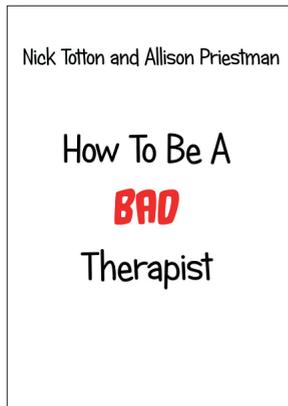


BOOK REVIEW

How to be a Bad Therapist

by Nick Totton and Allison Priestman

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How to be a Bad Therapist

Nick Totton and Allison Priestman

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Since on some level I always thought of myself as a bad therapist, I wanted to check if I had it right. I had the sense that this book would give me some insight into my compulsion to do good, to help, to be of assistance, to do things properly and by the rules, etc. – all those worthy aspirations I have always struggled with, having been brought up to be a good girl who gives back to her community. I always thought these qualities would make me a good therapist, but perhaps in the end, they led me up the garden path, so to speak, instead of out into the woods, the savannah, the wilds, the deserts, the Antarctic – and into my domesticated garden.

During my twenty years of administration and organizational work with the EABP, I have always been concerned with such issues as regulations, membership criteria, training standards, accreditation, ethical guidelines, good practices, research, publications, resources... all good, because of course these are of great importance – on an organizational level. They all contribute to enhancing our profession, grounding our work, and making it accessible to more people. Dealing with these issues makes us think – they stimulate discussion, along with a sense of community. We learn from each other in the process.

But then, when you sit in that room with another person opposite you who has come to you most probably because in some way they are suffering, you are alone, you are naked, and all the knowledge, rules, and guidelines in the world do not help you relate directly. You are thrown back on your uncomfortable sensations, on your own fear of intimacy, perhaps your ideas of right and wrong. You hang on to that label of therapist – the one who knows. You *think* of all those things you could say, that the client could do – the techniques you could use to get through to them. Between you and your client are a filter of dos and don'ts, maybes, coulds, shoulds, and woulds.

This delightful book brought such feelings of relief. In a warm and fun way, it deals with how to “un-domesticate” yourself, how to leave aside all that knowledge to be in the moment, how to take off the gloves, get messy, make mistakes, come back to yourself and to the person in front of you, and let that wild part of yourself out of the cage – that curious, playful part of yourself who can react in the moment, trust yourself, and the possibility for relationship.

The authors open with this declaration of intent:

... we aim to throw open some windows, to bring fresh air into the discourse about what makes a good or bad therapist and to offer some redefinitions of therapy. We suggest that therapy isn't an expert knowledge system, open to being standardised and manualised, but is more akin to local, indigenous, embodied, and relational forms of knowledge. Therapy isn't primarily an academic activity, and we would argue is not best taught in an academic, rigorously assessed context. We are interested in questioning who sets the rules. Are the rules and expectations of how to be a good therapist the most helpful ones? In the search for high standards and protection of the client has something been lost?

Rather than offering a restrictive model of what should and shouldn't be done, training could re-frame itself to look at what's getting in the way of the practitioner's ability to be in contact, offer intimacy, create, and maintain an appropriate relationship. Training to explore how to work creatively with, rather than act out from, our wounding.

The reality of working with clients is that much of the time we are flying by the seat of our pants. Counselling and psychotherapy, especially when we work relationally, is often an unpredictable process. We will explore how to embrace the inherent messiness, awkwardness, and un-knowableness.

The book grew out of group work done on Zoom during the pandemic – an ideal time to explore new ways of working in a creative way – a time when no one knew the rules, so everyone was open and curious about what came up. And the message that appeared was:

“...you do not have to be good.” It is possible to work ethically, relationally, with awareness of power dynamics, to relax and trust in your personal embodied knowledge and that of your clients.

The book chapters address the following topics:

- Good and Bad Therapists (and People)
- Ethics and Technique
- Intimacy, Disclosure, Mutuality and Enactment
- Privilege and Power
- Therapy as Wild
- Play and Relaxation

Nick Totton says of himself, “Regulation and accreditation hardly existed when I started, and when they knocked at the door, I didn't like the sound of it, so I never signed up.” However, this has not stopped him from working as a psychotherapist for nearly forty years. In addition, he is a trainer, supervisor, and has written wonderful books that contribute to our professional knowledge and thinking: *Psychotherapy and Politics*; *Embodied Relating: The Ground of Psychotherapy*; *Wild Therapy: Undomesticating Inner and Outer Worlds*; and *Body Psychotherapy for the 21st Century*.

Co-author Alison Priestman has worked as an Embodied-Relational Therapy psychotherapist for nearly 20 years and as a trainer for 13 years. She is a member of the Embodied-Relational Therapy training team and has worked extensively with Nick Totton.

This highly readable book convinced me that perhaps, I am not so bad after all!



Jill van der Aa-Shand trained as a body psychotherapist in the 1990's. In 2021, she was granted an honorary membership by the EABP for her many years of service – congress organizer, Secretariat, General Secretary, Vice President, and Managing Editor of the International Body Psychotherapy Journal (IBPJ).

She is the author of *Just a Leaf Falling*, and is currently working on *Perspectives*, interviews with Dutch artists living in Limburg, to be published in Dutch in 2022.