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Working with Psychosis: A Paradox of Relatedness

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Learning Goal:

To show how psychotherapists' experiences of working with psychosis affects the process of establishing a therapeutic relationship.

Abstract Text:

The psychotic patient, hindered by their unresolved primary narcissism, frequently struggles to relate to others, including their psychotherapist. This does not imply that there is no attempt at relating, but rather that the attempt does not seem to acknowledge the full existence of the psychotherapist as other. If the patient's attempt at relating is missed, they are abandoned to the dread of their separation and loneliness. Psychotherapists see the process of establishing some form of relationship with their patient as a key component of a viable therapeutic endeavour – a need that is often driven by narcissism in some way. The point at which the psychotic patient and the psychotherapist meet marks the beginnings of relatedness disturbed by conflicting needs and wishes, creating a paradox of relatedness. In this paper, psychodynamic psychotherapists' accounts of engaging therapeutically with psychosis are used to highlight therapists' experiences of this paradox of relatedness. This dynamic is looked at through the lenses of Freud's formulations of primary narcissism, and Kernberg's understanding of narcissism.

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