



NAVIGATING  
**POWER**

IN THE  
COUNSELING  
SETTING

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# TODAY'S GOALS

- To discuss the subtle ways in which therapists enhance power imbalances in therapy and create unethical and detrimental dynamics in the therapy space.
- To promote self-awareness in clinicians in service of understanding the amount of power that is inherent and therapy and how to honor that discrepancy with client.
- To utilize an interpersonal process and dynamic lens to understand how to empower clients, model humility, and be willing to engage in difficult conversations around power imbalance.



# POWER



- Defined as the ability to influence the lives of others and their own lives.

## 5 Bases of Power

- Reward Power
- Coercive Power
- Legitimate Power
- Referent Power
- Expert Power

# OUR POWER

- We are often in the referent and expert power roles.
- This invokes a great deal of vulnerability at the outset of the therapeutic journey.
- Why do ethics exist? Ultimately, they exist to mitigate the potential abuses of power.





# OKLAHOMA LPC RULES



- LPCs shall not knowingly enter into a dual relationship(s) and shall take any necessary precautions to prevent a dual relationship from occurring.
- When the LPC reasonably suspects that he or she has inadvertently entered into a dual relationship the LPC shall record that fact in the records of the affected client(s) and take reasonable steps to eliminate the source or agent creating or causing the dual relationship.

# OKLAHOMA LPC RULES

- If the dual relationship cannot be prevented or eliminated and the LPC cannot readily refer the client to another counselor or other professional, the LPC shall complete one or more of the following measures as necessary to prevent the exploitation of the client and/or the impairment of the LPC's professional judgment:
- Fully disclose the circumstances of the dual relationship to the client and secure the client's written consent to continue providing counseling;
- Consult with the other professional(s) to understand the potential impairment to the LPC's professional judgment and the risk of harm to the client of continuing the dual relationship.





# OKLAHOMA LPC RULES

## Sexual Conduct with Current Clients

- Is prohibited
- LPCs shall not knowingly enter into a close personal relationship, or engage in any business or financial dealings with a former client for five (5) years after the termination of the counseling relationship.
- LPCs shall not engage in any activity that is or may be sexual in nature, as defined by the Board, with a former client after the termination of the counseling relationship. Sexual conduct with former clients is prohibited.



# WHY DO THESE EXIST?

- At the outset of the therapy relationship, there is a power imbalance.
- This continues throughout treatment; you are not “known” to them in the same ways you would be with a partner.
- And nor should you be or therapy is no longer working as it should.





