

When Attachment Becomes the Crisis: *The Relational Work That Unsettles Even Seasoned Clinicians*

An online webinar over 2 evenings with
Kathy Steele

Zoom Webinar
10 & 11 March 2026, Tuesday & Wednesday

Times on both days:

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm, London UK
2:00 pm – 5:00 pm, New York, USA

CPD hours: 6 / CE credits: 6



Location: Online streaming only

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depending on the ticket type)

The Moments When Therapy Tilts

There are moments in trauma therapy when the familiar maps simply fall apart.

A session begins with warmth, trust, even gratitude — and without warning, the field tilts. A small misattunement, a pause held half a second too long, an unexpected question — and suddenly the client's attachment system flips. The therapist is no longer a steady ally but a threat, a disappointment, or the embodiment of past betrayal. The emotional atmosphere thickens; the meanings shift; the relationship becomes unrecognisable.

These are the moments when therapists find themselves wondering:

- Which version of my client am I speaking to now?
- Why am I suddenly the rescuer, the enemy, the abandoning parent, or the idealised figure — all within the same session?
- How did warmth turn to rage so quickly?

Before long, the therapist is not only tracking the client's emotional world — **they are navigating multiple internal attachment figures, contradictory transferences, and roles they did not consent to play.**



This is where therapy becomes disorienting.
And where the real relational work begins.

When Security Becomes Destabilising

Most attachment trainings teach how secure bonds form, how they can be nurtured, and how early templates shape adult relationships. But few address the reality many trauma therapists face daily: clients for whom security is not simply difficult, but destabilising; for whom closeness evokes dread as much as longing; for whom attachment is not the pathway toward healing, but the very terrain of conflict.

These clients may idealise a therapist one moment and attack them the next. One internal state may cling; another may withdraw or strike pre-emptively. A gesture of kindness may land as intrusive; a boundary, as abandonment.

Therapists often feel:

- off-balance
- confused
- guilty
- pulled into roles of rescuer, persecutor, caretaker
- unsure what “version” of the relationship they are suddenly in

This training begins where most attachment work stops:

with the destabilising, contradictory, emotionally charged realities of attachment systems shaped by trauma and dissociation.

Beyond Attachment Theory: The Live Relational Field

Across two evenings, Kathy Steele — internationally recognised for her clarity, depth, and clinical precision — leads us directly into this territory:

attachment as it unfolds moment by moment in the therapeutic relationship.

Not as a developmental concept, but as a shifting relational field in which:

- multiple internal attachment figures carry contradictory expectations
- transferences collide and reorganise
- therapists are cast into unexpected relational roles
- the relationship itself becomes both the site and the tool of change

Drawing on over four decades of clinical experience and the structural dissociation model she co-developed with Ellert Nijenhuis and Onno van der Hart, Kathy will help therapists decode:

- why warmth flips into fear or fury
- why certain clients cannot sustain felt safety
- how internal relational systems compete for control
- how therapists can remain present without being pulled into enactments

This early clarity signals what participants will ultimately learn: to recognise shifts between internal attachment figures; to manage contradictory transferences without becoming destabilised; and to use their own countertransference as a clinical instrument in the rupture–repair loop.

Why Warmth Turns to Rage



One of the most disorienting features of these clients is the speed and intensity with which relational meaning changes. A therapist may be idealised at the start of a session and fiercely criticised by its end. A gesture of kindness may be experienced as intrusive; a boundary, as abandonment. These oscillations are not resistance or manipulation; they are expressions of fragmented internal working models — relational expectations forged in environments where attachment was unsafe, unpredictable, or profoundly confusing.

Understanding the client's internal logic is necessary. But it is not sufficient. Therapists must also understand their own reactions.

Countertransference as Clinical Compass

Transference is only half of the story; countertransference completes the field. When clients project contradictions — “you are my only hope,” “you don't care at all,” “you're just like them,” “you will leave me” — therapists may find themselves drawn into roles they did not consent to play: rescuer, adversary, ideal object, abandoned child, persecutor, or fragile caretaker.

The emotional impact can be startling: irritation, guilt, withdrawal, anxiety, defensiveness, or a powerful urge to make things “right” at any cost.

Kathy teaches not only how to understand these enactments, but how to work within them without collapsing into over-accommodation, reactivity, or burnout. She emphasises compassionate curiosity — a stance that acknowledges both the client's terror of intimacy and the therapist's humanity. With precision and warmth, she helps us differentiate which reactions belong to the client's past, which arise from the current relationship, and which emerge from the therapist's own attachment history.

