

“Come Closer, but Keep Your Distance:” A Client’s Perspective on the Psychotherapy of Schizoid Process

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Abstract

This article presents a client’s perspective on the psychotherapy of the schizoid process. It contains a word-for-word psychotherapy session, which illustrates the relational and developmental perspective used in integrative psychotherapy to enable a psychotherapy client to understand and resolve their process of fear and withdrawal. Throughout the article the client comments on her internal experience, her interpersonal connection with the psychotherapist, and the therapeutic qualities of the healing relationship.

Keywords

Schizoid, schizoid process, integrative psychotherapy, relational psychotherapy, withdrawal

“Well, come back and have tea with us,” said Moon-Face. “Silky’s got some Pop Biscuits—and I’ve made some Google Buns. I don’t often make them—and I tell you they’re a treat!”

—Enid Blyton, *The Magic Faraway Tree*

I entered the profession of psychotherapy with an intense desire to help people heal from the relational disruptions and traumas that they had endured in their lives. Little did I realize that I also had a troubled child inside of me who required a healing relationship in order to feel alive and authentic. In doing my psychotherapy training, I was able to understand the relational conflicts that shaped the adult I had become. Importantly, with a couple of attuned psychotherapists, I was able to give that troubled inner child a voice, understanding, and a sense of inner peace.

This article is a sharing of the positive outcomes of some of the psychotherapy work I have done over the years. I particularly want to share with colleagues what I have learned from one specific hour of intensive therapy that had a profound impact on my life. To the extent that I no longer need to withdraw in social relationships, I no longer feel alone, as I am at peace within myself. This article contains an unedited transcript of an hour-long therapy session, which I did during a five-day professional training program. I was initially attracted to the training programs because I was impressed with the writings on the theory and methods of a developmentally based, relationally focused psychotherapy. There was a series of workshops in the UK on the psychotherapy of shame and self-righteousness, *International Journal of Integrative Psychotherapy*, Vol. 12, 2021

narcissism, the early affect confusion of the borderline client, and the psychotherapy of the schizoid process. I wanted to know so much more about the practice of a relational oriented psychotherapy, so I signed up for the extensive training program.

As the trainer described the schizoid process, it was as though he was talking about me. His illustrations of the “schizoid compromise” put words to my emotional distress, my self-criticism, my loneliness, my emotional withdrawal in many social situations, and, importantly, when I needed to connect with a sense of inner peace (Erskine, 2001). The psychotherapy session that I describe below helped me to know, not just cognitively, but in the depths of my body, that I am not alone.

I lived my childhood in an environment of secrecy. I was unable to talk freely about what was happening in my family and within me. I was brought up in a society that did not recognize or talk about what went on within the family—certainly not the domestic violence between my parents. I had grown to believe that I must not talk about my experience, and if I did, bad things would happen. I was fearful about talking because, in my fantasy, I would lose the people around me who I depended on for my survival. The combination of the brutal conflict between my parents and my fantasy led me to feel isolated and alone.

I felt a sense of deep shame, as I had internalized the belief that I was bad and that there was something wrong with me. In my school class I cowered in my chair, terrified of being seen and unable to raise my hand or use my voice to speak out. I can remember answering the teacher’s questions in my mind, but by the time I could find the words to answer, the class had moved on to the next question. I was so scared of getting it wrong. One day I was asked to stand up in class and talk. I accidentally said a word wrong and the whole class laughed at me. I felt ashamed and stood there blushing and wishing I could disappear. Each time I went over this event in my mind, it reinforced my script belief that “I should not speak out.”

I remember my mother attending parents’ evening—an evening that I dreaded because I struggled academically. But I thought that at least I would get a good review from my geography teacher. I loved to hear about different countries and how landscapes formed with meandering rivers. But on this evening my mum came back and said that my teacher told her that I showed a lack of interest in the lessons and was always looking out of the window or not paying attention. I was upset by this. He had misinterpreted the times that I was struggling to do the work and be part of the class. This led me to feel like I did not belong, like I was the odd one out. When I struggled with the work, I would look out of the window and wish I was somewhere else, or I would go to my “sanctuary,” my special place of internal quiet, for a break from the anxiety and pressure of feeling that I had to get things right.

My parents did not have high expectations of me. I knew that my brother was the “brainy one,” and in response I developed a strong internal critic telling me “I can’t learn” and “I’m stupid.” I also told myself “I’m fat and ugly.” As I grew older and got a job, my internal critic intensified. I told myself again and again “I’m stupid and boring” and “Nobody wants me as a friend.”

As a result of these script beliefs, I could not trust anyone. Consequently, these script beliefs led me to adapt my behavior. I separated myself from people around me. I stopped myself from getting close with anyone, and I concluded that I desperately needed to protect myself from people. I told myself “I can’t trust anyone,” “People will hurt me,” and “If people really know me, they will shame and reject me.” However, I desperately wanted to be liked. I avoided anything that would make a conflict and possibly lead to a break in the relationship. I would go out of my way to help other people and avoid any conflict that could lead to a relationship loss.