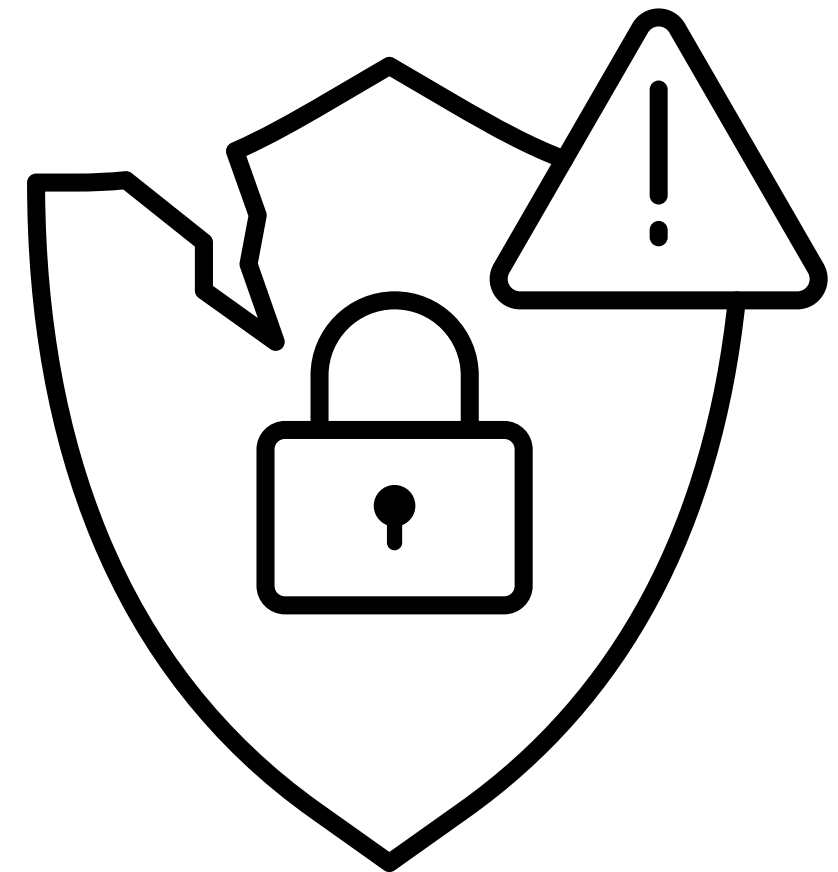
# SUBTLE BREACHES OF POWER



- Provide me with some examples of ways in which you have seen power imbalances occur in the therapy relationship?

