

EXPLORING UNINTENDED HARM IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

- PHILIP COX



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Resource Guide

About Philip Cox

Philip's critical realist relationship to the topic began as a client, then over 2 decades as a therapist. More recently, Philip has published and run workshops around unintended harm, and developed to understand that by supporting therapists, we also support clients.

His Doctoral research of unintended harm is beginning to be applied in various contexts. Philip is passionate about social justice and giving voice to those who feel marginalised or silenced in society.



Philip Cox

Event Details

This talk focuses on the ethical and philosophical imperative 'do no harm' in psychotherapy, also known as unintended harm (iatrogenesis). Around 10% (Lambert, 2010) of the public say they feel harmed by attending psychotherapy. This figure significantly rises for marginalised groups. Between 27%-40% (Williams, Lyons, & Coyle, 1999; Macaskill & Macaskill, 1992) of therapist's report experiencing their personal therapy as harmful. The trend of complaints to all professional registration bodies is upwards.

The practice of naming and shaming those who get the delicate balance of good work vs making errors wrong is causing distress, which could drive an open and honest debate underground. This means the very ethical frameworks or codes of ethics meant to protect the public or practitioners from needing to complain, could themselves have an unintended and harmful impact.

Philosophically, we are the good and bad therapist too (Shohet, 2017): a practitioner involved in what is perceived as unintended harm, in many ways harms themselves. This talk considers the exploration of unintended harm as a sign of good rather than poor practice. Yet, the topic seems rarely discussed in trainings or openly amongst therapists. Here, we will create a safe space to explore what the public, therapists, and complaint trends seem to be telling us. We will also discuss what to do if you receive a complaint and how the Psychotherapy & Counselling Union, whose motto is 'Standing up for Therapists', could support you.

RESOURCES

Unintended harm in psychotherapy

Professional Standards Authority. (2016). *Regulation rethought: Proposal for reform*. London: Professional Standards Authority.

Psychotherapy and Counselling Union. <https://pandcunion.ning.com/>

Scott. O. Lilienfeld. (2007). Psychological treatments that cause harm. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 53(2), 53-70.

Robin Shoet. (2017). Exploring the dynamics of complaints. *Self & Society*, 45(1), 69-71.

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