

Transcript of Video: The Empathy Mistake

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Are you making the mistake that leads to secondary trauma for helping professionals?

Hello, I'm Arianna Gray creator of The Counselor Burnout Cure: Simple Secrets for Blocking Burnout, and in this video I'm going share a mistake that fuels secondary trauma, and how to avoid it with a Simple Secret that will help you block this huge source of burnout.

One of our Tribe of Helping Professionals recently asked me: "...how can we be empathetically present for our clients without being traumatized by their stories?"

What a great question. Every helping professional I've ever talked to struggles with this sometimes.

I remember sitting in session with a client who started to tell me a traumatic story. I KNEW it was going to be traumatic because it started with a description his her parents holding her upside-down by the ankles over a stairwell.

In that moment I suddenly felt my stomach tighten, my breathing get really shallow, and my eyes lose some focus. Some part of me did NOT want to hear this and feel how awful it was. AND some part of me DID want to hear this and support my client. I felt the details begin to flood in to me as I struggled to understand what this would feel like to live through, and to hear what she was saying to me. I started to feel flooded with my responses, her responses, and the little child inside of me being horrified and afraid that these things happen in the world. I did not know how to support me and in that moment.

And THAT was my mistake.

The mistake most of us make is thinking that we have to choose between being empathetically present for our clients OR protecting ourselves emotionally from getting trashed.

But we don't have to! We can do BOTH! And the secret is WHERE we put our boundaries and focus DURING that traumatic story, and the ORDER in which we attend to our clients and our SELF.

With a simple shift YOU don't have to choose between your self and your client.

What I figured out (with a lot of trial and error) is a Simple Secret I call "The Bubble Boundary." FIRST it creates a boundary and a focus that deflect the trauma from going all the way in to my core, while still allowing me to be empathetically present with my

client; and THEN it allows me to care for myself and my OWN responses with my full attention.

Here's what I do:

1) As soon as I'm aware that some difficult story is going to be shared, in my mind I imagine putting my sensitive inner child "behind" me in a safe spot so SHE is not the one driving the car.

2) I envision a "Bubble" that goes all the way around me. This bubble allows me to see and hear perfectly, and to pay deep attention to what my client is sharing and how THEY felt in the situation. BUT it STOPS all awful content at the boundary. It just stops it right there, and it falls to the ground in front of me. I know it's there, but I am NOT taking it INTO me. I am NOT Feeling how their experience would feel to ME. I am NOT thinking about what it would have meant for me. All my focus is on the CLIENT'S experience and what it was like for them, really GETTING how THEY felt, without engaging in my own process. I am fully present FOR THEM, with the painful content is still available as information to me, but I am not taking it IN to my core and trying to process it.

This allows me to focus on my awareness of them and an empathetic connection to how THEY feel (and this is KEY) it's about THEM! NOT my reaction
THEN

3) Immediately after the session, I turn my focus on ME and my reaction. THIS is where I unpack my response and care for myself. Even if I just take 5 minutes to do this, it makes a HUGE difference.

Some things I might do include taking five minutes to just journal stream-of-consciousness about the experience; or have an inner dialogue with the little girl inside of me and ask her how she is feeling and give her compassion and empathy (without trying to fix anything right now, just listening and offering comfort); or going to a colleague and asking for five minutes to share the experience and regroup. This is just the immediate triage, and it's VITAL. Then I follow it up later by spending more time doing any of these activities, walking in nature, or talking with my own therapist about how it impacted me.

By using this Simple Secret and creating this "bubble boundary" that stops me from engaging with the material in the moment, AND keeping my FOCUS on my client's experience (rather than my own internalizing of the story) I am able to stay connected to my client, THEN (and this is BIG) when I am out of the session with my client I CONSCIOUSLY turn my focus to my OWN experience, and I am empathetically present for my SELF having my emotional response and self-soothing (without having to still be caring for my client). This eliminates the conflict of whether I'm suppose to care for my client or myself: we BOTH are cared for, first one, then the other.

So the Simple Secret is This:

1) Create the "Bubble Boundary" around myself

2) Keep the Focus on the client FIRST

3) THEN Unpack my Feelings IMMEDIATELY after the session, if only for five minutes

This simple secret has been amazingly effective for me, and my clients report feeling like I'm "really there" for THEM.

This is a kind of Counseling Aikido, and it's a HUGE help. Knowing how and when to take in information AND take care of our clients AND our selves, blocks this potential source of burnout. I invite you to try this the next time someone starts to share a traumatic (or even just distressing) story. And let me know what you think. Leave a comment below about how it works for you, or what else YOU do that helps.

This Simple Secret can make a huge difference in Blocking Burnout in your life.

If you're watching this video anywhere other than AriannaGray.com come on over and opt-in to get more FREE Simple Secrets for Blocking Burnout as well as the inside track to upcoming Inspiration and Renewal events for our Tribe of helping professionals.

Thank you for the work that you do. And remember, you really ARE making a difference.