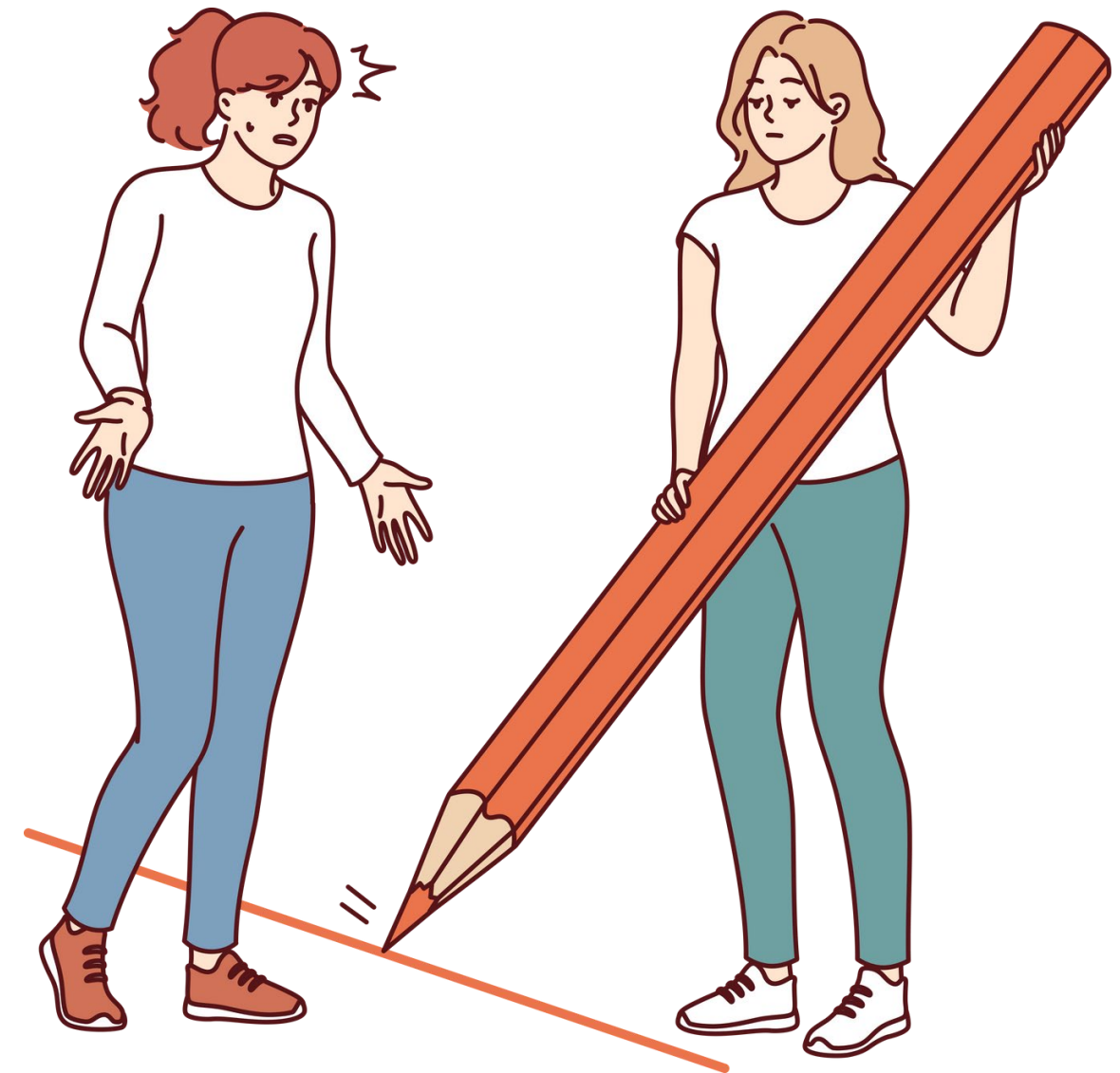
# SUBTLE BREACHES OF POWER

- Breaches in professionalism (i.e., showing up on time, ending on time, charging fees).
- Failing to take ownership and ascribing ruptures to a dynamic that exists within the client.
- Not being collaborative and informative to a client on the treatment plan and progress toward treatment goals.
- Making suggestions related to what the client should/should not be doing with their lives.
- Failing to process with the client their experiences in the room.



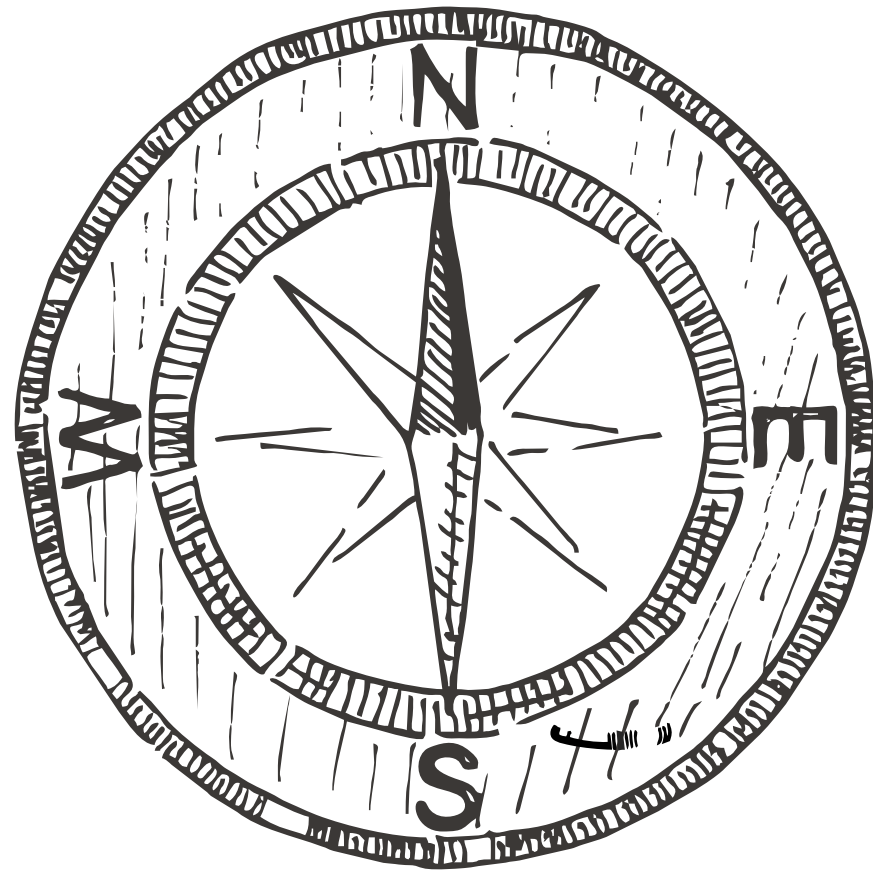
# SUBTLE BREACHES OF POWER

- It is my opinion that most boundary issues are an “us” issue and often result in the misuse of power.





