



kort's korner

Why Couples Strong-Arm Rather than Disarm Each Other

SIGMUND FREUD FIRST IDENTIFIED the psychological process of transference and brought it into what is now modern day psychotherapy. He noticed that people had strong feelings and fantasies about him that had no basis in reality

between him and the client. In fact, transference is actually something that happens in life—and not just psychotherapy.

Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., coined the relationship theory and model *Imago Relationship Therapy*. He believed that couples were directing their transference onto each other within the marriage causing the rupture between them. He felt that if the couples could understand what was happening they could remove the transference that was negative and see each other and the conflicts for what they really were.

Therapists today who work transference understand that deeper work can happen in the therapy room if clients are willing to go there and understand what is happening. Couples willing to work out their transference can do the same to get past where they get stuck in their relationships.

Transference

What is transference? During transference, people turn into a “biological time machine”. A nerve is struck when someone says or does something that reminds you of your past. This creates an “emotional time warp” that transfers your emotional past and your psychological needs into the present.

Transference is a phenomenon in psychology characterized by unconscious redirection of feelings of one person to another. For instance, one could mistrust somebody who resembles an ex-spouse in manners, voice or external appearance; or be overly compliant to someone who resembles a childhood friend.

In a therapy context, transference refers to redirection of a client's feelings from a significant person to a therapist. Counter-transference is defined as redirection of a therapist's feelings toward a client, or

more generally as a therapist's emotional entanglement with a client.

The goal of transference is to finish the unresolved childhood and past wounds between the client and another person from their life. In psychotherapy, the therapist becomes the object of the negative transference which brings the treatment to the next level and goes deeper into one's psyche. In relationships, one's partner becomes the antenna for that transference.

Projection

What Is Projection? Some people refer to transference as a “projection.” In this case you are projecting your own feelings, emotions or motivations into another person without realizing your reaction is really more about you than it is about the other person. In a life filled with transference, your job may be “the family reunion you are avoiding and you are forced to go to each day.” In other cases of projection, your girlfriend may remind you of all the irritating things your mother did when you were growing up. Love at first sight is usually a projection – especially if it ends in disaster and you could have seen it coming.

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Why Couples Strong-Arm Rather than Disarm Each Other, continued

Negative Transference

In an extreme form of transference, you may conclude that someone is an awful or evil person when in fact that person's favorite food and television show reminds you of an emotionally abusive mother and a sexually abusive brother you have been trying to forget since childhood. That's an example of negative transference.

A warm, supportive and kind person could remind you of what you are missing and wanting in your life. You might then idealize that person and begin to see him or her as wonderful beyond belief. The idea is that you will react to your therapist, partner, friend, colleague, family member or whoever you are close to based on your experience with another person. This is usually a parent that the patient has an unresolved conflict with. In extreme cases a patient will become overly attached to their therapist or they will enter into and create conflicts without realizing how.

How Can You Tell? How do you know you are having a "transference reaction"? It's not always easy, but you probably are if the client is having a powerful reaction that is not justifiable to a reasonable person. In other words you as the therapist know that what they are feeling and saying about you is in error but they insist on the belief about you.

Once you know and understand this you begin to learn to disarm and

no longer strong-arm your partner in communication. You learn that your over-reaction is about you and not them in most cases. Overtime couples can work their negative transference and projections and not take them out on each other but rather direct them where they belong.