner'
      - Story is simmering, not at rolling boil just yet

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Containment: Slow the process down
  - Revisit the topic soon
    - Don't let weeks pass (elephant in room)
    - Bring it into the room (that session or next)
    - Conveys "your trauma isn't too much for us"
  - Back to Canadian pilot

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- When the therapist rushes into trauma stories
- Back to case of David Morris

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Rescue fantasy: Beware the quick fix
  - Managed care pulls for quick fix
  - Fast food culture pulls for quick fix
    - "Faster is better"
  - Clients pull for quick fix
    - Want to feel better

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

### ■ Rescue fantasy: Beware the quick fix

- Therapists pull for quick fix
  - Hard to see people suffer
  - Sense that stakes are high
  - Client: "Your my last resort"
  - Therapist may take charge
    - Tells the client what to do
    - Disempowers client

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## How to Pace the Process of Opening up

- Remember:
  - Containment before opening up
  - Trauma work takes time
  - Pace the process

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

- Grounding strategies great start.... but:
  - Help dysregulation, not safety in tx relationship
  - No safety in tx relationship? .....no tx!

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

- Validating traumatic experiences, conveys:
  - "I get it, your trauma was real"
  - Empathic & grounding stance
  - Builds trust

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

### Validating traumatic experiences

- Problem: Many don't accept validation so readily
  - "I'm no victim" identity
    - Most survivors shun "abuse" label (Berger, 1988)
    - Case of Tony Rodgers, raped as young boy

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

### Validating traumatic experiences

- Problem: Many don't accept validation so readily
  - Many invalidate own traumatic histories
    - "I was weak"
    - "I deserved what I got"
    - "I should figure this out myself"

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

### Validating traumatic experiences

- What to do?
  - View validation as a therapeutic process
    - Validate, yes... but don't shove validation on clients
    - Be attuned, go at client's pace
    - Some need time to come to accept validation
  - Be transparent with trauma terminology
    - "Rape" "died" "sexual abuse"

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

### Validating traumatic experiences

- What else to do?
  - Pay attention to client's reaction to trauma language
    - Float trial balloons
    - Do they bristle? Feel relief?
    - Notice aloud, "Is that hard to say, 'sexual abuse?'"
    - "As we discuss xyz, what are you feeling right now?"
  - In time, "trauma" becomes part of survivor's identity

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

- Honesty in tx relationship
  - Isn't that obvious?...
  - Easier said than done
  - We get drawn into dishonest enactments
    - Secret-keeping
    - Manipulations
  - Dishonesty permeates trauma... & we get pulled in

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

- Prioritizing basic safety needs
  - Hard to do trauma tx in middle of trauma
    - Trauma may be ongoing
  - Basic safety first
  - Easier said than done
    - Basic safety can take a while
    - Can't get someone to leave abusive partner

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

- Self-regulation brings safety
  - Working with Triggers
  - Case of Edmund Metatawabin

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

Self-regulation brings safety

- Triggers
  - Fast connection to trauma
  - Highly idiosyncratic
  - Useful trauma language
    - Explains, not blames
    - Not client "acting ridiculous"
    - Not client "over-reacting"

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

Self-regulation brings safety

- How to Use triggers... Help client:
  - ...to Notice their triggers
    - Journaling helps

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

Self-regulation brings safety

- How to Use triggers... Help client:
  - ...to Get to know their triggers
    - "What was going on for me just then?"
    - "Why would I be feeling this way now?"
    - "What [in the other] was I reacting to?"
      - Neediness, sadness.... bossiness, anger
    - "What [in the relationship] was I reacting to?"
      - Closeness, validation.... abandonment, rejection
  - Mentalize internal experience

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

Self-regulation brings safety

- How to Use triggers:
  - What in the tx relationship were they reacting to?
    - "I hate it when you're so nice!"
      - DANGER UP AHEAD....(manipulation, exploitation)
      - Empathy can be triggering
    - Ask yourself: "What about tx relationship triggered her?"
    - Ask client same question
      - Bring tx relationship into the room

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## Safety strategies in trauma-tx relationship

Self-regulation brings safety

- Grounding techniques
  - Anchor to the present, reality
  - Activate sensory experience
  - Turn client's attention to the present
    - Any of the senses can be used

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

- What activates *your* attachment system?

Private written exercise (10 minutes)

- Think of a specific time you were behaviourally out-of-control or shut down (relative to you) in a relationship context?
  - What behaviour of the other were you responding to?
  - What were you thinking/feeling?
  - What brought resolution?