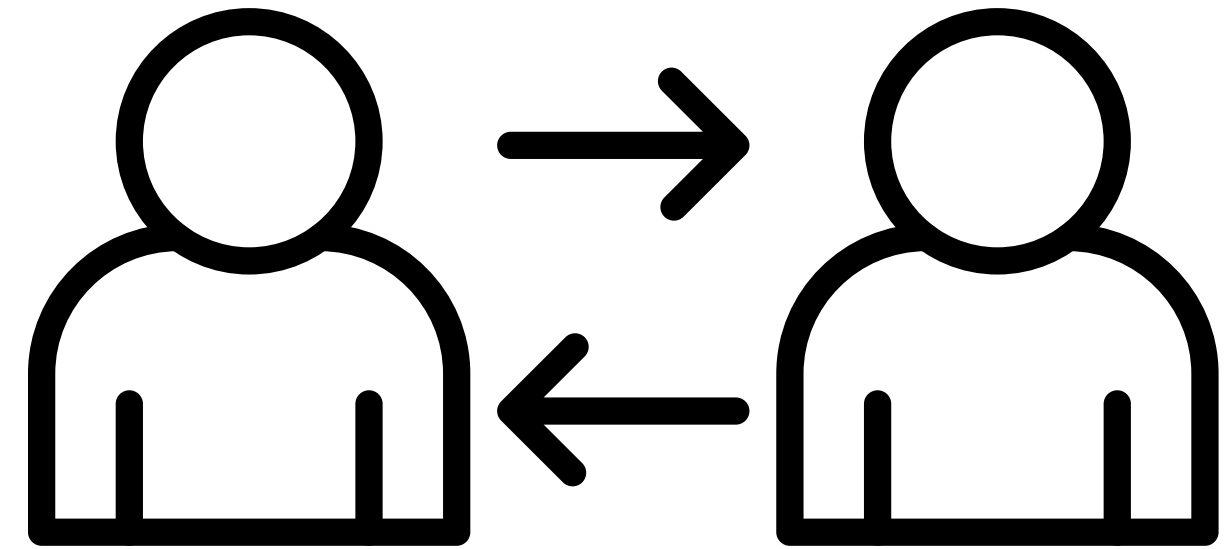
# NAVIGATING POWER IMBALANCES



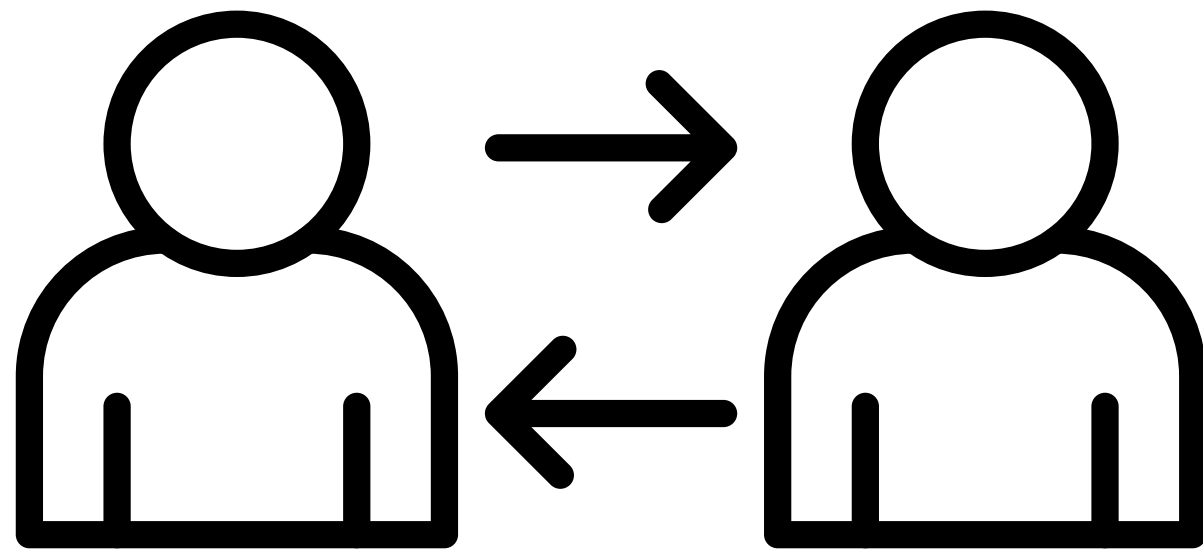
- This is first and foremost the responsibility of the clinician.
- We have to address ruptures and misuse as they happen and be willing to own our parts.
- This requires reflective practices by the clinician.

# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS

- The distinction between the overtly spoken content of what is discussed and the process dimension of how the therapist and client interact.
- Therapist makes a perceptual shift away from the overt content of what is discussed and is beginning to track the relational process of how two people are interacting as well.



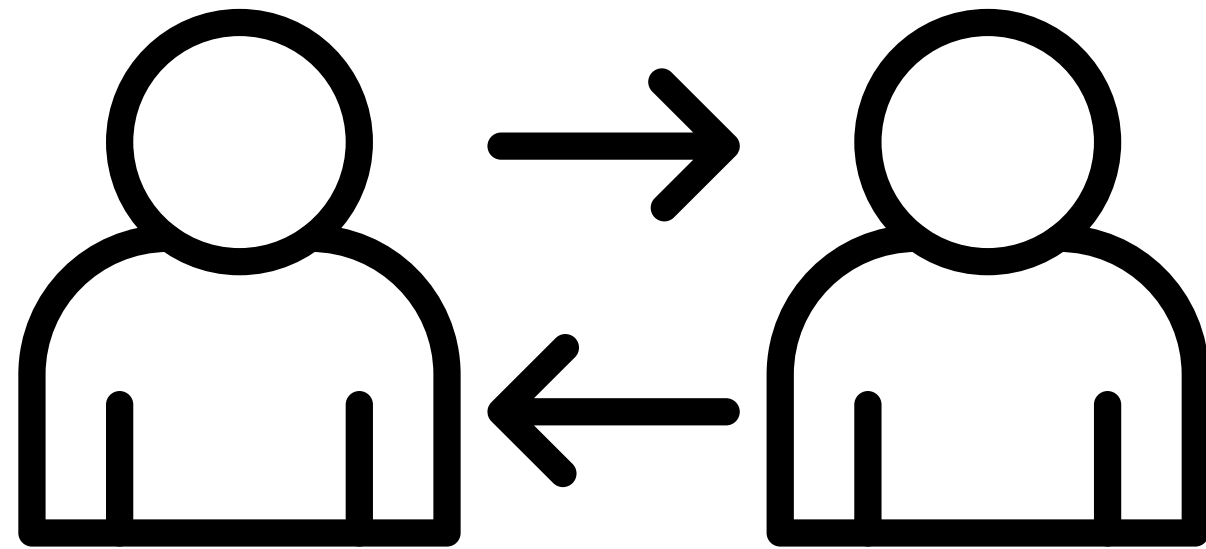
# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS



- We step beyond the usual social norms at times and talk more directly with clients about their interaction or what may be going on between them right now.
- Here - and - now, present-focused interventions; the focus is on you and me.



