

Your Authentic Therapist guide

Real tips to help you become
more authentic in the therapy room

NADENE VAN DER LINDEN

2021

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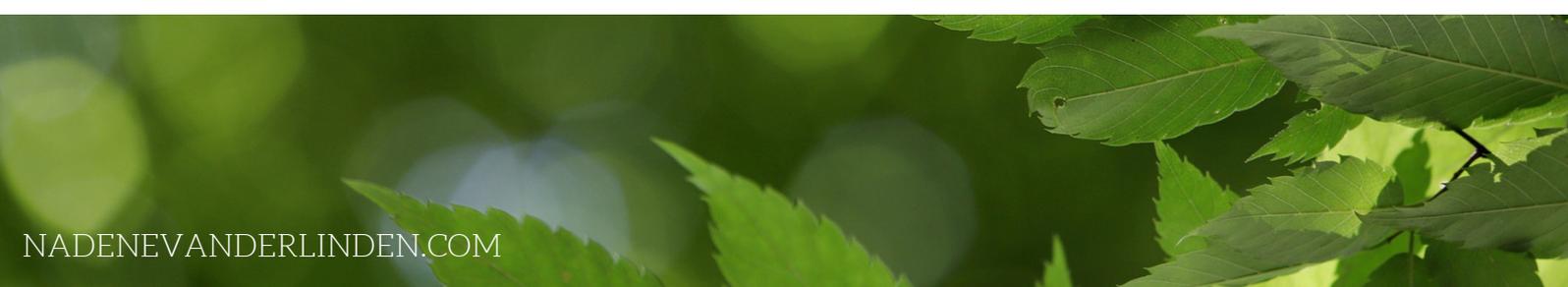
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Tips to become a more authentic therapist

Increasing your authenticity as a therapist helps contribute to your confidence and ability to thrive as a therapist. It's a difficult job without being yourself and trying to fit a therapist's mould. In recent years vulnerability and authenticity have been tied together but the good news, you don't have to use self-disclosure of a personal kind to be authentic.

Here are my key tips.

- Be warm and responsive. Do not leave long silences.
- Stop believing that your verbalisations will stop a client expressing themselves. Not feeling seen or reassured of your connection is more likely to make clients hide from you than your vocal insertions (of course I am not talking about therapists talking about themselves in a self-aggrandizing or reassurance seeking way)
- Stand in the way of your clients' inner critic and don't allow your clients critic to abuse themselves in front of you. Show them you care enough to protect them and model how to use a compassion and the make it stop in session
- Use appropriate self-disclosure to allow clients see you are "real" and not a perfect person. For examples of appropriate self-disclosure see the next page.



Guidelines for authentic self-disclosure

1. Self-disclosure has to be purposeful and boundaried to be helpful to clients.

2. Self-disclosure does not have to be personal details. It can be how you feel in that moment hearing the client's material for example:

"oh yes that would make me angry too" in response to a client's story of someone stealing their lunch at work or "parenting is hard isn't it, I really struggle to stay calm with my kids sometimes". It can be owning up to missing things if you were temporarily distracted "sorry, could you say that again, I got a bit distracted by something I have to do that I'm not looking forward to doing after work today" "sorry I yawned, I had a bad night and am tired"

3. If you do an exercise in session with a client, you may like to share something about your experience of the exercise. I often do an exercise where I do a polyvagal ladders map. When I do this I will share that I move up and down the ladder and that while it may seem to the client that I am always in ventral vagal as that is how I present in session, I have my own triggers that send me down the ladder into sympathetic and dorsal vagal responses.

3. If you share aspects of your own healing journey with clients it can be helpful but only if you have made sense of your own narrative on that issue. It should never be done for the purpose of clarifying your own narrative or strengthening your healing.

For more on how to be an authentic therapist, I recommend Michiel van Vreeswijk's chapter in "Creative Methods for Schema Therapy (2020)

When not to use self-disclosure

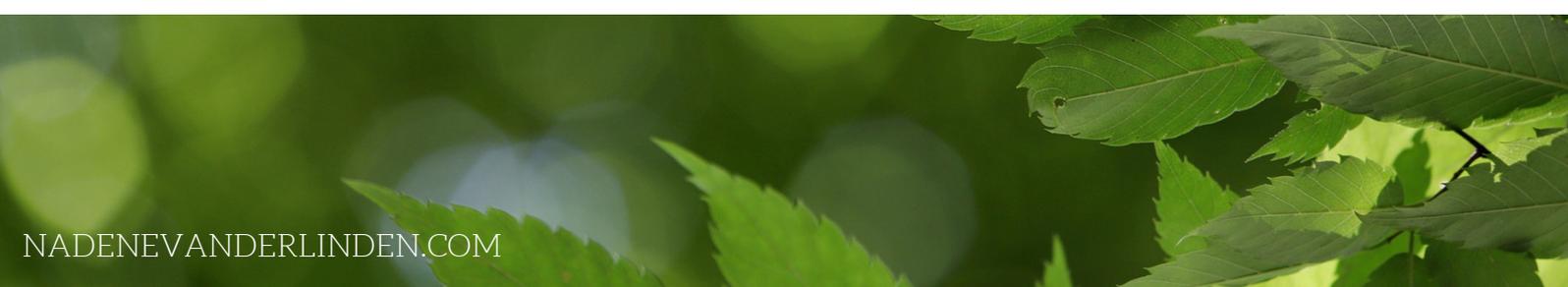
Appropriate self-disclosure is a therapeutic technique utilised by many therapists. Rather than the traditional model of the distant expert, modern therapists model authentic imperfection to their clients. Presenting themselves as real and flawed human is part of the authentic therapist's toolkit.

Self-disclosure that meets the criteria for helpfulness and appropriateness can be problematic for some clients. It may even have the opposite of the intended effect of increasing trust and shut down the client in a session or many sessions after the self-disclosure is made.

Who are these clients?

- They are our clients who are terrified of being judged.
- They are our clients with severe emotional deprivation in their childhoods.
- They are our clients with relentless inner critics.

These clients have a radar for judgment and not being understood that is set to super high. They will find judgement and misunderstanding, even when you as their therapist are trying hard to provide a relationship in which they feel cared for and accepted.



When not to use self-disclosure

I once had a client angrily proclaim I clearly couldn't understand her problem because I was married. Given the nature of what the client was seeking help for, I had never disclosed anything about my relationship but the wedding ring I wear did that on my behalf. And it was felt by this very emotionally deprived client as a sign of me not being able to understand her pain. It was unintentional on my part, but it happened.

Self-disclosure with these clients can only come once the client has relaxed and trusted that the therapist accepts them. For these emotionally deprived, deeply self-critical who fear judgment that will take time, many sessions even. If you can see markers of this in the initial session avoid using self-disclosure early on with the client.

If you don't spot it at assessment but you notice a self-disclosure doesn't fly with a client, check-in. What happened for them when you shared that? Did they feel more or less understood? They may share that it has had an unintended effect but also if you get little from them, consider that they are likely one of these types of clients.

Dial down the self-disclosure until they are ready to find it useful.

Reference: Liz Lacey's Schema therapy for Addictions training (2021)

