

# WHEN HURT REMAINS

RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON THERAPEUTIC FAILURE



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# ***When Hurt Remains: Relational Perspectives on Therapeutic Failure***

Edited by Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar and Rachel Shalit

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn



Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar and Rachel Shalit

**I feel strange reviewing a book I contributed to.** A strong sense of impropriety gurgles in my gut as if I'm shamelessly promoting myself though, in fact, I make no profit from book sales of any sort. And still, despite an authoritative voice that says, "Let someone else write about this book," I am drawn to share at least an overview of the stories others wrote about their experiences with therapeutic failure.

**It's not an easy topic to approach.** I learned from Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar (see his reflection on page 58) that his first attempt to gather submissions was, well, he was rather ignored. The second time, perhaps the stars were more aligned or therapists felt safer revealing vulnerable moments in their clinical day, or perhaps they were more willing to share what didn't go quite as planned (though I wonder how in fact we can preplan the outcome of a client session when it's constantly co-created, moment-by-moment as each minute flows by). Regardless, I felt honored to be invited to contribute and humbled by my deeper feelings of guilt and shame as I recalled a professionally and a life changing incident, which at the end of a lengthy self-reflective process I did opt to share.

***When Hurt Remains: Relational Perspectives on Therapeutic Failure***, edited by Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar and Rachel Shalit, with a foreword by Andrew Samuels, offers personal stories about professional moments of failure. Fifteen psychotherapists define failure from their own perspective and courageously revisit client cases, some that occurred many years ago, to share intimate and revealing vignettes where the therapeutic bond was disrupted, where they were deeply wounded, and for some those wounds changed the course of their career. For all, these wounds remain as a tear in the fabric of their being. The book is actually entitled, *When Hurt Remains*, because the stories were so painfully "carved into" the contributors' being they significantly impacted them (xxv).

## Can we fully recognize our failures without shaming ourselves and others?

**The stage is set** with a modicum of acceptance that failure, misattunement, and rupture are considered crucial to human development, a cornerstone in the formation and maintenance of attachment relationships. In fact, some say failure supports life altering growth, a result from what is therapeutically known as rupture and repair. Failure is considered inevitable, perhaps even necessary in the realm of relating. Yet, as psychotherapists we often hold ourselves to a higher bar, a place of perfection, or at least a state free from failure, void of mistakes. In truth, most if not all therapists must know that some client relationships end painfully. Yet, as Asaf and Rachel note, for the most part therapists are left to carry that hurt on their own. Sometimes the pain is processed in supervision or personal therapy, but for the most part, we, as therapists, carry it—secretly, shamefully—for a long, long time.

**Asaf and Rachel** asked themselves and potential contributors: Can we fully recognize our failures without shaming ourselves and others? Can we bear it while attending to our narcissistic wounds and rescue fantasy? The purpose, then, of this book is to address these questions while examining what relational theory and practice can contribute to both our ability to understand and to work with therapeutic failure. The book was edited with four audiences in mind: psychotherapists in training, clinicians, clients, and intelligent lay readers—people interested in psychotherapy who might find the book interesting and perhaps even inspiring. Asaf and Rachel “sought to portray the human side of the clinical picture, when hurt remained” (xxv). They write that the book is “intended to tell the story of our failed attempts to connect, to help, to make a difference, with honour, and respect, and kindness.” The contributors’ vignettes involve things that didn’t work, therapeutic mistakes, and empathic failures; some of these failures saved therapy, while others marked the end.

**The book is divided into five parts** (15 chapters in total): Beyond Boundaries; Techniques: Holding On and Letting Go; Enactments: When Biographies and Self-States Converge; Affects on the Edge; and Broader Perspectives. Each section begins with an

introduction that addresses the theme, explains the reasoning for inclusion, and offers a brief statement about the chapters within it.

**Beyond Binaries**, with chapters by Doris Brothers, Jessica Benjamin, and Elad Hadad, examines some of the binaries in thinking of therapeutic success and failure. Doris challenges the polarity of success and failure, highlighting their relativity and limitation. Jessica looks at the polarities of good and bad, the therapist’s ability to withstand badness. And Elad writes with uncertainty about success and failure in light of cultural indoctrination and expectation.

