

# The Human Side of Psychotherapy: Love and Courage

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Shackled still by our medical model origins, we psychodynamic psychotherapists continue to argue over any number of logical-positivistic themes related to the transformational process. Is the therapeutic field a one-person or two-person psychology? Should psychotherapists practice neutrality or become dynamic participants in the process? Does projective identification exist?

While these debates rage on – helpful as they are for communicating about our work – the experiences of those who consult us exist on a completely different level. In fact, the difference between our theoretical concepts and the experiences of our patients is *enormous*. While we clinicians carry these technical issues in our minds, those who seek help from us are most concerned with two extremely non-technical, highly subjective matters – love and courage.

If you think about it, we psychotherapists spend our days listening to love stories – lack-of-love stories, loss-of-love stories, fear-of-love stories, longing-for-love stories. In one recent morning, for example, I heard one woman express her ambivalence regarding her love for her husband; another was experiencing terror of trusting others after having been assaulted; a young man worked on his fears about dating; and a fourth person, an older man, weighed the responsibility of marrying a woman who already had four children. Love was the primary theme in each of these sessions.

As I looked further, it was difficult to find a single exception to the centrality of love in patients' experiences. Individuals who have serious mental illnesses, like Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder, tend to feel betrayed by their own bodies; they too most commonly seek help with their various relationships, which often have been seriously compromised by their mental states. Those with medical illnesses face the loss of the functioning of their own bodies; their debilitation often makes them more aware of the importance of love in their lives. Trauma always involves betrayal, so typically a distrust of love follows from it. Other painful subjective experiences, like loss, grief, sadness, rage, and envy are all, in one way or another, related to that most common and central of human emotions – love.

And these lovelorn individuals who seek our help usually end up equally concerned with courage. Courage emerges, almost as a partner to love, as patients grapple with unrequited love, unavailable love, impossible love, conflicted love, lost love, and threatened love. Can they find the courage to name and face these challenges – all of which are an inevitable part of any life that dares let love in? Are they willing to take the risks that love entails? Much of psychotherapy involves helping individuals find the courage to view their love-situations with greater clarity, to confront others, to let go of impossible situations, to face loss they've been avoiding.

Central as they are to human experience, love and courage stubbornly defy efforts at technical characterization. Concepts like libido, cathexis, or attachment fail miserably in describing or explaining the experience of love. Finding professional terminology to capture the uniquely human quality of courage proves equally difficult. Resistance has likely been the most common theoretical phrase to explain a lack of courage, yet it, too, somehow misses the mark. These two common elements of human experience –

love and courage – are so amazingly complex, so layered and nuanced. They are at once universal and highly individualized. Any effort to reduce these profound themes of subjectivity to logical-positivistic categories is doomed to failure.

We of course need to continue to work on the evolution of psychoanalytic theory. It provides us with a way of understanding the transformational process; it allows us tools for communicating with one another; it offers metaphors useful for training those new to our field. But it has grave limits. Sartre once wrote that “to label me is to destroy me.” We should, as the British say, “mind the gap” – the immense gap between theory and experience. Theory never does justice to the living experience of those who consult us. And it is that human experience, the world of love and courage and more, in which we are most sacredly entrusted.