

Therapist Neutrality in a Polarised World: *Clinical Wisdom for Difficult Conversations*

An online webinar with
Dr Brooke Laufer and Dr Jason Herr

Zoom Webinar
14 August 2025, Thursday
Times:
6:00 pm – 9:00 pm, London UK
1:00 pm – 4:00 pm, New York, USA

CPD hours: 3 / CE credits: 3



Location: Online streaming only
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“A therapist’s neutrality, coupled with empathy and authenticity, allows clients to experience themselves without fear of judgment or rejection.” — Carl Rogers

What if, in trying to help, we unconsciously begin to *save*?

Sophie (not her real name), a university student in her early 20s, begins therapy after dropping out of her course. She’s flat, disillusioned, and unsure what she wants. In sessions, she voices a mix of loneliness and political alienation—scepticism about climate action, frustration with performative activism, a sense that no one means what they say anymore. Her therapist Agnes, seeking to validate her distress and to make Sophie feel heard, begins to steer the conversation: exploring intergenerational betrayal, late capitalism, the emotional impact of systemic collapse.

Over time, Sophie begins to feel her therapy sessions seem more and more like discussions in disillusionment. One day, she arrives subdued. *“I think I just wanted help understanding why I feel disconnected from everyone,”* she says. *“But now I feel like I’m supposed to care about something bigger than me—and I don’t even know who I am.”* Soon she stops coming to sessions.

Agnes, the therapist, is left wondering:

- Did the client see her efforts at attunement as projection?
- **Had she, as the therapist, opened up space—or occupied it?**



Why this training—and why now?

In recent years, many therapists find themselves questioning the ethical lines they were trained to respect and never cross. Whether motivated by empathy, social justice, or ethical conviction - they've begun interpreting client material through the lens of their own social, political, or cultural frameworks - often without realising it.

There has been a shift toward viewing socio-political concerns as central to clinical work. Rather than maintain a stance of neutrality, therapists identify oppressive systems they feel a client may be experiencing. Many may also disclose their own political beliefs. Indeed, a number of mental health professional organisations have adopted these ideologies in their scholarship, mission statements, and educational curricula.

On online forums and psychotherapy platforms today, it is commonplace to find therapists discussing and debating ideological stances, weaving political narratives into therapy dialogues and some are even adopting activist-aligned identities. **While such shifts may come from good intentions, they risk distorting the therapeutic alliance in therapy rooms and can have a profound effect on the therapeutic process, potentially skewing the focus away from clients' individual needs and toward a broader, politically charged narrative.**

Victim/Saviour Identification and Neutrality

In their victim/saviour identification, therapy providers can easily lose sight of neutrality, at great detriment to the integrity of this healing profession.

The shift from a neutral stance in therapy to a more prescriptive one - where therapists impart their socio-political views or anticipate trauma from political changes - risks prioritising the therapist's worldview over the client's individual experiences. A therapist is more likely to subtly imply that clients either need to be enlightened to certain social or political concerns, or saved from their oppression. Rather than empowering clients to work through personal challenges, this approach risks fostering a dependency on the therapist or encouraging clients to adopt fears or grievances that may not have been central to their lives. Effective therapy, by contrast, empowers clients to trust themselves and develop independent skills.

This training doesn't argue *against* values—but it **asks us to pause and consider the cost of replacing neutrality with ideology.**

- Can we still hold space when a client expresses views we disagree with?
- Do we validate only when we feel aligned?
- Are we treating the person—or the problem we perceive them to represent?

A therapy room is a sacred common ground where connection, tolerance, and non-judgement is fostered. Here, neutrality is the key which allows clients to explore a wide range of thoughts, feelings, and possibilities without judgment, even when they oppose or clash with the personal viewpoints of the therapist. **Establishing a non-judgmental environment is perhaps one of the most visible manifestations of therapeutic neutrality.**

What we'll explore together

This training is grounded in four major ethical and clinical dilemmas facing contemporary psychotherapists:

◆ Therapist Overidentification with Sociopolitical Causes

Therapists may adopt frameworks such as liberation psychology or anti-oppressive therapy without examining whether these models are shaping the client's process—or replacing it. When a therapist is motivated by a



desire to save and a strong sense of purpose, they may implicitly suggest that certain perspectives or beliefs are correct and others are harmful or misguided. This can lead to a limited, one-sided perspective that doesn't give clients space to form their own views or explore issues from multiple angles.

