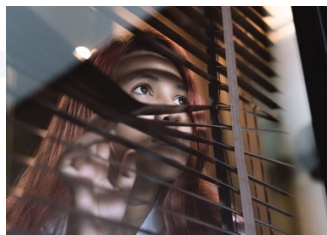


"How Dare You Question Someone Who Has Suffered?":
Exploring the Addictive Pull of Grievance and the Therapist's Clinical Dilemma
Video Course
Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn

Video Course
CPD hours: 3



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"They've hurt me—and I can't stop telling the story."

Every therapist has sat across from a client whose life seems organised around injury: an ex-partner who betrayed them, parents who failed them, a system that never saw them. The pain is real, often deep and legitimate. Yet beneath the authenticity of suffering, something else begins to take shape—a self built around grievance, an identity fuelled by being wronged.

This webinar invites clinicians to explore one of the most insidious and clinically challenging dynamics in contemporary practice: the addictive pull of victimhood. Why do some clients remain bound to their pain long after the original event has passed? How does grievance become self-soothing, self-protective—and, paradoxically, self-defeating? And how can we, as therapists, honour lived injury without reinforcing a narrative that quietly drains vitality and agency?

Daniel: The Story That Won't End

"She never once said sorry. Not once."

Daniel sits forward in his chair, recounting—for perhaps the fiftieth time—the details of his divorce three years ago. His ex-wife's betrayal. How his colleagues "took her side." How he "gave everything" and got nothing back.

When I gently reflect on the loneliness I sense beneath his anger, his body stiffens.

"You're just like everyone else," he says. "Trying to make me the bad guy."

In that moment, I feel the full weight of the therapeutic dilemma. Daniel's pain is real. The divorce was genuinely difficult. Yet something about the way he holds this story—the rehearsed quality, the righteous



certainty, the refusal to look anywhere but at her failures—tells me we're not simply dealing with grief that needs time to metabolise.

We're dealing with something else entirely: an identity organised around being wronged.

When Victimhood Becomes Identity

At the heart of this session lies a difficult truth: **grievance can feel safer than freedom**. For many clients, to let go of injury is to lose coherence. The sense of being "wronged" provides stability in an unstable world; it explains chaos, justifies anger, and preserves moral superiority.

Jan Hepburn will examine how grievance, when rehearsed repeatedly, can ossify into a self-organising structure. It becomes not just something the client feels but something they *are*. This identity brings comfort and community—especially in today's cultural climate, where victimhood often confers moral status and belonging. Yet, as Jan will show, this stability comes at a cost: the sacrifice of spontaneity, curiosity, and connection.

Drawing on relational and psychodynamic insights, she will trace how victimhood functions as both defence and supply. **It shields against helplessness and guilt, while simultaneously feeding a subtle narcissistic hunger**—to be the one who was wronged, and therefore, the one who matters most.

The Addictive Cycle of Grievance

Grievance works like an addiction. It offers temporary relief—through outrage, righteousness, or pity—followed by emptiness and renewed craving. The brain's reward circuits reinforce the cycle, as validation and sympathy produce a momentary sense of empowerment.

Over time, the client becomes hooked not on resolution but on repetition. The story of being wronged gets replayed to maintain a steady emotional temperature. The greater the injustice, the more secure the identity.

Clinically, this creates a paradox: attempts to "work through" the injury may be experienced as betrayal. The therapist risks becoming the new persecutor, failing to appreciate the magnitude of the client's suffering. Jan will help participants recognise this addictive dynamic, exploring how to engage the underlying fear—**if I'm not a victim, who am I?**—without colluding with it.

The Therapist's Dilemma: Empathy Without Collusion

Working with entrenched victimhood challenges even seasoned clinicians. Our training urges empathy, yet empathy can easily become complicity. When we validate too quickly, we reinforce the client's attachment to grievance; when we challenge too soon, we risk rupture and retraumatisation.

Jan will explore how therapists can hold both truths simultaneously: that harm occurred, *and* that identity cannot be built solely upon it. Through moment-to-moment clinical examples, she will demonstrate how to listen for the emotional function of grievance rather than its factual accuracy—tracking when "telling the story" deepens connection and when it serves avoidance.

Participants will learn to cultivate what Jan calls **compassionate differentiation: the ability to stay warm but not captive, engaged but not enlisted**. This is the clinical art of honouring legitimate injury while simultaneously questioning the uses to which that injury is being put.

Grievance as Narcissistic Supply



Beneath chronic victimhood often lies a subtle narcissistic economy. The position of the wronged one offers a form of superiority—moral purity against the corruption of others. It allows for anger without guilt and need without vulnerability.