Where Therapists Lose Their Footing

The destabilising relational patterns Kathy addresses include:

- **Defensive withdrawal** — the sudden disappearance of relational presence that preserves psychic survival at the cost of therapeutic connection
- **Urgent attachment bids** — excessive demands that mask terror of abandonment while paradoxically repelling the very connection sought
- **Ruptures both subtle and seismic** — misattunements that threaten the continuity of treatment and reactivate procedural memories of relational catastrophe
- **Regressive object relations** — intense dependence in which the therapist is cast as saviour or stabiliser, foreclosing the client's capacity for autonomous agency

Together, these patterns create the unpredictable, emotionally charged relational field that defines complex trauma treatment — the very territory therapists are rarely trained to navigate.

Attachment Neuroscience as Procedural Memory

Contemporary attachment neuroscience shows that fragmented attachment templates are not cognitive distortions to be corrected through psychoeducation, but embodied relational schemas encoded in the subcortical and autonomic systems that shape relational expectation. This means the therapeutic relationship itself becomes the primary site of reorganisation — not through insight alone, but through lived relational experience that gradually rewrites procedural memory.



Working at the Level of Implicit Change

Kathy introduces a collaborative relational framework that operates at the level of implicit procedural learning. Rather than interpreting attachment patterns from a position of clinical authority, she teaches therapists to address the client's relational expectations through carefully calibrated therapeutic presence — offering experiences that contradict internal working models without overwhelming the client's window of tolerance.

Participants will learn how to speak into the relational field without shaming, blaming, or over-interpreting; how to name contradictory transferences; and how to introduce new relational possibilities while tracking autonomic shifts and defensive mobilisation.

Fragmented Internal Attachment Figures

Clients with complex trauma and dissociation often carry multiple internal attachment figures — each with distinct expectations, fears, and defensive strategies. Dissociation research shows that these competing relational templates are not merely “parts” to be coordinated but semi-independent relational systems, each carrying its own procedural memories and emotional valence. One internal state may trust deeply; another may attack pre-emptively; another may fear annihilation in closeness; another may long for total merger.

Kathy will show how to recognise these shifts, map their origins in the client's relational biography, and intervene in ways that regulate rather than destabilise the therapeutic field.

Skills for Relational Storms

Across both evenings, Kathy will weave together case vignettes, practical interventions that translate immediately to Monday morning practice, attachment neuroscience that explains why warmth can trigger rage, and deeply human reflections on the therapist's emotional labour. She will illuminate how attachment wounds become activated in therapy and how therapists can remain grounded, attuned, and flexible even when the relational terrain is volatile.

By the end of the training, you will be able to:

- Anticipate and repair relational breaks before they calcify into treatment impasses
- Work with contradictory transferences without becoming entangled in projective identification
- Maintain boundaries that provide containment without withdrawing emotionally
- Use misattunements as opportunities for reparative relational learning
- Tolerate and transform intense affects without collapsing into rescue or retaliation
- Understand countertransference as essential clinical information rather than therapeutic failure

This training is not about mastering attachment theory.

It is about becoming fluent in attachment reality — in all its complexity, beauty, volatility, and transformative potential.

For clinicians who long to feel more confident, more grounded, and more capable in the relational heart of trauma therapy, this training offers rare guidance. Kathy's teaching is both rigorous and deeply compassionate; she brings clarity where therapists often feel lost, and she provides tools that can be used immediately, not months later.

Participants will leave better equipped to survive the storms of attachment fragmentation — and to help clients move toward relationships that are more coherent, more stable, and more real.



**This is not attachment made comfortable.
This is attachment made possible.**

Learning Objectives:

- Discuss how to anticipate and repair relational breaks before they calcify into treatment impasses
- Work with contradictory transferences without becoming entangled in projective identification
- Explain how to maintain boundaries that provide containment without withdrawing emotionally
- Use misattunements as opportunities for reparative relational learning
- Discuss countertransference as essential clinical information rather than therapeutic failure

About the speaker

Kathy Steele maintained a private practice in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1985 to 2025, offering individual and group therapy. She specializes in the treatment of complex trauma, dissociation, attachment disorders, and the clinical care of challenging cases.

Kathy Steele teaches trauma programs internationally, including at Emory University. She is also a member of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD), where she previously served as president.

She has received numerous awards for her clinical work and publications, including the ISSTD Lifetime Achievement Award. She is the author of many scientific papers, has contributed to several books, and co-authored three major works: *The Haunted Self*, *Coping with Trauma-Related Dissociation*, and *Treating Trauma-Related Dissociation: A Practical, Integrative Approach*.

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