

## Experiencing the Shattered: Managing Countertransference Experiences with Anorexia Patients in Psychotherapy

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**Abstract :** Working with anorexia patients can be a challenging experience for mental and health care professionals. The reasons for not wanting to work with this patient population stems from the numerous concerns surrounding the patient's health - physically and mentally. Many health care professionals reported having strong negative feelings, such as; anger, hopelessness and helplessness when working with anorexia patients. These feelings often impaired their judgement to treatment and affected how they related to the patient. This research focused on psychotherapists who preferred to work with anorexia patients; what countertransference feelings were evoked in them during sessions with patients and most importantly, how they managed the feelings. The research used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the theoretical framework and data analysis method. Semi-structured interviews were used with ten experienced psychotherapists to obtain their countertransference experiences with anorexia patients and how they manage it. There were three main themes discovered; (1) the use of supervision, (2) their own personal therapy and finally (3) experience and evolution. The research unearthed that experienced psychotherapists also experienced strong countertransference feelings towards their patients; some positive and some negative. However, these feelings could actually be interpreted as co-transference with their anorexia patients. The psychotherapists were able to own their part in the evocative unconscious nature of a relational therapeutic space, where their personal issues may be entangled in their anorexia patient's symptomatology.

**Keywords :** anorexia nervosa, countertransference, co-transference, psychotherapy, relational psychotherapy

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