All that time, I knew I had the ability to go inside myself to my “private sanctuary.” At a party I could look as though I was enjoying the music and dancing, but I had the ability to “space out;” I would go to my special place of peace and quiet.

I wanted a family and children, but marriage brought the realization that I needed help to deal with my past and to be able to form lasting relationships. My partner was not a talkative person, which was OK in the beginning, because I too was silent much of the time. But as I did my therapy and training, I started to be able to use my voice and express myself. I realized that I needed to be with someone to whom I could talk openly. Over time I got more frustrated and angrier. I struggled with the question: “Why would he not listen or talk to me?” I hated seeing him sit in his chair with a massive newspaper up over his face. The paper reminded me of an iron wall that left me on the outside. There was no face or connection. I felt alone again!

An Intense Therapy Session

It was the afternoon of the third day of a five-day professional training workshop in Manchester, UK. I had previously attended five other five-day training workshops. In these professional development workshops, the trainer would lecture on specific topics, engage the training group in discussions about personality theory and how it applied to their clients, invite us to present cases for peer discussion and supervision, and demonstrate various psychotherapy methods with members of the group who volunteered to have an hour of psychotherapy with the trainer. As usual in the training group, the colleagues were sitting on several comfortable chairs in a large oval. I was looking for a place to sit where I could watch and learn. The group had asked for a demonstration of how to work with a client who uses relational withdrawal as a way to manage their emotions. The trainer asked for a volunteer, specifically for someone who identified with what he had taught the previous mornings.

While the trainer had been teaching about the qualities of a psychotherapy that are essential for healing the various splits in a client’s sense of self, I was thinking, “I know what he is talking about.” Earlier that day I had several memories of the times when I hid myself from people, searching for a secure place in my mind. I timidly said to the trainer (referred to from here on out as the therapist), “I kinda want to work.” At the same time, I was prepared for someone else to volunteer. In my mind anyone else would be more worthy of the opportunity to work than me. My old self-criticism was coming into play. My

role was to conform to what the other person wanted of me: to avoid conflict and to maintain the appearance of relationship by always being quiet and pleasant. I was frozen in place. It took me almost a half a minute to move toward the therapist.

I instinctively knew that the confidentiality and intimacy, so central to this unique training group, provided the necessary security for me to be vulnerable and expose what had been my personal secret for many years. I needed the gentle, patient strength that I saw the therapist provide to others in the group, and I also needed to reveal myself in front of a group of colleagues whom I respected. As a reader, you may wonder if I was in transference with the therapist and the group. Yes, indeed, I was in an emotional transference with both the group and therapist. I desperately needed a healing relationship, someone on whom I could rely—someone who would understand my nonverbal story and validate my inner experiences. I also needed the group members' acknowledgement and acceptance of who I am; I needed a new group experience in order to counteract my intense sense of shame.

Below, I provide commentary on the otherwise uncut, word-for-word transcript of our therapeutic transactions.

Therapist: *Come sit over here, so that I'm not twisting my neck around and we're facing each other.*

As I approached, I was aware of my apprehension. I was feeling unsure and somehow younger. What would happen? What should I say? Could I do this? The sensations in my arms, legs, and neck indicated to me that my body was stiffening.

Leigh: *I'm still a bit curious about our eye contact, as I still find it hard and you're really staring at me now.*

My voice was a little shaky and I gave a nervous laugh. I was feeling so uncomfortable about the way the therapist was looking at me. His face seemed intense. He looked interested as though he wanted to know what I had to say. I felt a sense of confusion as he gave me his full attention and the look of someone who "cares." I was not used to being looked at like this. It crossed my mind that I may not be able to stay looking face to face with him.

Therapist: *I want to see you.*

Leigh: *Yeh.*

My tone of voice suggested that I was half agreeing but half surprised that he had said this. I didn't know how to react to his comment. I wanted to move on, away from me being the focus of his attention, but I did volunteer. I thought "it will be OK"—an important reaction that was my way of calming myself.

Therapist: *I never realized how blue your eyes were before.*

Leigh: *I think it depends on what I wear as well. Sometimes they stand out a bit more.*

I was making polite conversation. I had been brought up to do this social skill and thought it was the right thing to do. At the same time, I was able to calm myself, as I knew what I had said was appropriate.

Therapist: *But you said that you were identifying with—*

Leigh: *I was identifying with um*

(9 second pause) *I suppose withdrawing with people and um*

(6 second pause) *And because of the eye contact with you, like going into my own place and not connecting with people. Coz I was saying about, how in the previous five-day workshop I was, I was kind of, um, very aware of how, I didn't make contact with you, um*

I had been aware of deliberately not making contact with people in the previous five-day workshop. At that time, I had needed to keep myself separated. My internal critic was causing me to hesitate. My cheeks turned red hot; I was full of shame as I admitted to myself that I had done this. But I needed to take a few seconds to think about what had made me volunteer. Why was I sitting there?

Therapist: *Do you think I demand it?*

Leigh: *Um. Do you think you demand it?*

I started to have difficulty focusing on what the therapist was saying, and I felt confused. I was returning to my adult self and was trying to concentrate on the questions so that I could get the answers right. "Demand" seemed like a harsh word, and I was feeling uncomfortable in my stomach. As I tried to repeat his question, his words didn't make sense to me or seem to connect with what we were talking about.

