



Somatic Countertransference in Trauma Work

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Over the last 25 years, trauma work—more than any other aspect of our field—has shown us the limitations of purely verbal ‘talking therapy’, and neuroscience has helped us understand why awareness of the body is crucial in attachment and affect regulation. In PTSD, by definition, the client is dissociated from the trauma which is experienced as terrifying and overwhelming sensorimotor affect, mostly in the body. It is impossible for the therapist to function reliably as an attuned regulatory object without being acutely aware of both the bodies in the therapeutic relationship—the client’s and her own.

Traditionally, psychoanalysts might have used the term ‘somatic countertransference’ to point to these aspects of our internal experience as therapists. What that means in practice is being constantly exposed to—what feels like—unmanageable intensities, picked up by subliminal, non-verbal channels and via our ‘mirror neurons’, our autonomic nervous systems and other spontaneous body mind processes.

Vicarious traumatisation is recognised as one of the dangers of such acute but necessary exposure. How can we process the information inherent in our ‘somatic countertransference’ so it becomes useful and transformative, both for our own survival and well-being and that of the client and their process?

This workshop will aim to address these questions and other related issues through an integration of theoretical discussion and experiential exercises. Morit’s aim is to support therapists from all modalities in accessing the non-verbal communication through offering some practical techniques that will enhance and expand the therapist’s existing way of working.

Morit Heitzler (www.heizler.co.uk) is an experienced relational body psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer with a private practice in Oxford. She has been teaching on various training courses in the UK and abroad and regularly leads workshops and groups. Through her work at the Traumatic Stress Service of the Maudsley Hospital, and The Oxford Stress and Trauma Centre, Morit has gained experience in treating a wide variety of PTSD symptoms and traumatized clients, including refugees and asylum seekers. She has developed an integrative approach to trauma work, incorporating—within an overall relational perspective—Body Psychotherapy, attachment theory, EMDR, modern neuroscience and Family Constellations.