

Under and Over-Involvement in Communication

Two kinds of reaction in therapy can significantly affect, and even harm, communication: *under-involvement* and *over-involvement*. “The under-involved psychotherapist is aloof, cool, and insufficiently responsive. The over-involved psychotherapist has lost touch with boundaries and become submerged in the client’s world (Westland, 2015, p. 95).

Use the prompts below to become more aware of what being too much, and too little, engaged with a client looks like.

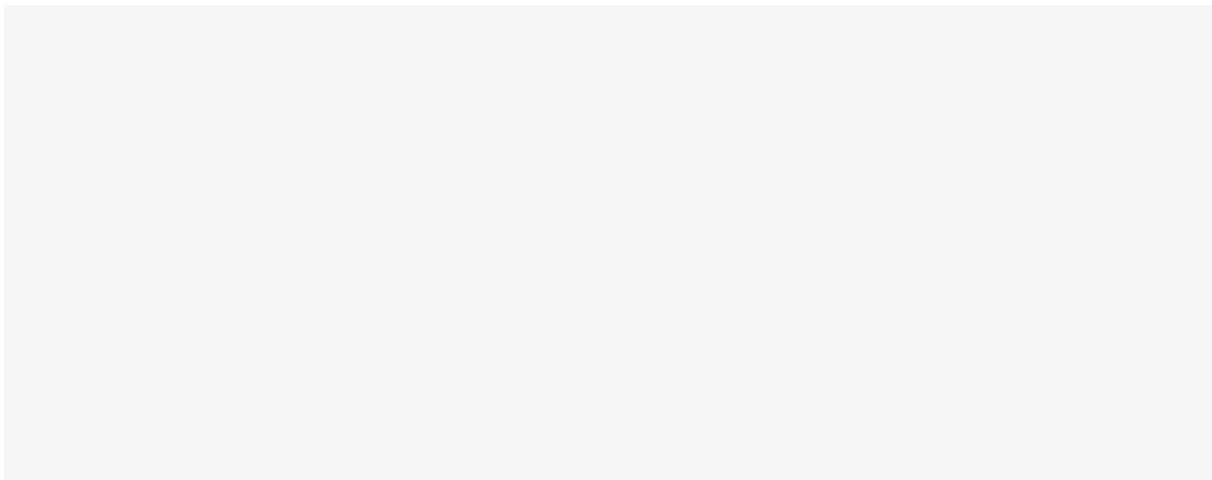
Pair up with a partner. One person will be the ‘client’ and the other the ‘therapist’. The ‘client’ sits comfortably and talks about whatever enters their mind. The ‘therapist’ sits quite closely, in front of the client, listening and not speaking.

Tell the ‘client’ you (the ‘therapist’) are beginning the exercise and adopting one of three engagement positions: neutral, over-involved, and under-involved.

Step one – Adopt a neutral reaction/stance – remain present with no particular type of reaction or engagement.

Listen for a short time like this. Note your awareness mentally and physically.

Describe how it felt when the exercise finished.

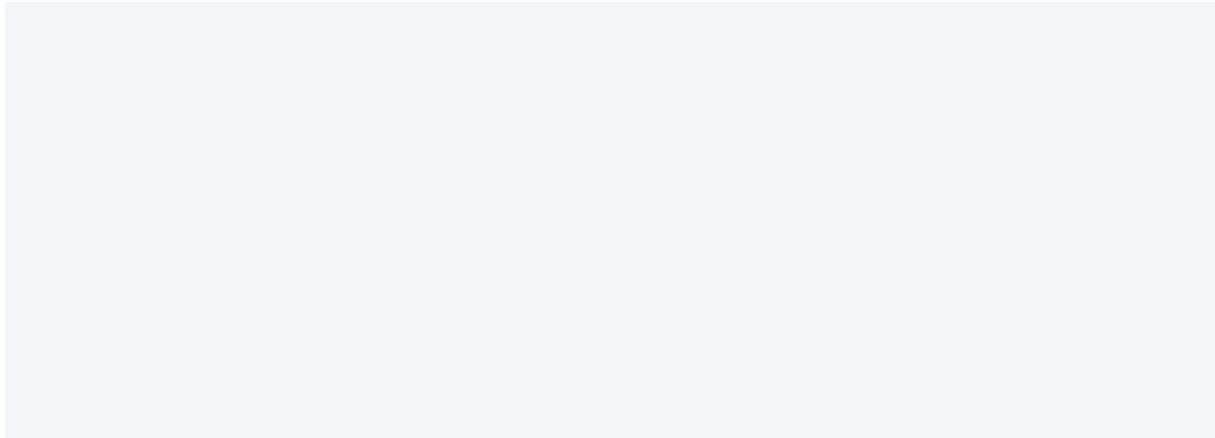


Tell the ‘client’ you (the ‘therapist’) are adopting the second of three engagement *positions*.

Step two – Adopt an over-involved reaction/stance – over-engage yourself with the client, feeling fully and emotionally involved in everything they have to say. Lean forward if it helps.

Listen for a short time like this. Note your awareness mentally and physically.

Describe how it felt when the exercise finished (perhaps you felt tense, upset, angry, sad, etc., depending on what was being talked about).

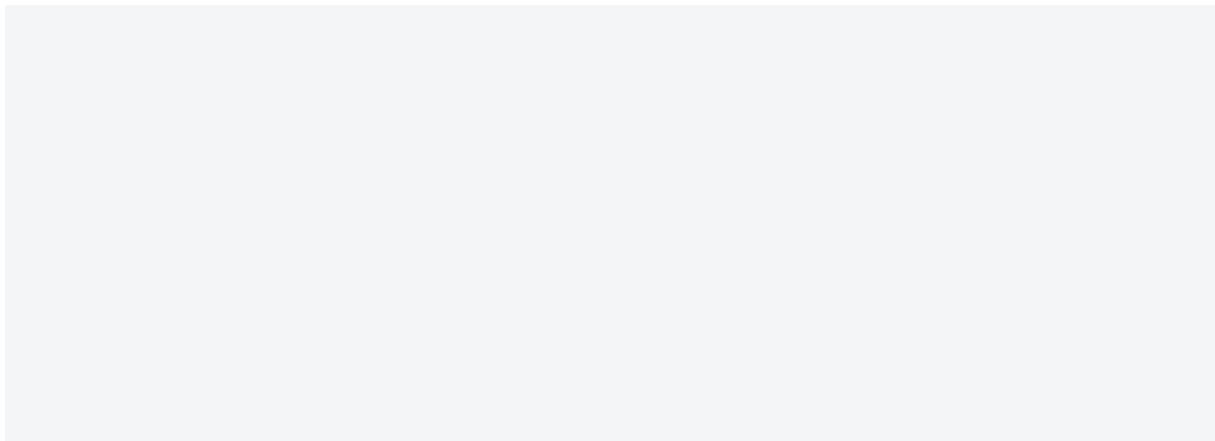


Tell the 'client' you (the 'therapist') are adopting the third of three engagement *positions*.

Step three – Adopt an under-involved reaction/stance – disengage yourself from the conversation. Physically and mentally distance yourself from what the client shares. Perhaps gaze out the window or think about a recent event.

Listen for a short time like this. Note your awareness mentally and physically.

Describe how it felt when the exercise finished (perhaps you were aware of the emotional distance between you and the client).



Reflect on how each 'position' felt. Ask yourself: where should my balance be when engaged with a client?

Also, ask for your clients' thoughts. Even with their eyes shut, did they sense a difference in your connection?

References

- Westland, G. (2015). *Verbal and non-verbal communication in Psychotherapy*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.