Therapist: *No. Do you think I demand that you be in contact?*

Leigh: *No. I'm not aware of it anyway, um*

I didn't think he was being demanding in any way. I was now aware of the people sitting around me. I was listening to the questions and desperately struggling to give him the right answers.

Therapist: *Did you feel pressure to do so?*

Leigh: *No. When I think of the previous 5-day workshop, I think we worked well. I went away and I didn't feel overwhelmed, as maybe I have been in the past, so it was good.*

Therapist: *You had been concerned about that before and I wanted to take your concern into consideration.*

Leigh: (8-second pause) *Mm. Yeh.*

The therapist had read the email I had sent to him about my intense feelings after a
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previous workshop. He remembered that I did not want to go away from the workshop overwhelmed. It felt reassuring that he had taken my request seriously. I felt more comfortable and secure sitting with him. In the past I had been the quiet one who wouldn't give an opinion and went along with what others wanted to do. Because of this, I thought I never made a direct impact on anyone. My friends were organizers and sorted out what we were doing, and I just complied with their decisions. I was amazed that my request had been heard and responded to. I realized that I had, indeed, made an impact on him. His response was so different from what I had experienced in other relationships.

Therapist: *I wonder what would happen right now, if you took some time to go to a safer internal place, with my support and encouragement?*

Leigh: *What's coming into my mind is, um, going away will mean getting in touch with the loneliness. Which is really hard.*

Therapist: *So you don't go all the way away. Go halfway away?*

Leigh: *Are you saying that I just go halfway away? Or do I go all the way?*

I was returning to a younger age. Again, I felt confused and anxious, and my senses were not working. My hearing deteriorated, and I could not understand what he was saying. The words become fussy. Like when I was young, what was being said didn't make sense. When I got confused my anxiety increased. It was a vicious circle, because when I was a child it was necessary to get it right, but if I was anxious, I could not understand and therefore I could not get it right. I was frightened, lonely, and sought refuge in silence.

Therapist: *Yes. You said if you go all the way away you'll get in touch with the loneliness.*

Leigh: *I guess it depends on the situation.*

Therapist: *Well, see what would happen if you just close your eyes.*

Leigh: *OK.*

Therapist: *And see if you can go away, even while I'm here watching over you.*

(6-second pause) *And I'm not going to do anything abruptly or fast. I'm not gonna surprise you.*

(5-second pause) *I'm going to stay right here, watching over you.*

The therapist's facial expressions seemed really important to me at that moment. It stimulated a memory of waiting for my father to come home. If he had a normal, stress-free happy face it was OK to go and greet him, but if he had that angry menacing look it was a sign that I needed to quickly retreat to my bedroom for safety, as it was likely that he would cause an argument with my mum. The arguments never were about important matters; in his mind she did things against him on purpose.

I was aware of his calm, slow, and caring voice. My breathing had become deeper and slower, and I relaxed my shoulders. I felt safer with the knowledge that he was taking care of me. I felt reassured that he would not let anything bad or shocking happen. His voice gave me the sense of being held safely. I was aware he was not too close and not too far away. He created a safe environment that was a great contrast to the chaos around me during my childhood.

As a child there was no one to help regulate my emotions and to help me understand what was happening. I needed the adults to stop the overwhelming shouting between them; I was caught in their violence. At those times I did not have any control of what was going on, neither outside nor inside my body.

Leigh: (15-second pause) *It feels like I want to open my eyes to just check that you're still there.*

As soon as I shut my eyes I was in a different place, dark and alone. I could not see the therapist's face to gather any information or reassurance that all would be OK. Everything was black and I was alone. No longer was I in the familiar room with my colleagues, and I could not find my peaceful "sanctuary" place. It was cold and dark. My body became alert, and I began panic. I needed to see his face for reassurance and to hear his calm reassuring voice in order to feel safe.

Therapist: *I'm right here and I'm going to stay here.*

(18-second pause) *I'm paying attention to how fast your heart is beating. So, I suspect you're scared.*

Leigh: *I'm just anxious really.*

Therapist: *Anxious.*

Leigh: *Because it feels like I'm on my own, with my eyes closed.*

Over the years I have developed the ability to diminish the significance of my anxiety by saying to myself that I am "just" anxious. I often convinced myself that "the current situation is not so bad." These little phrases help me to stop myself from becoming overwhelmed. These self-regulating techniques had helped me in many situations, but they had not solved the underlying issue of being both terrified and lonely. I longed for resolution of my terror and loneliness, and that was why I was taking the risk of revealing my true self to another person.

Therapist: (17-second pause) *Alone.*

(25-second pause) *And I'm going to be right here with you, while you're on your own.*

Leigh: (6-second pause) *It kinda doesn't matter if you're there or not because I know I can ... I can just be in my head and be OK.*

What I did not say out loud was: “It’s OK because I can go to my ‘sanctuary’ where I can feel calm and safe, and no one need know that I have gone.” Most of the time it seemed like going to my sanctuary just happened. But with the help of my ongoing therapy, I uncovered the three ways in which I would retreat to my sanctuary: I became still and said nothing, I stared into space without any focus, or I would focus on the sensations in my body. With each of these three ways I could slip into my “sanctuary” where I would be temporarily safe from the potential of invading chaos. After this psychotherapy session, I realized that repeating words over and over again, like a mantra, was another way to ease into my private place of peace and quiet.