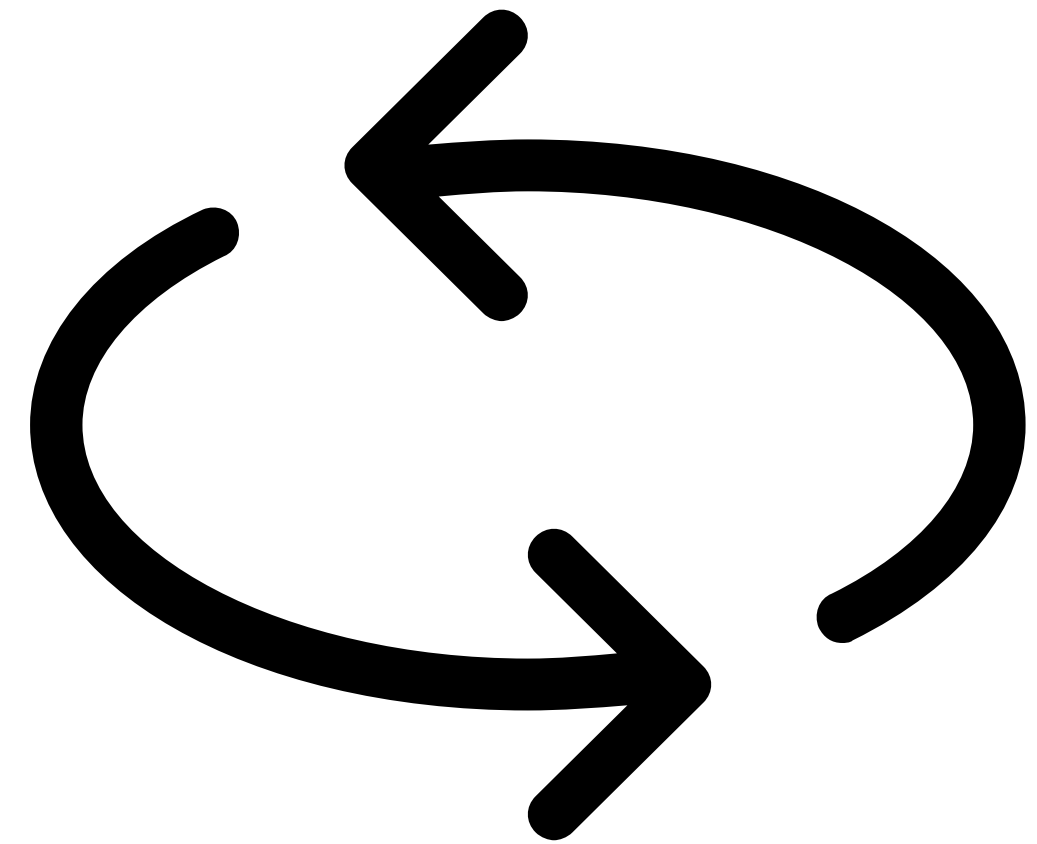
# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS



- This leads to process comments.
- We are ultimately linking the problem the client is talking about to their current interaction in the therapist-client relationship.
- Highlighting how the client is using the same problematic thought processes, faulty expectations, or ineffective coping strategies with the therapist, right now, that have been causing problems with others in their lives.

# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS

- Here's the twist though...
- When it comes to power dynamics, we have to reflect also on how we are using the same faulty thought processes, expectations, and ineffective intervention strategies with our client, right now, that have been causing problems in our treatment with others.
- This may even require us to take ownership of this dynamic with the client, in the here-and-now.