**Techniques: Holding On and Letting Go** involves three authors—Stuart Pizer, Matthias Wenke, and Shinar Pinkas—who share their hopes and their pain around failure with specific techniques. Stuart wonders about the potentiality of foreseeing the end of a technique’s usefulness. Matthias “portrays a painful collusive enactment technique taking over the therapist and the therapeutic process” (p. 35). And Shinar shares her story as a client who was touched by therapeutic limitations when held to one specific orientation.

**Enactments: When Biographies and Self-States Converge** is dedicated to therapeutic engagements where care and a deep abiding love developed between the client and therapist. Sharon Ziv Beiman writes about meeting with “illegitimate” self-states and how difficult it is to own and acknowledge these states. Shai Epstein brings together parental neglect, terror and shame within his personal story of a professional enactment as he tried to “save needy and wounded self-states of himself and his client” (pg. 67-68). And Offer Maurer’s writes about bullying and abusive cycles.

**In Affects on the Edge**, “Two analysts contributed to this section of dealing with strong, affects, affects on the edge, which at the time are too volcanic to experience” (p. 97). Muriel Dimen and Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar co-authored a chapter about affects that were “too frightening to bear” while Barbara Pizer looked at times when rage and anger were not expressed thus limiting the capacity to truly create intimacy and fully engage with one another.



## Can we bear it while attending to our narcissistic wounds and rescue fantasy?

**Finally, in Broader Perspectives,** the chapters address broader contexts in which failure may occur rather than what is failure. Joseph Schwartz self-examines his working life as a therapist looking at failure; Nancy Eichhorn offers a case study that addresses the question of actually learning from our mistakes and from our failures in a “culture dominated by accountability and fears of litigation.” Julianne Appel-Opper brings in intercultural perspectives that impact therapeutic acts, and Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar “looks at the characterological potential and risk in the therapeutic personality” (pg. 121).

**I offer a sincere warning** when sitting down to read this book—do so with willingness to accept the feelings that arise within you. These stories may resonate, may trigger parts of your own. It’s not an easy read, not a book to scan before you fall asleep at night. Sure some contributors maintain a professional stance, a sense of distance from the text as they talk about their experience or their thoughts; they offer more of an analytical presentation. And some open their veins and let the blood flow. The content is personal, real, at times gut wrenching and heart breaking. You are often witness to some of these contributors’ lonely secrets—themes and experiences that haunted them, wounded their psyche.

**I felt each person’s story**—even more so because I’ve written with several of the contributors in the past. I know their writing style, their orientation and professional work, but I didn’t know their hidden shame, their sense of failure that until now may have or perhaps may not have been revealed professionally. I appreciate the courage it took

to write these stories not knowing who will read them and how they will land on the audience.

**If, as the editors’ note,** these stories can normalize and de-shame therapeutic failure, if they can facilitate the creation of safe environments to share what isn’t working, what didn’t materialize as we thought, with honesty and acceptance, then the book has achieved one of its goals. Regardless of any anticipated outcomes, however, the book itself and the contributors who opened their lives and in part their souls, have succeeded in bringing to life a pivotal piece of literature that focuses on the relational aspects of therapy and what happens to the therapist in these engagements.

**Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar,** PhD, is a relational psychotherapist from Israel, founder of two relational body psychotherapy programs (in Israel and the UK), teaching and lecturing worldwide. His books include *Anatomy of Therapy* and *Touching the Relational Edge*. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *The International Body Psychotherapy Journal*, and an editor with *Body Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy, Psychotherapy and Politics International*, and *Self and Society*.

**Rachel Shalit** is an integrative and body-oriented psychotherapist, a board member of the Israel Association for Body-Psychotherapy, and a member of Psychosoma, the post-graduate Relational Body Psychotherapy School in Israel. Her previous career specialized in learning organizations (continuous improvement and methodologies). This passion is now oriented to the psychotherapy field.

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