Some of my clients who used dissociation to handle overwhelming emotions have described their out-of-body experiences where they are observing the abuse inflicted on them but without physical sensations or emotions. To these clients it is as though the trauma did not happen to them—an “it’s not me” experience.

My experience of withdrawing into my sanctuary was different from dissociation. I would go to my internal “no place,” a place without people. But I was not dissociated; I was always me, still in the room and watching, but I was not in emotional contact with anyone. Friends did not notice; they could not see my internal struggle. I was “spacing out,” which was how I described what I was doing to myself. In some threatening situations my withdrawal seemed to happen almost automatically, like flicking a light switch. On other occasions going to the “no place” was much slower, like turning a dimmer switch.

A disadvantage of retreating to my sanctuary was that I lost sense of time. Often, I did not notice that I had withdrawn into my private place. I worried about my “spacing out” and how it may be affecting my life. I knew that it was often necessary to record training workshops and supervision sessions because I was afraid I would space out, miss important information, and not understand what was being presented. I remember that in my early therapy seasons I frequently had an intense pull to withdraw into my sanctuary.

Therapist: (11-second pause) *So it doesn’t matter.*

(11-second pause) *Such an important phrase.*

(7-second pause) *“Doesn’t matter if you’re there.”*

When I heard him emphasize the words “doesn’t matter” I felt intensely sad. I couldn’t tell him how desperately I wanted and needed him to be there. There was a high risk of being controlled, criticized, or invaded again. It felt like a real threat, and I needed to hide from any threat. I was in constant conflict between wanting to be closer to him and desperately wanting to pull away.

Therapist: (17-second pause) *And I’m going to stay here watching over you. Even if to you say, “doesn’t matter.”*

I was relieved that he was not leaving me alone. A longing and hope for relationship kept me from completely withdrawing. There was a constant push, a desperate need to stay in relationship and experience the care I never had at those fearful times. At the same

time there was a constant urge, to pull away from the painful criticism, control, and invasion that I feared would happen if we were in a close relationship.

I have seen the way other people have formed relationships and supported each other in the five-day training workshops. The sight of other people supporting and hugging each other reminded me of how painfully alone I was. At that time, I couldn't imagine having that relationship with others even though I periodically had some hope for satisfying connections with people. I was stuck. If I pushed him away, I thought that I would lose my chance for any relationship with him. If I let myself be close with him, he might take over and control me. That immediately brought up memories of being hurt in previous relationships. Withdrawal to my sanctuary was the best solution.

Therapist: (40-second pause) *The feeling must be intense.*

(49-second pause) *But it must be wonderful to have a place to hide.*

(6-second pause) *To have a hiding place that provides some security.*

(11-second pause) *A safe place to go where there's no conflicts with anybody.*

(4-second pause) *Must be wonderful.*

I was listening to the therapist's soothing voice and agreeing. Internally I was acknowledging the truth of what he was saying. He was describing my internal experience, or how it was for me. It seemed like he understood because he was talking to the child I once was.

It was important that he didn't ask factual questions or inquire about my feelings because I was too young to answer. I didn't have the language to explain what was happening. The therapist was giving me a vocabulary to help me understand and explain my experience. He was confirming why I had been protecting myself. Nobody had done this before or had been interested in where I went to feel secure. Not having to think and answer questions helped me to be calm. I was not aware of the other people in the room, except for the occasional turning of a page or someone taking a drink. I felt calm, and I was back in my sanctuary, but this time the therapist was nearby, relaxed, and at my pace.

Leigh: (7-second pause) *It's just peaceful.* (I clear my throat to be able to speak.) *Its peaceful.*

Therapist: *Oh! So necessary to find peace.*

(14-second pause) *The noise that you'll hear in a moment is just me straightening my leg. I'm not going to invade your peace; I'm just moving my leg.*

(10-second pause). *It must have been so necessary, to find a peaceful place.*

(14-second pause) *So much feeling when I say that.*

(21-second pause) *Must be sad to have to search for a private peaceful place.*

It felt reassuring when he told me that he would move his leg. He was doing what he said he would do by going slowly and taking care not to surprise or shock me with loud noises or sudden movements. He seemed to understand the importance for my need for security. He let me know that he wouldn't invade me in any way. His words were comforting; they give me a sense of security which increased my trust in him.

Leigh: (8-second pause) *It's because things are so overwhelming outside, that I have to go inside.*

I recalled my parents fighting. Mum would scream for help. My father was bigger and stronger than she was, so instead of fighting back she would scream back at him, things she knew would hurt him emotionally. It was her only way of getting back at him, even though it meant she got hurt more.

Therapist: *Of course. That's why I used the word wonderful before. Wonderful that you found at least some place, to have a little bit of peace.*

(10-second pause) *Overwhelming outside.*

I was crying as I recalled past overwhelming experiences. He passed me a tissue. His gesture was soothing.

