

CHALLENGING CLIENTS' METAPERCEPTIONS IN THE IMMEDIATE HERE-AND-NOW

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Another example of challenging clients' metaperceptions in the immediate therapeutic relationship comes from work with Ross, a young man who came to therapy with a number of issues, amongst them a desire to establish longer term romantic relationships. Ross described himself as an 'utter failure' in relationships--his longest relationship with a man had been less than three months--and in the early stages of therapy we explored this, coming to recognise his tendency to withdraw from intimate contact with others. Another theme that emerged in the early stages of the therapeutic work was Ross's feelings that he was obliged to present a cheery, up-beat disposition to others, even when he was feeling deeply depressed.

The following extract comes from about nine months into the therapeutic work. In the weeks prior to the session, Ross has cancelled a number of appointments. These were all for very good reasons but, through supervision, I was becoming increasingly aware of the parallels that seemed to exist between Ross's withdrawing from intimate relationships and his withdrawal from me. At the start of the session, therefore, I invited Ross to reflect on how it felt to have missed these sessions and whether or not it said anything about where he was at in our relationship. In response, Ross talked about days when he feels that he really does not want to see anyone--including myself. 'I'm someone who really needs their own space,' he said. At this point, something really struck me and I sat forward:

Mick: I hear what you are saying about needing your own space and that feels absolutely right, absolutely important for you. But I have a sense that the real challenge for you is to find a way of having your own space, whilst also being able to have the intimate relationships that you've said that you really want. Because I have a sense that, with us and with other people, you withdrawing into your own space sometimes means that the relationship runs down and it fragments, whereas I wonder if there is a way of you being able to have relationships where you can have your own space, whilst at the same time keeping an intimate relationship going.

Ross: I'm thinking about the way that I sometimes really enjoy being around people in a group but just being quiet. Like I might be around people but read a magazine or something [*Ross talks about this further*]. Is that the kind of thing you mean?

Mick: Yeah... I guess so... like being able to be with people without being big and bubbly but also not entirely withdrawing from the relationship.

Ross: ...Um... I'm just noticing that I'm feeling quite distracted: a bit absent and withdrawn. It's like I am a shell and just going through the motions. I'm not sure what that's about. Maybe I felt a bit stupid when you said what you said earlier. I don't know. Also, I dunno, maybe... I think I get a bit bored by people, not very interested for very long... I dunno. I feel bad about being distracted. Like you're sitting there and thinking, 'Why isn't he being present?' 'He should be present!' Like you are going to criticise me for it.

Ross's response here reveals his metaperception that, when he feels distracted and absent, others will notice that, and feel critical towards him for it (the myth of self-transparency, as above). In fact, it had taken me entirely by surprise--I was much more caught up in my own anxieties about whether I had said something really stupid or not--and decided to challenge his metaperception by disclosing my experiencing.

- Mick:* And what's really interesting to me is that I had absolutely no idea that you were distracted just now! You seemed-- you do seem, totally engaged to me. I mean, maybe this is just about me not being very perceptive, but--
And it just make me wonder whether you work really hard in relationships to stay engage, and feel that if you're not engaged then you have to literally withdraw because people will criticise you if you mentally withdraw. But, actually, my guess is that a lot of the time you could mentally withdraw and people often wouldn't notice. Maybe you have more scope to mentally withdraw from people than you imagine....
- Ross:* The thing is, it's so much harder work... putting on this face, it is really hard work. It would be much easier to be withdrawn.

Ross seemed to have a deep fear that, if he did withdraw, and was seen to withdraw, others would be deeply critical of him. I challenged him to give this a go.

- Mick:* So how would that look like? What would it be like to be here right now and to be withdrawn?
- Ross:* [*Ross slows down dramatically*]. I don't know... I guess... maybe looking round at the pictures on the walls [*he looks at the pictures*]... maybe sitting like this [*Ross curls up in his chair, and talks quietly for a few minutes*].
- Mick:* And how does it feel to be doing that, to be being that distracted, withdrawn person here?
- Ross:* Really rude! God, awful!!

Again, there is an opportunity to challenge Ross's metaperception.

- Mick:* And I guess what's interesting to me is that, sitting here, it feels absolutely fine... absolutely fine. Like, I guess the fact that I know that you're needing to withdraw and that that's where you are at makes it easier, but even if I was not aware of that, I'd probably be thinking, 'Mm... I wonder what is going on with Ross.' Not, 'That's so rude!'

What emerges from the work with Ross is his tendency to work extremely hard with others--to put on a bright, cheery front and to strive incessantly to meet others' needs--such that being around others is often an enormous effort, particularly when he is feeling down. Consequently, Ross often feels that he needs to withdraw from relationships; and thus does not get the support, affection or acceptance he often most needs. Much of this seems to be based on Ross's metaperceptual assumption that, when he is feeling less than cheery and present, others will perceive him in a very negative light. This extract, then, demonstrates two instances when I have challenged this metaperception. First, I challenge his assumption that others can 'read his mind' and know when he is not present; and, later, I suggest that, even if others are aware of this, they might not be too critical of it.