

"But Nothing Bad Happened" *Emotional Neglect and the Adult Client with No Story to Tell*

Live Online | A webinar over two evenings
Dr Kathrin Stauffer

Zoom Webinar

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Times:

6:00 pm – 9:00 pm, London UK
1:00 pm – 4:00 pm, New York, USA

CPD hours: 6



Location: Online streaming only

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The Moment That Reveals Everything

He has been coming for eight sessions. Polite. Articulate. Faintly apologetic about taking up your time.

You ask, gently, about his childhood.

"It was fine," he says. *"Normal. Nothing really happened."*

He offers nothing further, because there is no incident he recognises as relevant. Nobody hit him. Nobody left. On any intake form, his history is unremarkable.

And yet he is here—flattened, unsure what he feels or wants, apologising for needing sixty minutes of your attention. He describes his parents as "good people, really." He is not wrong. Nobody in this story is a villain. That is precisely what makes it so difficult to treat.

This is the client who says nothing bad happened, and means it. Not defended. Not evasive. For a child raised by parents who were present but not attuned—there to feed him, clothe him, drive him to school, but never quite there to notice him—there was no event to remember. Only an absence, repeated daily for years, until it became the water he swam in.

This is emotional neglect. It is among the most under-recognised presentations in adult psychotherapy, for the simplest possible reason: it rarely announces itself as an event. Screen him against many standard adversity frameworks and he may still appear deceptively low-risk—no violence, no obvious abandonment, nothing dramatic to tick. The difficulty isn't that neglect sits outside the research. It's that the lived experience of it so often refuses to look like an incident at all.



The Wound Without an Event

He does not say, *"I was neglected."* He says, *"I don't really know why I'm like this."* That sentence is the clinical material.

Researchers such as Katie McLaughlin and Margaret Sheridan, studying childhood adversity, increasingly distinguish between two very different kinds of harm. One is threat—something happens that shouldn't: violence, cruelty, danger. The other is deprivation—something that should happen never does: attention, delight, comfort, the felt sense of being welcomed. Abuse leaves a scene behind it. Neglect leaves a hole—the outline of everything that was supposed to be there and was not.

This distinction matters clinically because most training on developmental harm is built around the first kind of injury—locate the event, feel it, tell it, work it into a coherent narrative. The neglected client has no event to work with. Asking him to "tell the story" is a little like asking someone to describe a photograph that was never taken.

Emotional neglect is the wound without an event: no clear incident, no vivid rupture, no single memory around which the client can organise grief, anger, or protest. And the research bears this out—of all the recognised forms of childhood maltreatment, emotional neglect sits alongside emotional abuse as one of the strongest predictors of adult depression, despite involving no discrete traumatic act at all.

What Was Missing

Nobody needs to have attacked this child. Something simply had to fail to happen, often enough, warmly enough, personally enough.

A feeling not noticed. Distress not soothed. Excitement not shared. Fear not comforted. Anger not repaired in the relationship. A separate inner world never quite treated as real, or interesting, or worth attending to.

Over time, this absence becomes structure. The child learns not that feelings are dangerous, but that they lead nowhere—need summons no response, protest has no address, longing has no witness. By adulthood, it has stopped looking like an event to recover from, and started looking like a personality: quiet, undemanding, hard to place. Perhaps most distressingly, the person often concludes that the difficulty lies within them: **if nothing bad happened, their suffering must be evidence of some personal inadequacy.**

Why the Absence Runs Deeper Than History

The deprivation rarely stays in the past. It tends to colonise the present.

Children who grow up with little of their feeling named, reflected, or responded to often arrive in adulthood with a genuine gap in the vocabulary of their own inner life. Not repression. Underdevelopment. Ask this client what a memory made him feel, and the pause that follows is not resistance—it is a search through an emptier cupboard than most clients bring to the room. Contemporary research on emotional neglect and alexithymia supports exactly this clinical picture: these are not clients withholding their feelings from you. Many are still building the capacity to locate them at all.

This is the distinction between conflict and deficit, and it changes the therapeutic task. With a client in conflict, a feeling exists but is defended against—the work is to uncover it. With a client shaped by neglect, the feeling, wish, or protest may not yet be fully formed at all. There may be nothing coherent hiding beneath the surface to interpret. The task shifts from uncovering to building.

This is why an approach that works beautifully with clients carrying a clear grievance can quietly fail here. Wait neutrally for the material to surface, and the original absence simply repeats itself. Take the client's own "nothing happened" at face value, and it stays unrecognised. What this client needs is more exact than either default.