(9-second pause) *Overwhelming and anxious making, perhaps frightening, perhaps confusing.*

As he spoke I could I feel my jaw tightening and my lips pushing together. Memories of needing to escape the domestic violence in my home were coming in and out of consciousness but surprisingly I was not feeling overwhelmed. In the past I always felt emotionally overwhelmed when I had these memories but now, I felt calmed by his slow understanding voice.

(28-second pause) *Overwhelming.*

(14-second pause) *So necessary to create a peaceful place.*

(21-second pause) *To have some quiet. The preciousness of quietness.*

It sounded like he understood how bad it was and why I needed to hide. At the same time, he validated my need for peace and quiet. I sat very still, the same way I did when I was a child, not moving, not wanting to be seen, not sure if I could speak.

(24-second pause) *There's no rush. We are not going to do this work in a hurry. So, there's no need to think about being quick here to satisfy me. I'll adjust to your rhythm.*

As I listened, I slowed my breathing and found the pace I needed. I was aware that I was not under pressure to do or say anything. It helped that I was not compelled to think of

answers because I always perceived questions as either invasive or controlling. His reflective comments were reassuring and validating.

(25-second pause) *To have some time to really appreciate the peacefulness, is so important.*

(16-second pause) *So necessary to escape the confusion and chaos.*

(11-second pause) *To go to a place where there is no criticism.*

(20-second pause) *I'm going to listen even if you don't talk, I'm listening to your breathing, listening to your body vibes and yet I know you must have a lot to say. Even though it seems impossible to talk.*

Leigh: (7-second pause) *It feels like I lose my voice sometimes. I can't talk.*

I recalled seeing the violence in my family and wanting to shout and scream "Stop!" But I had no sound. Sometimes I thought that I had screamed but then later I was aware that I had not made a sound. I was invisible and soundless as the family violence played out in front of me.

Therapist: (5-second pause) *Em, em. Can't talk. It must be very hard to be hiding in your peaceful place and talk at the same time, because if you talk people might invade your peaceful place.*

(4-second pause) *They might invade. It seems better to never speak.*

While he was talking, I was having quick flashes of watching my father, not knowing if he would kill my mum. I could not physically shout out "stop." I was too terrified of drawing any attention to myself. I was 6 to 12 years old and had a realization that I was regressed to a much younger age. I was terrified that my father would turn his rage on me because I was sure that I would not survive his temper. The only way I could cope was to find my own sanctuary.

Therapist: (18-second pause) *I'll listen to your silence. Because I think there is a big story in the silence. A sad story and a fearful story.*

The therapist acknowledged the importance of my silence. It felt like *he knew* my inner world. It was so important to me that someone knew that my fears were real; he validated the importance of my sanctuary.

Leigh: (22-second pause) *I'm just aware that sometimes I don't want to be on my own. I want somebody to be there.*

Prior to my psychotherapy I lived in a state of anxiety, not knowing what would happen next. I would force myself out of the house to be with friends as much as I could manage, and then I dreaded going back to the house. I spent hours in my bedroom reading and enjoying my life in a world of fantasy. When I was younger, books such as Enid Blyton's

The Magic Faraway Tree (1943) provided an opportunity to escape with Moon-Face and Silky to distant lands through the clouds at the top of the magic tree. The fantasy took my loneliness away for a time, but I could not escape what was happening around me. Fantasy was not enough to take away the fear of what I witnessed. For that, I needed to withdraw to my sanctuary.

Therapist: (4-second pause) *But not to be invasive.*

Leigh: *That would be too scary.*

I knew that I had to sit still. It was as if moving would shatter my peace and bring the chaos back. Being physically still was a way of not being seen; I was physically tight and rigid as a result of my fear. I was remembering some of the arguments and how, once the shouting had stopped, my mum would come into my bedroom and sleep on the floor by my bed. Although it was good to know she was OK, it was terrifying because I wondered, “what if he came in the room?” I was scared stiff while watching the crack at the bottom of the door. I was waiting to see if his shadow was outside the door, waiting to see the light go off, an indication that he had gone to bed. Yet, even if he had gone to bed, I was always expecting that he would come into my room.

Therapist: *To be present. If you had an absolute guarantee that there'd be no invasion, no controlling, then it might be nice to have somebody there.*

(6-second pause) *But not the invasive, not the critical, not the controlling.*

I was silent, remembering the invasiveness, being controlled, and used. I had been used as a form of communication between my parents: my father would say, “Tell your mother ...”. If I was slow, he would shout, “Tell her!” even when she was in the same room. He was so controlling, and I was so confused, perhaps even angry. But I could not dare to express any anger because that was dangerous. I was suddenly filled with the same scary feelings that I had known from the past.

Leigh: (6-second pause) *It's too scary. I have to keep everybody out.*

Therapist: *Well, that's what I'm going to do today. I'm gonna keep everybody out. And make sure that nobody here does anything that's invasive or critical. Because I know how sad you are.*

Leigh: *It's because I'm on my own, its only because I'm on my own.*

I desperately needed someone there. The loneliness was intense, like a deep hole in my body, and at the same time I was full of fear. I longed to hear the kindness, caring, and reassurance that he was giving me. But it was so important that he was respecting my boundaries and was not controlling or telling me what to do. If he had done those things, it would have been hard not to see him as my father.

