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'I didn't expect to develop feelings for my psychologist'

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It's a cliché but ... ADOBE

"I was going through a rough patch in my life and wanted strategies for dealing with stress. I didn't expect to develop erotic feelings for my psychologist," Camille says.

Falling for your therapist is a romanticised, old cliché that seems to be the favoured plotlines of half of Hollywood's screenplays. But is it an actual thing? Given that almost 10 per cent of Australians received Medicare-subsidised mental health services in 2016-17 – that's 2.4 million people who have built relationships with a mental health specialist – it would be fair to assume Camille is not alone in her feelings.

It makes sense that the person who listens intently, who offers a supportive environment without judgement for you to gouge your innermost thoughts and bare your soul, might become someone you fancy. However, it's not just romantic thoughts that can be roused.

In psychology world, the term for a client projecting their feelings towards another person onto their therapist is "transference". Counsellor and copywriter, Kirsty Fanton, has lectured in psychology and counselling at the Jansen Newman Institute in Sydney and explains transference as "unfinished business from the past".

It's not just unrequited love or pent up sexual frustration either.

"While romantic or sexual feelings are most readily associated with transference in popular culture, the spectrum is far broader than that, including everything from challenging attitudes like distrust and hostility, to more facilitative ones, such as respect and openness. It all depends on the experiences and stories the client is bringing into the room and the relationship."

In day-to-day life, we subconsciously make associations with people and often treat them according to who they remind us of, and how that person made us feel. "Maybe your boss reminds you of your crotchety, critical Grandpa, so you cower in their presence or are highly sensitive to any feedback they provide on your work," Kirsty says.

In therapy, it is like a high-intensity bubble where vulnerabilities are shared and feelings from our past are magnified. Camille had tried a couple of counsellors before she clicked with her current one and now realises her lack of rapport with the former counsellors may have been related to negative transference. She admits her attraction to her recent psychologist grew over time.

"The more he listened, the more I realised how few men in my life had taken the time to hear me out. He never interrupted, he didn't scoff at things I said. Although he challenged me, it was always done with respect and care. He was easy to like."

Camille admits she made more regular appointments with her therapist and started to question if she was going just to see him, or if there was a valid reason to continue with the therapy. "I daydreamed about us together, having raunchy sessions in the therapy room. It was ridiculous. I'd convinced myself he was as into me as I was into him [this is known as countertransference]."

Even though Camille had insight into how she felt about her therapist, she locked those feelings down, intent on never coming clean, especially to him directly. "I renewed the mental health plan with my GP and she asked how it was going. I joked that I'd willingly run away with my psychologist. She encouraged me to raise those feelings with him."

Most clients would burn bright red at the notion of discussing transference with their psychologist. Who's going to admit they have sexual fantasies about the person sitting opposite listening to their life's woes?

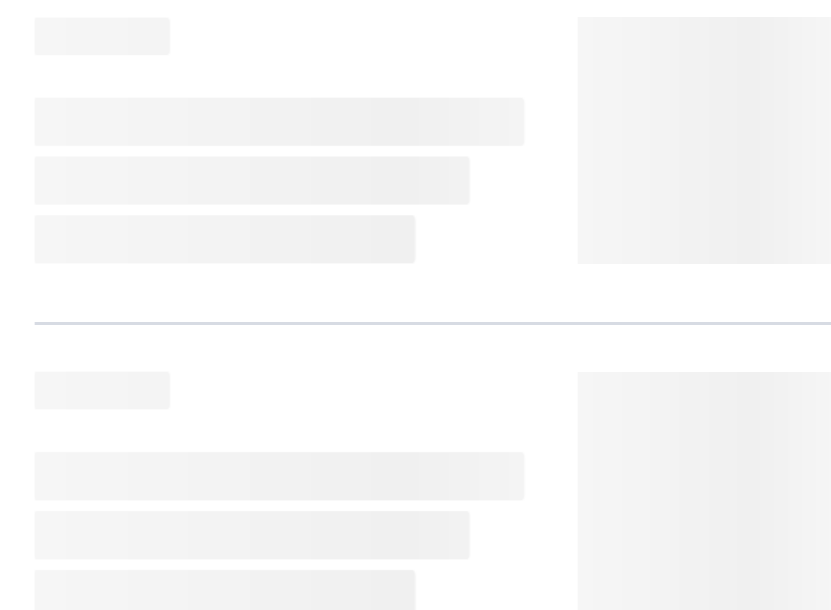
Kirsty says although it can be awkward, talking about your transferred feelings can be a powerful tool to develop the therapeutic relationship and also be a sign of a secure, well-formed relationship. "It's a way of bringing [a] client's history into the here and now and exploring it together to facilitate change."

Camille eventually summoned the courage to speak with her psychologist about it. "I was sure he'd refer me on to someone else but he didn't. He was professional and we unearthed some hefty themes in my past relationships that explained my misplaced attraction to him."

Any therapist worth their bank account will understand transference and be able to identify the triggers while upholding those all important professional boundaries. Sipping cocktails at sunset with your psychologist? That's much less likely. Sorry about that.

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