



## **Managing Resistance Without Power Struggles A Practical Skills Guide for Emerging Therapists**

Resistance is one of the most misunderstood experiences in therapy. Emerging therapists often interpret resistance as a lack of motivation, avoidance, or unwillingness to engage. This interpretation can create frustration and self-doubt, especially when you feel responsible for client progress. In reality, resistance is often a meaningful response to perceived risk, misattunement, or readiness for change.

Understanding resistance as relational rather than oppositional helps prevent power struggles and supports ethical care.

### **Why Resistance Shows Up in Therapy**

Clients resist when something feels unsafe, premature, overwhelming, or misaligned with their values or goals. Resistance may protect against vulnerability, loss of control, or fear of change. It can also reflect previous experiences of being pressured, misunderstood, or disempowered in helping relationships.

Resistance is not a barrier to therapy. It is part of the therapy.

### **How Power Struggles Develop**

Power struggles often begin when therapists feel urgency to produce insight or movement. This urgency may lead to pushing interventions, reframing too quickly, or persuading clients toward change. Clients may respond by disengaging, disagreeing, or becoming more rigid.

When both parties feel unheard, the struggle escalates.

### **Responding to Resistance Without Escalation**

Effective responses to resistance prioritize curiosity over correction. Reflecting ambivalence, validating autonomy, and slowing the pace reduce defensiveness. Naming resistance gently can also support awareness, such as noticing hesitancy or mixed feelings without judgment.

Letting go of the need to convince allows collaboration to re-emerge.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical practice requires honoring client autonomy and pacing. Resistance may indicate the need to revisit goals, consent, or the therapeutic approach. Supervision can help differentiate resistance from misalignment or scope issues.

## **Reflection Questions for Emerging Therapists**

When do I notice myself becoming frustrated or urgent in session?  
How do I interpret resistance when it appears?  
What happens internally when a client does not move as expected?  
How can I respond with curiosity rather than control?

## **Closing Thoughts**

Resistance is not something to defeat. It is something to understand. When you stop pushing, clients often feel safer to move at their own pace.