Therapist: *No, I don't think so. I see how scared you are, but I hear the criticism. Right now, I heard the criticism, of blaming yourself, but I think you were a frightened little girl,*

frightened and sad and probably very lonely.

(12-second pause) *Lonely!*

(8-second pause) *but it must seem easier to blame yourself than to feel that loneliness.*

(47-second pause) *I'm right here watching over you and there's no need to be in a hurry about this.*

(19-second pause) *There's so much feeling inside. Feeling that never gets put into words.*

I was crying as I became increasingly aware of just how frightened I was as a child. My eyes were closed, but as I listened to his voice, I sensed in my body that I was safe. The calmness of his voice, his attunement to my pace, and his understanding and consideration of my boundaries gave me a reassurance that I could trust him. This was a great contrast to how my father had treated me.

Leigh: (9-second pause) *I'm just thinking that I have blamed myself for things that have happened in the past.*

Therapist: *Of course.*

Leigh: *Because maybe, it is easier.*

Blaming myself made sense to me; how could I blame my dad? He was my dad. And my mum, she was doing what she could to protect us. It was always so much easier if all the conflicts were my fault. I told myself, "I did things to make my dad angry," "I didn't do anything to stop him hurting my mum," and "I should have done better at school." These chastising comments occupied my mind and kept me distracted from realizing the reasons for my terror and loneliness.

Therapist: *Of course, so much easier to blame yourself. Than to feel that loneliness.*

(18-second pause) *There's so much feeling inside. Feeling that never gets put into words.*

(17-second pause) *Lots of criticism, lots of self-blame, but lots of sadness. Lots of loneliness too.*

At this point I was crying because it felt safe to let the tears come. I had criticized myself for years, blaming myself for all the troubles in the family. With this cry my body was relaxing, things made sense, and my mind went quiet.

Leigh: (63-second pause) *I'm not really thinking of anything.*

It was strange to just sit there with nothing to say—and to have him still there. Then I started to worry, "Can he really be interested in me?" "When will he get angry?" "Who is going to laugh at me for being ridiculous?" Yet, he stayed there, listening to me. He did not move. This was not what I would have expected to happen.

Therapist: *It's OK, I'm still listening. Listening to your heartbeat, to your breathing, to your vibes. And your words when you're thinking. I'm also listening to your silence. The silence that tells a thousand stories.*

I couldn't understand what he was doing. Why was he staying with me, still listening, spending so much time with me, and not disappearing? I was unsettled by this unfamiliar experience, and yet, I didn't want him to stop.

Therapist: (23-second pause) *What I'm feeling is, the sadness. And I'm feeling the loneliness.*

Leigh: *And how hard it is to reach out.*

Therapist: *Yeh. Almost impossible to reach out, coz the fear is so great. It's so wonderful to be in a hiding place that's peaceful. That in the beginning feelings so good, until the loneliness builds up then it gets lonelier and lonelier, if you reach out its so frightening, because there's all the chaos again.*

(14-second pause) *It's so wonderful to have a hiding place that's peaceful and so terrible to feel that loneliness. Peaceful, lonely.*

Naming my dilemma was so important to me. Until that moment, I had lived my dilemma, but I hadn't acknowledged the internal struggle between having a peaceful hiding place and the painful loneliness. He put my internal conflict into words when he said the phrases "so wonderful to have a hiding place" and "so terrible to feel that loneliness." The words were new, but somehow they were familiar and comforting because they described me and the struggle of my life. I felt trust.

Therapist: (44-second pause) *I'm right here.*

Leigh: (28-second pause) *I want to reach out but I'm too scared.*

At that moment, my body froze. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but a rush of intense fear made it impossible to take that risk. I was certain that no one could possibly know how terrifying it was to want to touch and yet to freeze with fear. I was trapped in a body that was trying to protect me.

Therapist: *Of course. Too scared to reach out and so lonely, but it must seem dangerous to reach out, so maybe it's better to accept the loneliness. At least then its peaceful.*

Leigh: (5-second pause) *It's not better.*

Therapist: *Not better. But you know that loneliness. You've known that for years and years and years. It's better than invasion.*

Leigh: *I don't need to be scared anymore.*

Therapist: *Say that louder.*

Leigh: *I DON'T NEED TO BE SCARED ANYMORE!*

Therapist: *Are you sure?*

Leigh: (5-second pause) *No.*

Therapist: (8-second pause) *People do mean things. People become critical, controlling.*

Leigh: (5-second pause) *I feel I need to reach out and touch you, but then that's enough because I need to know you're there.*

The urge to know that he was fully present was really strong. I needed reassurance that I would be OK. I was feeling braver and testing that he was not going to harm me. He reached out and briefly touched my hand.

