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Therapeutic Holding and Containing

What is needed is a form of holding, such as a mother gives to her distressed child. There are various ways in which one adult can offer to another this holding (or containment). And it can be crucial for a patient to be thus held in order to recover, or to discover maybe for the first time, a capacity for managing life and life's difficulties without continued avoidance or suppression. (Casement, 1985, p.133) Text

Psychoanalytic theory refers to the concepts of holding and containing to express the parallel of how a mother allows a child to express emotion while keeping them safe. It also refers to the way the mother handles infant's projection of painful, angry, unbearable feelings, returning them to the child in a modified, contained way. The therapist provides a similar function helping the client work through their emotions with a reflective, 'Adult' therapist. In this way the client learns to think through and understand their emotional experience and to contain their own feelings.

Donald Winnicott's idea of 'holding' and Wilfred Bion's of 'containing' offer insight into the process:

Winnicott's 'holding' - Winnicott first used the term 'holding environment' (1953, 1971) to describe the optimal environment for 'good enough' parenting. He suggested that emotional problems developed when a person had been deprived such holding environments in childhood and that a level of holding was critical to the therapeutic environment.

A key function of the mother's early holding is to insulate her baby from the impact of stress, carefully choosing the moments to allow for frustrations to be allowed slowly into the child's experience.

The good-enough mother...starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure. (Winnicott, 1953)

Typically, a good-enough parent gradually increases the amount of time between a child's emotional expression of a reaction/need (e.g. crying) and the meeting of that need (feeding, comforting). Through this process, infants recognise they can survive being overwhelmed by emotions/needs, until the parent eventually comes and provides.

Bion's 'containing' – Bion's theory (1959, 1962) explains how a mother receives unwanted and/or overwhelming projections from an infant, processes them and then returns the experience to the infant in a modified, palatable form. This process also occurs in therapy with the therapist acting as a 'container', taking in thoughts/feelings from the client and re-representing them so they are both more understandable and less potentially destructive.

Bion's view is that infants become overwhelmed by their experience as they lack sufficient internal controls. The mother's containing function involves helping the infant develop a capacity for self-regulation. This infant takes in (internalises) this sense of being contained and experiences the mother's emotional availability and then will eventually develop their own capacity to do the same.

Bion extended his theorising to describe social groups as a type of 'maternal container' (1959).