Jan will discuss how this dynamic appears in couples and families, where one partner's grievance sustains a hierarchy of blame that obscures mutual responsibility. **"If I am the injured one, you are the one who must always repair."** In this way, grievance becomes control—a way of maintaining power while appearing powerless, of dominating relationships while claiming victimization.

Rather than pathologising such clients, Jan will show how to decode the longing underneath—the yearning to be seen, validated, and exonerated—and how to invite the client back into relational reciprocity without humiliation.

Returning to Daniel: What the Therapist Feels

In the weeks that follow, I notice something unsettling. Each time Daniel begins his familiar litany—the injustices, the unfairness, the unanswered apology—I feel myself growing smaller. My chest tightens. I want to interrupt, to redirect, to escape.

Is this my impatience? My own intolerance for victimhood? Or is it something Daniel cannot yet voice—the suffocation he feels, trapped inside a story that once protected him but now imprisons him?

*I realise: **in Daniel's world, there are only two positions available.** The wronged one, or the one who does wrong. To question his narrative is to become his ex-wife, his colleagues, everyone who "took her side." To validate it is to become his accomplice in a story that leads nowhere.*

The clinical work, I begin to understand, is not about getting Daniel to "let go" of his anger. It's about helping him discover who he might be if he weren't defined solely by what was done to him.

*But to do that, I must first survive being cast as the perpetrator—again and again—until he can bear the terror of what lies beneath the grievance: emptiness, shame, and **the fear that without his wound, he is nothing.***

The Cultural Climate of Perpetual Injury

Victimhood today exists within a wider social ecology that rewards outrage and identification with harm. Social media amplifies grievance narratives, turning pain into performance and visibility into validation. Identity politics can privilege injury over agency, and therapeutic culture itself sometimes mistakes validation for healing.

Jan situates these dynamics within a cultural framework, exploring how therapists, too, are shaped by these forces. How does the wider atmosphere of accusation and defensiveness enter the consulting room? How do our own sympathies, values, or exhaustion affect our ability to hold complexity?

Participants will be invited to reflect on their own countertransference—the subtle pull to rescue, redeem, or recoil—and to consider how to maintain moral and emotional neutrality in a world that valorises moral certainty. When the culture itself is organised around grievance, how do we help clients find a different path?

From Injury to Integration

The goal of therapy is not to erase the injury but to transform its meaning. Jan will present practical approaches to help clients move from grievance to growth, including:



- **Narrative re-authoring** – Shifting from "what they did to me" toward "what I am now able to see"
- **Restoring agency** – Identifying micro-choices that counter the passivity of victimhood
- **Re-establishing relational balance** – Inviting empathy for both self and other without collapsing boundaries
- **Cultivating dignity** – Supporting clients to hold their pain with integrity rather than entitlement
- **Working with the question beneath the question** – Addressing the existential terror: "If I'm not the wronged one, who am I?"

These interventions help restore the possibility of connection—internally and externally—so that the client's story no longer ends with injury but with evolution. **Healing becomes not the erasure of what happened, but the reclamation of who the client can become beyond it.**

Key Learnings

- Identify when grievance has become self-reinforcing rather than reparative
- Recognise the addictive emotional rewards of victimhood and their neuropsychological underpinnings
- Understand the narcissistic functions of grievance in maintaining power and identity
- Employ relational strategies that validate genuine injury without colluding with grievance cycles
- Use countertransference as a clinical compass for distinguishing empathy from over-involvement
- Apply interventions that foster agency, dignity, and the capacity for mutual repair in individuals and couples
- Navigate the therapist's impossible position between validation and challenge
- Help clients discover identity and self-worth beyond injury

About Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn

Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, supervisor, and trainer for the British Psychotherapy Foundation. She served as Registrar of the British Psychoanalytic Council for 15 years and currently chairs the Professional Standards Committee. Author of *Guilt and Shame: A Clinician's Guide* (nscience), Jan was awarded the BPC Lifetime Achievement Award in 2023 in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the profession. Her teaching is known for its clinical depth, clarity, and engagement with the emotions therapists find most difficult to address—shame, envy, hatred, and the complex defensive structures they create.

"How dare you question someone who has suffered?"

This is the question that silences the room—and the dynamic that traps both client and therapist in cycles of grievance that resist healing. Join Dr Jan McGregor Hepburn for this thought-provoking evening and learn how to recognise, interpret, and work with the narcissistic uses of victimhood—transforming grievance from a closed loop of pain into a pathway toward integrity and repair.

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