Therapist: *Just a little pat like that? Or is that too much?*

At that time a pat was not enough but my body was frozen. I could not reach out. I needed him to initiate. I wanted him to take my scare away. I needed his calm voice and slow movements. Any fast movements would have scared me away. I could not separate the past and the present. Although I knew it was different. He was gaining my trust and was doing everything that he promised.

Leigh: *I want to reach out my hand, but I can't, because I can't move my arm.*

Therapist: *Shall I come to you?*

Leigh: (8-second pause) *I'm scared.*

Therapist: *I'm going to come closer. If you don't like it you can push me away. It will be OK with me if you push me away. So lonely and so scared. So scared of invasion, then so lonely, how terrible it is inside to have both.*

(74-second pause) *Right here with our finger-to-finger contact.*

As he touched my hand, I quickly started to feel overwhelmed. I was unable to regulate my body sensations. When I was a child there was never anyone there to teach me how calm myself. The only soothing thing I knew was to withdraw into my sanctuary. I pulled my hand away.

Leigh: *That's enough now. That's all I need.*

I felt an embarrassment that we had touched hands, that I needed the contact, and some guilt that I could only stay for such a short period.

Therapist: *That's important for you to say, that's all I need. To say no, that's enough. If it's true.*

Leigh: (10-second pause) (I laugh nervously.) *I feel alone again.*

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Instantly I was back in a lonely place. As I type this transcript, I feel so sad. I recall wanting to hold his hand, but the desire was gone in a flash because I was overwhelmed with fear. I immediately pulled away.

Therapist: *I'll stay with you while you're all alone. Go back to that quiet place, you know that so well.*

(70-second pause) *I'm right here. Paying attention to your loneliness, and your sadness and your fear.*

(35-second pause) *I'm right here. Paying attention to your loneliness, and your sadness and your fear.*

(36-second pause) *It must be very difficult and brave to say those words, "hold my hand."*

I took a deep breath to ease the tension in my body. I was sad and confused. But it was different with the therapist there. I was able to tell him what I was thinking, and he did not doubt or question me.

Leigh: (7-second pause) *I don't want to be hurt again.*

Therapist: *Of course not. Never again. Why, that was the purpose of hiding, the purpose of going to that peaceful place.*

Leigh: *Like running away.*

Therapist: *Running away to never be hurt again.*

(22-second pause) *So deeply hurt.*

(21-second pause) *So scared.*

Again, he validated my experience. I felt the tensions leaving my body. Until this moment no one had understood my deep hurt and responded in such an authentic way.

Leigh: (9-second pause) *It's scary when there's no one there.*

Therapist: *Yes, almost as scary as when someone is going to be controlling, or hurtful, or invasive. Two kinds of scared.*

(12-second pause) *Impossible to protest. Impossible to say stop it or No! or I don't like it. Because then it gets worse.*

Leigh: (9-second pause) *I can't say it. I couldn't say anything.*

Again, it was difficult to talk because my body started to freeze, and my voice was barely audible. I suddenly lost my ability to speak just as I did when watching my father hit my mum. The fear took over once again, my lips tightened, and my jaw tensed.

Therapist: *Dangerous to say stop it. Dangerous to say “no,” frightening to say, “I don’t like it.”*

Leigh: (15-second pause) *It’s OK, it’s OK, it’s OK, it’s OK, it’s OK.*

I repeated “it’s OK” over and over. I was surprised as I started to say the same mantra that I used repeatedly as a child. I suddenly made the connection that I used the words “it’s ok” all through my life to stabilize myself.

Therapist: *I hear the words, “it’s OK it’s OK. It’s OK it’s OK.” I hear that mantra when I know it’s not OK. It’s not OK inside. I hear the words “it’s OK it’s OK it’s OK.” I know you’re scared, very scared.*

Leigh: *Just block everything out, block everything out.*

Therapist: *Yeh, “block everything out.” “Block everything out” and go to your peaceful place. Just go to your peaceful place.*

Leigh: *It’s OK, it’s OK.*

I continued to say my “it’s OK” mantra very quietly. I was desperately trying to reassure myself and regain control. I was giving myself what I needed to survive: the sound of a reassuring voice. It may have been my own voice, but it felt reassuring; it was distracting me from being overwhelmed. Once I was reassured, I could again focus on what he was saying.

Therapist: *That peaceful place where you can say “it’s OK it’s OK.” Don’t talk, don’t say anything, don’t protest, don’t say no.*

My mantra also served the purpose of keeping me calm and stopping me from protesting.

Leigh: *It’s peaceful again.*

Therapist: *Never say those words, never shout back, just keep quiet and good, quiet and good. There’s safety in being quiet and good. So important to find safety. So necessary to have a safe place to hide.*

I could not respond. It was hard for me to hear him saying those words—words that I only said to myself. I was full of emotions and body reactions as he spoke. He was saying the same things that I repeatedly said to myself; he was voicing my internal criticism: “keep quiet and good.” These were some of the critical words that compelled me to remain silent.

Leigh: (15-second pause) *I couldn’t have survived without it.*

Therapist: *Survival inside. But then it gets so lonely. You started itching for something.*

I was scratching my skin. I need to feel something on the outside of me because I was

feeling so intensely inside. Even now, as I write this there are no words to describe what I was feeling. I was just struggling to survive. The same survival struggle that was with me every day in my childhood.

