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We're All in this Together

Most therapists work hard to maintain appropriate boundaries with clients. Many of us have heard stories of the “over-sharing” therapist who talks too much about his or her personal life, leaving the client feeling lost and unsure of how or if they can make good use of the time. In clinical meetings we often discuss the valuable uses of self-disclosure and the importance of timing: not saying too much too soon but being able to interject a meaningful detail about one’s life experience when we assess that the knowledge would benefit the client.

The novel coronavirus has changed all that. We can’t sit back in the safety and security of our therapists’ chairs, listening with compassion and objectivity to our clients’ struggles with isolation, fear of loss, separation from loved ones and the mundane facts of everyday life: where will I be able to buy toilet paper? Now I’ve got to do my own manicure for the first time! Oh no! We’re all in this together. Many therapy sessions – all virtual now, of course – begin with a client asking “So how are YOU doing?” Not the way we normally start a session! And there’s no way any of us would take that simple question and turn it around in the way we might have done in the past by asking a question to the question, such as, “What makes you curious about that?” No, these days, we’ve got to find a simple and ideally brief answer that says something authentic about how we’re doing. And then deftly shift the focus back to the client and what they need to discuss that particular day.

Starting out as a technology skeptic, I’ve been surprised to discover how much I’m enjoying Zoom therapy sessions. For one thing, I feel grateful to be able to continue working and seeing my clients in this highly stressful time. Even when I’m exhausted (and everyone agrees virtual sessions are more exhausting than in-person!) the gratitude never entirely leaves my awareness. At the same time, I’m also aware that many of the manifestations of anxiety and depression that we typically address in therapy are plaguing us on the other side of the couch. Anticipatory anxiety: what if this happens? What if that happens? I often guide clients back to the present moment to help them quell such future-oriented anxious thoughts. But I can’t do that so successfully now; none of us can.

Catastrophizing is another common anxiety symptom, one that I’ve prided myself on rarely falling victim to. But in these quarantine days I too find myself imagining a scary future, worst case scenarios, our lives becoming unrecognizable in a kind of apocalyptic landscape. What? My inner therapist (who’s often asleep on the job these days) tells me to snap out of it, be realistic – not pessimistic! Then I look out one of the windows in my apartment and see so many

people now wearing face masks and the street scene does in fact look like something from a sci-fi movie.

Poor attention span also seems to be a common side-effect of spending countless days cut off from the normal activities of our lives. I find myself starting to read an article in the newspaper (yes, I still read an actual paper newspaper) or a book review and within minutes, my mind is wandering and I'm turning the page to something else, leaving the thing that had caught my eye unfinished. I return to it again later and sometimes I'm able to plow through, sometimes actually recapturing the enjoyment of reading I've experienced since childhood. Luckily, doing the work we do isn't challenging in this way: having the active participation of another person, albeit on a screen, keeps me engaged; I don't have to rely solely on internal motivation – my clients keep me involved and motivated.

Many people are talking about mood swings, not necessarily the most dramatic kind, but being aware that one day or part of a day they're feeling "okay," able to get work done, able to feel reasonably confident in their ability to cope and then the next day, or later that night, their mood darkens, they feel lethargic and less able to imagine an optimistic outcome or even being able to manage the uncertain future we have in front of us. When I'm zooming from one therapy session to another, feeling inspired by the willingness and intentionality of my clients to keep the work going, to talk about family dynamics, relationship challenges, issues with self-esteem, the bedrock of psychotherapy, my mood is on the upswing. In the silence of an evening, after all the work is done, I may find my mood drifting downward. Time to peruse social media; time for Netflix – ideally something on Comedy Central (John Mulaney is a new favorite of mine) or to find an engrossing documentary like "Tiger King;" time to talk with my adult children or a close friend, not knowing when we'll see each other in person again.

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