Because the gap often sits below ordinary autobiographical language, verbal exploration alone may not be enough. Bodily experience—breath, posture, gaze, muscular tone, the collapse or stillness where an impulse to



reach might have been—can offer important clues. Kathrin will also explore the use of imagery, which she regards as one of the most valuable routes for working with developmental deficit: a way of giving shape, texture and possibility to experiences that were never sufficiently formed in the first place.

Few clinicians have thought about this problem more rigorously, or for longer, than Kathrin Stauffer. Her book, *Emotional Neglect and the Adult in Therapy*, remains one of the clearest clinical accounts of what these clients carry. This training brings that work into the room directly—not a summary, but its clinical application, made immediately usable across two evenings.

By the End of This Training, You Will Be Able To:

- Recognise emotional neglect in clients who present as simply “fine,” low-key, or mildly depressed, rather than clearly traumatised
- Distinguish genuine developmental deprivation from real abuse that a client has minimised or normalised—so absence is never mistaken for the whole picture
- Explain, in language a client can use, how “nothing happened” may illuminate difficulties they have never been able to understand
- Work from developmental deficit rather than intrapsychic conflict, when there is nothing coherent yet to interpret
- Track the body’s quiet record of what was missing—in breath, posture, gaze, and the inhibited impulse to reach
- Use imagery to give form to missing developmental experience, helping clients build inner representations of comfort, welcome and response where these were insufficiently established
- Help clients build a felt vocabulary for internal states never named in childhood, moving from *I don’t know what I feel* toward *I am allowed to find out*
- Recognise when your own therapeutic neutrality is repeating the original silence, rather than repairing it
- Recognise and work with therapist frustration when the client appears unreachable, passive or emotionally sparse—understanding how the experience of “trying to get blood out of a stone” may communicate the developmental absence being enacted in the room

Across These Two Evenings, We Will Explore

Evening One: The Anatomy of Absence

The threat–deprivation distinction, and why it changes what therapy requires for this client group. The phenomenology of the neglected adult: flatness, chronic apology, a persistent sense of being too much for wanting anything at all, and the ways developmental deficits shape the adult mind. Why standard trauma-processing approaches struggle when there is no incident to process. Clinical vignettes in recognising neglect hiding behind a client who appears, by every ordinary measure, to be doing fine.

Evening Two: Building What Was Never Built

Practical work with language, imagery and embodied experience to help clients develop inner capacities that were never adequately supported. Kathrin will demonstrate how images can give form to missing experience, while carefully chosen body-oriented interventions can help therapists recognise and work with states that have not yet become fully available in words. Working with absence itself as clinical material, without inventing a trauma that never occurred. The therapist’s own stance under scrutiny: how much to wait, how much to name, how to pace recognition without repeating the original non-response. Restoring a client’s sense of entitlement to attention, comfort, and need—and supporting the disorientation that so often accompanies that permission, once it finally arrives.



Who Should Attend

If you work with adults, you already have clients who tell you nothing bad happened. This training is for psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, and mental health practitioners across modalities who want a precise clinical framework for developmental absence—not another lens for dramatic disclosure, but a way of taking seriously the client who has, genuinely, nothing dramatic to disclose.

No prior familiarity with Kathrin's work is required. Only a willingness to recognise that what the client cannot yet say may be as clinically important as what they can.

About Dr Kathrin Stauffer

Dr Kathrin Stauffer, PhD, is a UKCP Registered Body Psychotherapist and the author of *Emotional Neglect and the Adult in Therapy*, which has become a key clinical text for therapists seeking to understand the lifelong consequences of early emotional deprivation. Originally trained as a biochemist, she retrained in body psychotherapy and has spent decades integrating that scientific precision with attachment theory and clinical practice—bringing an unusually exact, embodied understanding of how early absence is carried not only in memory, but in the nervous system itself.

Kathrin's previous trainings for nscience, on parentification and reversed attachment, sold out well in advance. This is the first time she has brought the subject of her own book directly to the nscience stage.

A Final Thought

He will keep telling you that nothing bad happened, because as far as he knows, that's true. Nothing happened. That is exactly the problem.

Emotional neglect asks something different of the therapist than trauma does: not only the careful exploration of what occurred, but the slower work of noticing what never did—and helping clients develop, in adult life and within relationship, capacities for self-recognition, need, comfort and fulfilment that were never adequately supported.

Some clients will never say, "I was neglected." They will say, "But nothing bad happened." Therapy has to learn to hear what is hidden inside that sentence.

"Clients who tell me nothing bad happened are rarely being evasive. They are being accurate. My work is about learning to take absence as seriously as we take injury—and helping clients discover that they were always allowed to need more than they got." – Kathrin Stauffer

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