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

- Countertransference in trauma tx
  - Trauma raises many feelings in us
    - Based on our own attachment hx
  - Feeling vs. acting-on
  - Notice Countertransference

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

- Countertransference patterns
  - Re-enact trauma dynamics in tx relationship
  - Victim/perpetrator/rescuer-bystander dynamic
  - Common patterns we fall into
  - Something has triggered us

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- Trying to "rescue"...rescue fantasy
  - Therapist as "rescuer," client as "victim"
  - Therapist over-identifies with client as "victim"

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- Rescue fantasy
  - Trying to "fix" the client
    - Therapist works harder than client
      - Notice your affect, body, non-verbal behavior
    - "Telling" client what to do
    - "Telling" client to stop seeing abuser... Problem:
      - Disempowers client
      - Client leaves tx

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

#### ■ Rescue fantasy

- "Indulging" the client (b/c you feel sorry for them)
  - "special rules" for this client
  - Loosening time limits (when you normally don't)
  - No charge for cancellation (when you normally don't)
  - Emailing at all hours
  - Problem: weak limits feel unsafe

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

#### ■ Rescue fantasy

- Lax boundaries with client
  - Becoming client's "friend"
  - Lots of self-revelation
    - "Is my therapist capable?"
    - "Is my therapist more 'messed up' than me?"
  - Problem: Lax boundaries feel unsafe

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

#### ■ Rescue fantasy

- Feeling contempt for perpetrator
  - Therapist "hates" perpetrator/non-protective parent
  - Over-identifying client as "victim"
  - Problem: Client may have mixed feelings toward parent
    - Case: "To a Safer Place"

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- When we feel "bullied"/hurt
  - Therapist as "victim," client in "perpetrator" role
  - Therapist feelings:
    - "afraid" of client's aggression
    - anxious
  - What's going on?..... Client self-protectiveness

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- When we feel "bullied"/hurt
  - "I'll hurt/reject you before you can hurt/reject me"
    - Client feeling dependent?..... decides to drop out
    - b/c of client fear of vulnerability
    - Self-protective
  - "I'll get angry at you before you can hurt me"
    - "I've had to fight for everything!"
    - Self-protective

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- When we "bully" the client
  - Therapist in "perpetrator" role, client as "victim"
  - Happens with perfectly good clinicians
  - Something has been triggered in us

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx Countertransference patterns

- When we "bully" the client
  - Therapist "gets tough" on client.... when feeling:
    - Frustrated, anxious
      - E.g., multiple suicide threats
    - Disappointed
      - E.g., lack of compliance, progress
    - Incompetent, "out-of-control"
      - E.g., following boundary violations
  - Problem: client ends up feeling hurt, like a failure
  - Notice your anxiety, aggression, disappointment ....

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx Countertransference patterns

- When we "bully" the client
  - Feeling "hate" (contempt for) client
  - Frustration, loss of perspective, loss of empathy
  - "Hate in the countertransference" Winnicott (1947)
  - Case

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx Countertransference patterns

- When we "give up" on client
  - Therapist in "bystander" role, client as "victim"
  - We become resigned, complacent
  - Compassion fatigue

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- When we "give up" on client
  - Failing to challenge client
    - Don't call out client on self-destructive behavior
    - Lose faith in client's ability to change
    - Case

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## Navigating the Relationship in Trauma Tx

### Countertransference patterns

- When we "give up" on client
  - Feeling "sorry for" client
    - Over-validate, sympathize
    - Therapist rationalizes: "I'm being supportive"
    - PROBLEM: Collusion doesn't help
      - No growth
      - Re-enacts non-protective bystander

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

- Traumatic re-enactments common in trauma tx
  - We act on feelings
  - E.g., any of the previous examples:
    - Rescue fantasy
    - "Getting tough" on client
    - Feeling "bullied" by client, etc...
  - Intersection of client's & therapist's attachment hx
  - Navigating them is key

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

- Traumatic re-enactments common in trauma tx
  - Case of Nigel....
    1. Early in tx
    2. Good tx connection (months)
  - Tx relationship starts to shift (p. 148)

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

- Problem: Enactments can lead to tx ruptures
- Why?
  - Enactments feel unsafe
    - Boundary violations (even small) feel dangerous
    - Containment compromised
  - Tx now crossed into using e. o. for unmet needs
    - E.g., Therapist as "guru," with trauma client
  - Tx neutrality has been compromised
- Case of Nigel (p. 148)