◆ The 'Persecuted Saviour' Complex

Driven by empathy and conviction, therapists may unconsciously project victimhood onto clients, imagining themselves as protectors, educators, or moral guides. This training will explore how to **recognise and regulate the rescuing impulse**, ensuring it doesn't override the client's own agency or resilience.

◆ Self-Disclosure and Advocacy in the Therapy Room and Online

From bios to blogs to clinical interventions, therapists are increasingly open about their views. But **when is transparency helpful, and when does it create pressure or distortion?** We'll look at the evidence around therapist self-disclosure and how online identities may unconsciously shape in-room dynamics.

◆ The Chain of Trust and Institutional Authority

Therapists often work within ethical frameworks issued by institutions that may themselves be influenced by political or ideological pressures. **How do we stay ethically anchored without becoming uncritically loyal to shifting guidelines, training trends, or professional consensus?** This training equips therapists to remain grounded in critical thinking and clinical evidence.

What's at stake if we don't engage with this?

- Clients may begin to edit themselves, anticipating our approval or disapproval
- Therapists risk becoming saviours or overly passive, depending on the client's worldview
- **The therapy room becomes a site of moral affirmation, rather than emotional exploration**
- Practitioners absorb activist or ideological roles that can lead to emotional burnout and ethical blurring

Without recalibrating our stance, we risk turning therapy into a charged process that can detract from the client's capacity for growth and adaptability, which are at the core of therapy. This training re-prioritises resilience and tolerance as the foundational elements for effective therapeutic outcomes

Can this actually be taught? Yes—and it must be.

Neutrality isn't detachment. It's a fundamental principle that shapes the very foundation of the therapeutic dynamic. It is also an ethical commitment and a clinical skill that requires reflection, feedback, and practice. Drawing on contemporary ethics, real-world case vignettes, and psychological literature (Yalom, 2002; Barnett, 2011; Peterson, 2002), Brooke and Jason will lead participants through practical tools for:

- Identifying where and how bias enters the room
- Recognising overreach and countertransference in politically charged work
- Re-establishing neutrality as a position of **ethical maturity and relational respect**

This is about creating a space where the client's voice remains primary, even when the therapist cares deeply.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this webinar, participants will be able to:



- Define therapeutic neutrality as an active stance fundamental to clinical integrity
- Identify how therapist overidentification with political or ideological frameworks can distort the client's narrative
- Spot persecuted-saviour dynamics and understand their ethical and emotional consequences
- Use clinical supervision and self-reflection tools to surface and manage unconscious ideological bias
- Evaluate the role of therapist self-disclosure in therapy sessions and digital contexts
- Critically assess institutional frameworks and interrogate the 'chain of trust' without defaulting to cynicism or conformity
- Practice neutral listening, reframing, and open-ended questioning across modalities and worldviews
- Support clients who bring in politically challenging material without avoidance or alignment
- Work across therapeutic modalities while retaining a consistent ethical core
- Clarify the therapist's role as a psychological clinician, rather than an advocate, moral guide, or educator

About the speakers

Dr. Brooke Laufer is a clinical psychologist, writer, and educator whose work bridges trauma, ethics, and the psychology of belief systems. Her background includes forensic assessment and perinatal mental health, alongside a longstanding interest in how professional identity can become entangled with cultural and political narratives.

Dr. Jason Herr, also a clinical psychologist, specialises in integrative psychotherapy with a focus on critical thinking and epistemology in clinical decision-making. Together, Brooke and Jason bring both scholarly and clinical depth to this topic—helping therapists not just understand the theory behind neutrality, but apply it meaningfully in practice. Their collaboration creates a space that is both psychologically rich and intellectually honest, allowing participants to wrestle with today's complexities without abandoning clinical integrity.

Dr Jason Herr is a licensed clinical psychologist based in Chicago with over two decades of experience. He trained at the University of Chicago's Neuropsychology Lab and has a strong foundation in neurology, neuropsychology, and psychopharmacology. In addition to his private practice, Jason has developed and taught graduate-level coursework, and led training programmes for psychology interns at the Regional Center for Mental Health, where he also supervised neuropsychological assessment batteries.

In his clinical work, Jason draws on his deep knowledge of brain-behaviour relationships to inform nuanced, integrative care—particularly in complex diagnostic areas such as ADHD and comorbid conditions. His style is collaborative, curious, and ethically grounded. A long-time advocate of therapeutic neutrality, he emphasises the importance of holding space without agenda, especially in a climate where ideology often enters the room. Jason currently offers online sessions and is licensed to practice across state lines under PSYPACT.

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