Leigh: (15-second pause) *I need to feel.*

Therapist: *Mmm?*

Leigh: *I need to feel something.*

Therapist: *Yeh!*

Leigh: (5-second pause) *I can feel your hand.*

(7-second pause) *I can feel your hand.*

Therapist: (29-second pause) *Very important to stay quiet and not to define yourself. Not to protest, keep those lips sealed. It's the only safety.*

(76-second pause) *I'm right here, watching over you. Even though it's necessary, to be in your peaceful place.*

Leigh: *Why am I here?*

Therapist: *"Why?" What a wonderful question. For safety. So necessary to be in a peaceful place for safety. So necessary to be in a peaceful place, for safety. You know that answer more profoundly than my words express. You know it in all those tight muscles, in your back in your arms, and in your pelvis, and in your jaw, those muscles know that answer. So important to be seen. To find peace from all the chaos, all the noise.*

(46-second pause) *I'm listening.*

Leigh: (13-second pause) *I'm amazed that you're still there.*

Therapist: *I want to be here. But I want to make sure I'm not invasive.*

Leigh: (6-second pause) *Why are you there when nobody else was there?*

Therapist: *Some questions I cannot answer. But I heard what you said. "Nobody else was there." That's quite a story, you're just giving me the headlines. The headlines are "nobody else was there."*

Leigh: *I don't understand.*

Therapist: *Yes you do. "Nobody else was there."*

Leigh: *When I was alone and scared, I needed someone, and nobody was there.*

Therapist: *Oh! When you most needed someone when you were alone and scared. And*
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nobody else was there. Alone when you most needed it.

Leigh: *So why are you there?*

Therapist: *I want to be.*

Leigh: *It doesn't make sense. It's confusing. I don't understand, I don't understand anything.*

Therapist: *You're so familiar with nobody being there, so familiar.*

Leigh: *I needed someone to be there.*

Therapist: (7-second pause) *Of course. Someone to be there. To really be there. Without being controlling.*

Leigh: (70-second pause) *Thank you.*

I felt a sense of gratitude to the therapist for staying with me, for not invading my space, for sticking to his words, and for understanding me. His way of being with me provided me with a new sense of trust—trust in another person, and trust in myself. His way of being was so different to how my father behaved. My internal reactions were a mixture of disorientation and relief; my body was relaxing. I felt fully present.

Therapist: *My commitment.*

Leigh: (96-second pause) *It's peaceful again.*

Therapist: *Yes, I feel at peace too.*

Leigh: *It's strange but when we started it felt like you were on the outside, and it feels like I briefly allowed you to come into my quiet place.*

Therapist: *Thank you for the privilege.*

It was a daunting experience to have an intense psychotherapy session like this in the middle of my training group. I was suddenly worried that the group members would now see me as crazy. My internal critic said, "They could not see me as a capable therapist after witnessing what I said." Then I looked around. I didn't see what I expected. I saw the faces of people who cared about me, they were on my side. Although it was difficult to look in their faces, it was necessary because their smiles and kind words provided evidence that they accepted me. Their presence and interest in me silenced my internal critic.

Near the end of my psychotherapy session, while I was in my peaceful sanctuary, there were a few moments when I sensed that the therapist was there with me. The knowledge that he was keeping me safe from harm—his patience and presence—made it possible for me to trust him. Even to this day, deep in my body, I retain a feeling of

safety and a sense of confidence that I am OK. I know that I am not alone anymore. I remember the feeling of having someone watching over me, keeping me safe.

I learned so much, professionally, from this intensive psychotherapy session. My practice of an in-depth, relationally focused psychotherapy has been enhanced in several ways. Now I:

- Understand the necessity of resonating (Erskine, 2015) with the client's body and maintaining a consistent attunement to their rhythm.
- Realize how important it is to watch for subtle clues indicating that the client may be on the verge of becoming emotionally overwhelmed. I also realize the importance of adjusting the therapeutic transactions so that the client can integrate their affect and cognition.
- Provide the necessary physical distance between the client and myself so that the client can have access to their private space and yet also sense that they are in the presence of someone who is safely watching over them.
- Identify when a client can benefit from the use of respectful touch, and I carefully secure their permission to focus on their body sensations (Erskine, 2015).
- Appreciate the use of therapeutic description and how it is effective when working with a client who relies on relational withdrawal as a form of self-stabilization (Erskine, 2020).
- Maintain a genuine interest in the client's internal experience and appreciate how it may be both similar and different than mine.

In my practice of psychotherapy, my aim is to develop an attuned therapeutic relationship so that my clients feel safe with me. Together we discover their unique experiences and identify which relational needs (Erskine, 2021) are not being met in their current lives. We explore how they can get today's relational needs satisfied in their day-to-day relationships with family and friends.

This intensive psychotherapy session, in which the therapist sensitively attended to my schizoid process, has been extremely important to me. As a result of this session, I have changed in several ways. I have gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of my schizoid process. I have increased confidence and trust in myself, and I understand that other people can be there for me. Ultimately, I am able to feel an inner sense of peace and that I am not alone.

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