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

- So....
- Enactments....
  - Inevitable in trauma tx
  - Sneak up on you
  - Can lead to tx ruptures
  - The trick is using them in the tx

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

#### ■ Why do we repair a ruptured alliance?

- If not, no safety
- Big opportunity for growth. Teaches:
  - Relationships can be repaired
  - Relationships are work
  - Relationships aren't doomed

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

#### ■ How to repair a ruptured alliance

- Notice the enactment
  - Adopt self-reflective stance... look inside
  - Mentalize your experience with client
    - "What got activated in me?" "Why then?"
    - "What's going on for me that I'm doing/feeling things I normally don't?"
    - "How did my needs activate client?"
- Requires curious, nonjudgmental stance

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

#### ■ How to repair a ruptured alliance

- Validate client's experience
  - Validation = relational first response
  - Listen, empathize, don't judge
  - Be genuine, can't fake it
    - This is why you need to look inside
- Ask yourself:
  - "How did I hurt my client?"
  - "How did I activate my client?"

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - Validate client's experience
    - Stay in here-and-now
    - If no validation, client feels uncontained
  - Validation ≠ collusion
    - Goal isn't to agree with client
    - Understand client's subjective experience

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - Validate client's experience
    - With Nigel....

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - Provide containment re the conflict
    - Why?... present moment still feels unsafe
    - Name the conflict, frame it as "conflict"
      - "Conflict like this can be difficult"
      - "It's hard to be in conflict"
  - Frame it as relational/process... part of relationships
    - "So how do we want to address this conflict?"
    - "This conflict is hard, but we can figure it out together"

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - Provide containment re the conflict
    - Why name it as "conflict"?
      - Explains what's *not* going on between us
        - This *isn't* end of relationship
        - This *isn't* betrayal, manipulation
        - This *isn't* unbearable
      - It's honest
        - We *are* having a conflict
        - Conflict is messy, difficult
    - Sitting with conflict helps client grow from conflict

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - Help client *mentalize*: Unpacking conflict
    - Only *after* we look inside, validate, contain
    - Mentalizing:
      - Invite client to explore motivations
        - What triggered them?
      - Adopt curious stance
        - "I'm wondering what was going on for me/you?"
      - Bring in emotion
        - "What are you feeling *right now*, as we discuss this?"

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair

### Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - Help client *mentalize*: Unpacking conflict
    - Mentalizing with Nigel
      - "What about what I said triggered you most?"
      - "After reading my email, what'd you worry I was saying to you?"
      - "How did it feel, to *finally* tell me off?"

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## Relationship Goes off the Rails: Enactment, Rupture, Repair Repairing a ruptured alliance

- How to repair a ruptured alliance
  - So...Unpacking conflict in trauma tx...
    - ...is a process
    - ...takes place in the here-and-now
    - ...always stirring
    - ...can bring posttraumatic growth
  - Nigel cont'd

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Our Online (and Free) Mental Health  
Magazine:

### The Trauma & Mental Health Report

<http://trauma.blog.yorku.ca/>

--Google: Trauma and mental health report

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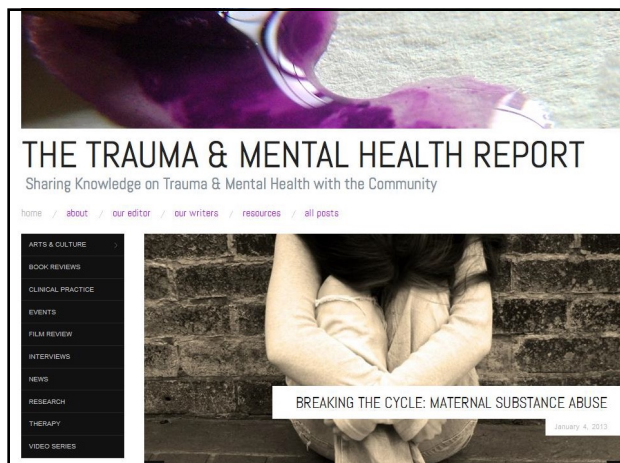
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**Book Titles:****Muller, Robert T. (2018).**

Trauma &amp; the Struggle to Open Up: From Avoidance to Recovery &amp; Growth.

New York: W.W. Norton.

**Muller, Robert T. (2010).**

Trauma &amp; the Avoidant Client: Attachment-Based Strategies for Healing.

New York: W.W. Norton.

Place orders online through:  
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Online Magazine:

The Trauma &amp; Mental Health Report

York University (Psychology)

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