



## **Staying Present When You Feel Emotionally Activated A Practical Skills Guide for Emerging Therapists**

There will be moments in your clinical work when a client's story, affect, or behavior activates something in you. You may feel strong emotion, distraction, discomfort, or an urge to respond quickly. These experiences are not signs that you are unfit for the work. They are signals that something meaningful is happening in the therapeutic relationship.

Learning how to stay present during emotional activation is a core skill that protects both you and your client.

### **What Emotional Activation Looks Like in Session**

Emotional activation can show up in many ways. You might feel your heart rate increase, notice a sudden shift in attention, or become preoccupied with getting it "right." Some therapists experience emotional flooding, while others feel numb or detached. Activation can also appear as a strong desire to reassure, challenge, rescue, or redirect the client.

These reactions are often subtle and easy to miss, especially early in training. Developing awareness of your internal cues is essential to maintaining clinical presence.

### **Why Staying Present Matters Clinically**

When a therapist becomes emotionally activated, the risk of drifting out of the therapeutic frame increases. You may unintentionally shift the focus away from the client, rely on over-structuring, or disengage emotionally. Clients often sense these shifts, which can impact safety and trust.

Staying present allows you to continue listening, reflecting, and responding thoughtfully even when your internal experience feels intense. Presence is not about emotional neutrality. It is about emotional regulation.

### **Differentiating Activation From Action**

Feeling emotionally activated does not require immediate action. The skill lies in creating a pause between what you feel and how you respond. This pause allows you to choose interventions that align with the client's needs rather than your own discomfort.

Reminding yourself that you do not need to resolve the feeling in the moment can help you stay grounded and engaged.

## **In-the-Moment Strategies to Maintain Presence**

Simple practices can support presence during activation. Slowing your speech, anchoring your attention to the client's words, or gently naming emotion rather than content can stabilize the interaction. Some therapists find it helpful to silently label their experience as "activation" rather than interpreting it as a problem.

These strategies help you remain connected without becoming overwhelmed.

## **Using Curiosity Instead of Control**

Emotional activation often increases the urge to control the session. Shifting toward curiosity can soften this impulse. Instead of pushing for insight or direction, allow yourself to wonder about the client's experience and your response to it. Curiosity creates space and reduces reactivity.

This approach supports collaboration and keeps the therapeutic relationship intact.

## **Processing Activation Outside of Session**

Emotional activation deserves attention after the session ends. Reflection, supervision, journaling, or consultation can help you understand what was triggered and why. Over time, this process deepens self-awareness and reduces the intensity of future reactions.

Ignoring repeated activation increases the risk of burnout, boundary issues, or ethical drift.

## **Ethical Considerations for Emerging Therapists**

Ethical practice requires monitoring your internal experience and recognizing when it impacts clinical judgment. Staying present includes knowing when additional support is needed. Seeking supervision when emotional activation feels persistent or confusing is a sign of responsibility, not inadequacy.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Emotional activation is not something to eliminate. It is something to work with skillfully. As you build the ability to stay present during these moments, your confidence and clinical effectiveness will grow. Presence is not about perfection. It is about staying engaged, aware, and intentional when the work becomes challenging.

## **Reflection Questions for Emerging Therapists**

What signals tell me I am becoming emotionally activated?

How do I typically respond when I feel activated?

What strategies help me create a pause in session?

How can I use supervision to better understand my reactions?