Therapy in the Age of Trump
William Doherty

We have entered the age of Trump, and if we pay attention to what our clients and communities need from us, marriage and family therapy will never be the same. We’re seeing families and friendships fracture along political lines. Some of our clients, especially immigrants, are stressed out about their future, and some are reliving experiences of being bullied or feeling as if their core values of a just society are threatened. Others clients are happy with the new Trump administration but feel alienated from friends on the other side. (Facebook has become a war zone.) And let’s face it, lots of therapists are stressed out too. I know therapists who are excited that Trump ascended to the presidency, but they, too, are concerned with the polarization in the country and the tearing of the social fabric.

What we’re seeing is the culmination of at least two decades of increasing divisiveness in our culture and politics, where those who differ are seen as dangerous enemies, not just misguided opponents. So how do we respond as therapists and citizens? For starters, we can acknowledge that the membrane between the personal world (the traditional domain of therapy) and the public/political world has ruptured all around us.

In truth, the personal--political membrane was always a fiction, as feminist and ethnic-minority therapists have long pointed out. Most of us, though, could do business as usual without inviting clients to share their reactions to what was going on in the public sphere. But now we need new tools like the ones my colleagues and I have been developing. Call them door openers. One is to inquire, at the outset of a session, whether clients are following what’s going on in the political world right now, and if so, how it’s affecting them. The result is that many clients open up about anxieties and relationship strains they hadn’t previously shared, probably because they thought the therapy room was supposed to be a politics-free zone---as we ourselves may have believed. Another is an open letter for the waiting room or a therapist’s website. Here’s an example of a letter I’ve put out into world:

“Dear Clients, We’re living in troubled times. I feel it, and most people I know feel it. I’m writing this note to let you know that I’m open to talking about something not always brought up in therapy: how what’s going on in the public and political world is affecting you and your relationships, and how you’re coping.
• After a divisive presidential election, a lot of people are upset and feeling discouraged by the political infighting in this country.
• There’s great uncertainty about what the upcoming years will look like. Some people are feeling alarmed, insecure, and threatened, while others feel hopeful that necessary change will happen. And those two kinds of people are often at odds with one another.
• I see both liberal and conservative members of our community feeling as if their values are no longer acceptable in the public arena—and to some of their friends and family.
  The list could go on. For now, consider yourself invited to bring your concerns about the public world into our conversations in therapy. No expectation or requirement that you do so, of course—just if you think it might be helpful.
  I’m here to listen, support you, and help you figure out how to manage today’s stresses while living a life that’s in keeping with your personal and community values.”

Once clients open up (and they do when invited), then we can help them cope with political stress just as we do any other kind of stress: through buffering methods like reducing exposure to the 24/7 news cycle, refusing to be baited by people who just want to goad them, and self-care efforts. The other kind of coping—active coping—is about helping clients enact their civic values in the world via action steps such as getting better informed through reputable sources, donating to causes they support, volunteering to help others, getting politically active, or (as one client decided) being kinder to society’s “others” in public. And when clients are having powerful, dysregulated emotional responses to the political situation, we can help them unpack how it connects to their personal journeys.

Then there’s the world outside the therapist’s office. I see as healer with something important to offer our neighbors and communities. In my end, I’ve been doing depolarization workshops, including one on how to talk to friends and family who differ politically, and one on how to talk with children about what’s going on in the country. I also facilitated a weekend dialogue in Ohio between a small group of Donald Trump supporters and a small group who voted for Hillary Clinton. The goal was to learn if people could better understand their differences (beyond stereotypes) to see if there were common values and to share, if possible, something hopeful with their community and the larger world. For me, it was like couples therapy with 21 people—intense, painful, illuminating, and ultimately gratifying. At their spring reunion, the group decided to stick together and create a new kind of town hall meeting where people actually listen to one another. And I and my colleagues with Better Angels project are
about to do a new dialogue that will be turned into a documentary film, and we’re hoping to do a summer One America bus tour to spread depolarization efforts nationally. (To learn more or to get involved, www.better-angels.org and www.citizentherapists.com.

It’s time to start seeing ourselves as citizen therapists, which means that we are open to talking with our clients about the public stress they are experiencing and we’re willing to be healers in our communities. We know how to promote the kind of personal agency that’s necessary for a self-governing, democratic people---a people whose worlds are public as well as private. MFTs are connectors, trust builders. We understand the complexity of human relationships. We know that embracing differences is difficult but life enhancing. If we expand our vision of our work, we can contribute to a flourishing democracy where people can be agents of their own lives and builders of the commonwealth.

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