

When Helplessness is not Helpless

A supervisee presents a 45 year old male who is struggling with cancer. He is undergoing chemical treatment and is now, because of complications, hospitalized. The patient communicates that he would want his therapist to visit him in the hospital. He cannot wait until he is discharged and would feel much better if the therapist gave him a visit. As we role played the situation, it was very clear that the patient was depressed and beside himself. He was worried about death and his survival. Underlying communication by the patient- "If you cared you'd be here." To myself I thought it was a form of blackmail.

By demanding that the other party play out the role of the powerful authority who is there to fix things, we can easily see how behind being rescued are feelings of grandiosity, power and guilt. Much of this was a reenactment of what has happened to the patient in his own family. The patient does not show any open feelings of grandiosity that are behind feelings of wanting to be rescued. However, he does impart to the therapist that he must play out the role of the fixer-upper. Can the therapist not play into this role and confront the patient that he is living out a reenactment of what has happened to him in the past? The patient is more preoccupied by needing love rather than loving others.

Helplessness in this instance is a form of manipulation and control. Though the patient may seem dependent, through helplessness is really the underlying focus. Those patients who have unresolved issues regarding dependency cannot voice their wish to be taken care of. They have had very little experience with being parentified and consequently have no awareness of needing help or being taken care of.