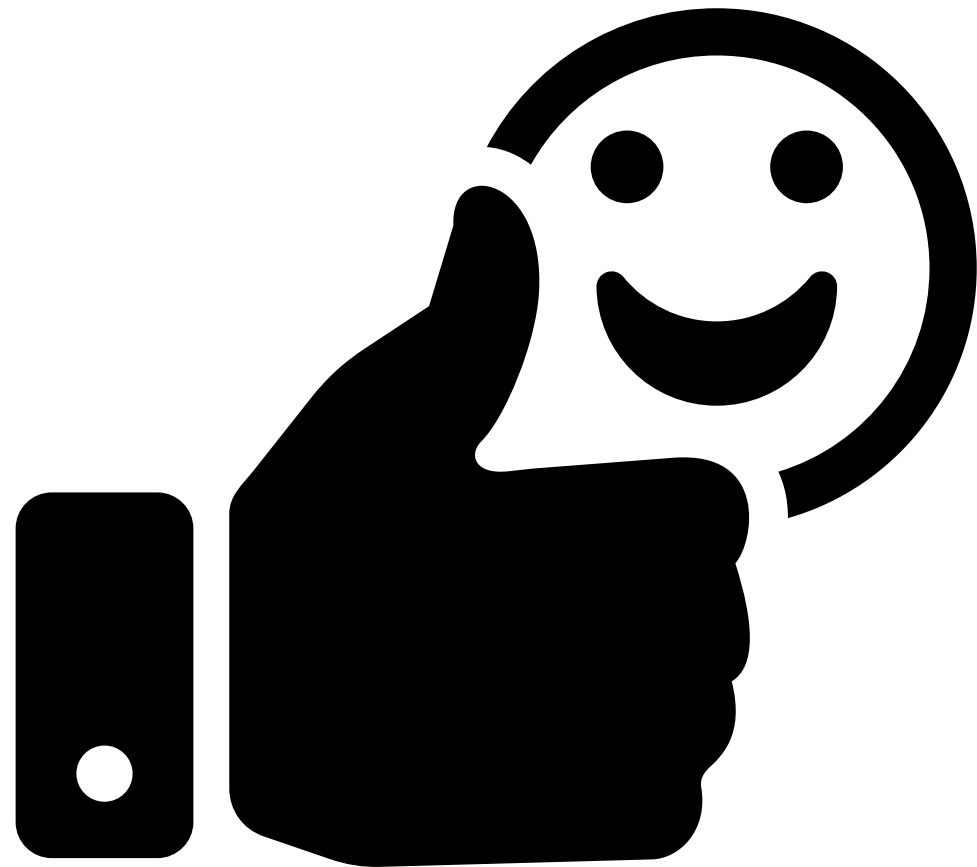


# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS

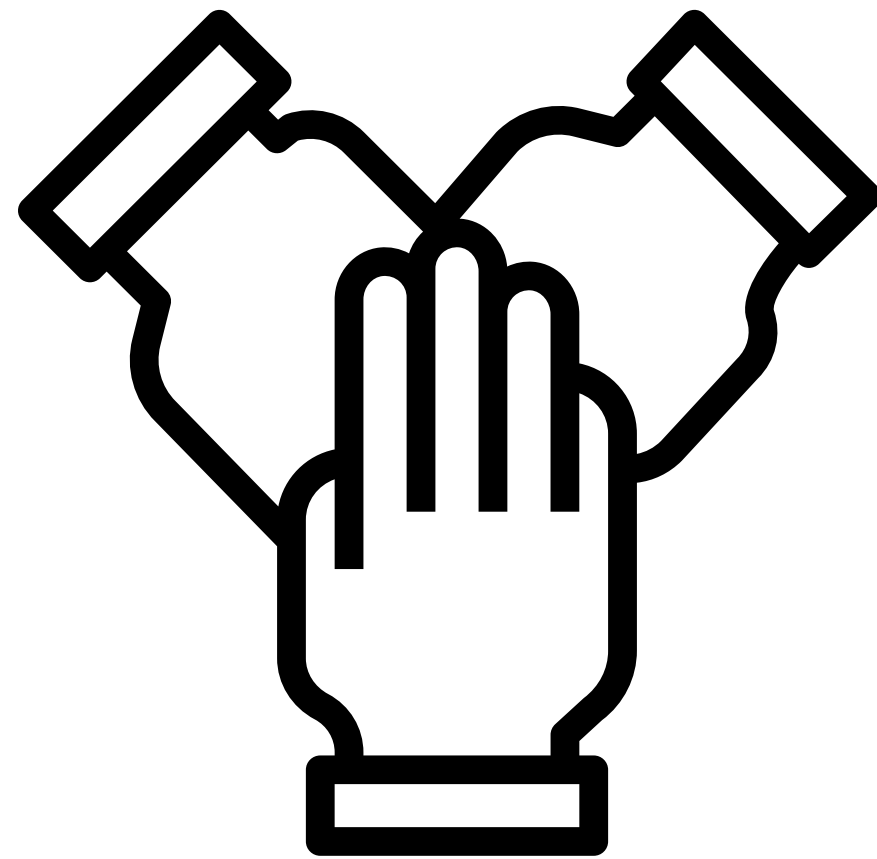
- We must be non-defensive in this process, helping to restore ruptures.
- This is using meta-communication, or narrating the process – this is a collaborative invitation for genuine understanding and honest communication – something they want and need.



# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS AND POWER



- We provide a new and more satisfying response to the client's old relationship patterns than they have usually found with others.
- And I believe that this demystifies therapy and brings some balance to the power differential; it humanizes us and evokes vulnerability.

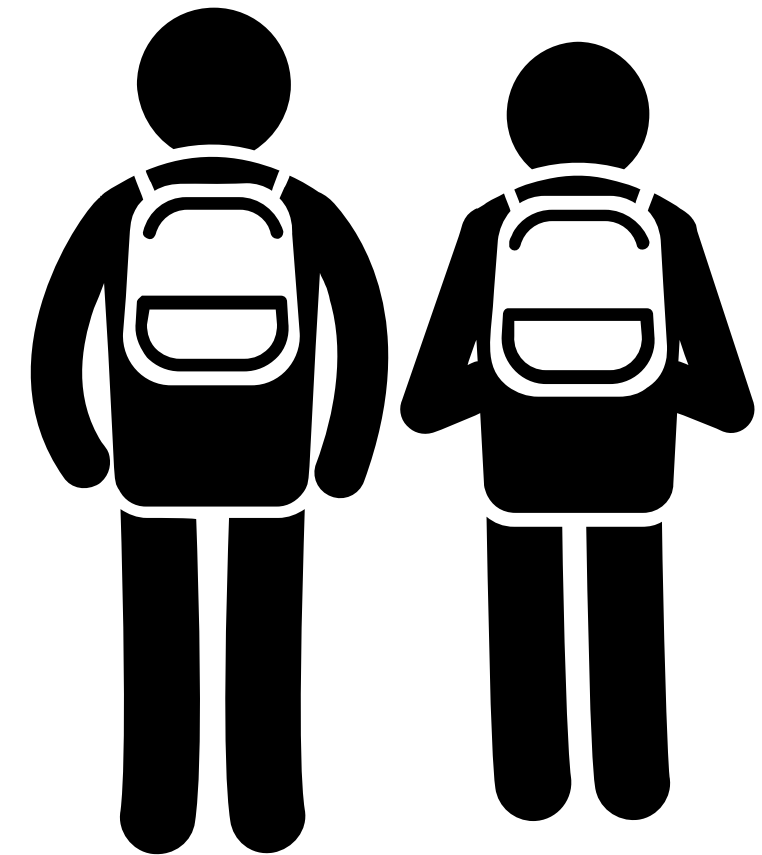


# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS and power

- We are here to provide clients with an experience rather than an explanation.
- I think this subtle shift moves us away from the role of expert into a more collaborative space where we can use our power for empowerment.
- The reason I am drawn to dynamic and humanistic forms of therapy is because they require the clinician to resist being the holder of all knowledge; the true answers come from within the client.

# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS and power

- We are fellow travelers; looking for a story rather than listening to a story.
- Clients change when they live through emotionally painful and long-ingrained relational experiences with the therapist, and the therapeutic relationship gives rise to new and better outcomes that are different from those anticipate and feared.





# INTERPERSONAL PROCESS and power



- If they re-experience important aspects of their primary problem with the therapist, and the therapist's response does not fit the old schemas or expectations, the client has the real-life experience that some relationships can be another way.
- This is empowerment and it's also owning the power we have in the room to be someone significant in their lives, but not someone who just dispenses well-being.