



The "Invisible Work" of Therapy

Holding Space, Emotional Labor, and What to Do About It

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CE Training Workshops

About Your Presenter

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Opening Reflection

Prompt:

What's a part of your clinical work that no one sees but takes the most energy?



Why This Topic Matters

Therapists are trained to
care deeply

Systems reward efficiency
over connection

The mismatch creates
burnout, guilt, and
invisibility

Objectives

By the end of today, you will:

01

- **Define emotional labor and connective labor in the context of therapeutic work, with reference to current sociological research.**

03

- **Evaluate the impact of this undervaluation on therapist well-being, burnout, and professional identity.**

02

- **Identify how the invisible aspects of clinical labor (e.g., attunement, presence, holding space) are undervalued or unmeasured within institutional frameworks.**

04

- **Apply strategies to advocate for structural change and create personal and collective practices that honor and sustain the emotional labor of therapy.**

The Language of Invisible Work

Definition:

Work that is essential but unseen, unpaid, or unacknowledged.

Examples from therapy:

- Holding emotional space
- Managing countertransference
- Relational repair after ruptures

Historical Roots

Arlie Hochschild (1983):

"Emotional labor" »→ managing feeling to create desired emotional states in others

Joan Tronto (1993):

Ethics of care »→ the moral weight of caring professions

Allison Pugh (2024):

"Connective labor" »→ sustaining human connection

Emotional Labor: Deep vs. Surface Acting

Surface acting:

Pretending to feel what you don't

Deep acting:

Genuinely evoking empathy or calm

Therapist challenge:

Doing both—authentically yet professionally



Connective Labor in Therapy

Emotional, relational, and cognitive work that sustains connection

Therapeutic examples:

- Tracking relational patterns
- Holding ambivalence
- Navigating boundaries with warmth

Invisible because it's qualitative, not quantifiable

Cognitive Labor

Often overlooked:

- Tracking client narratives over time
- Anticipating emotional responses
- Managing risk and ethical complexity
- Documenting subtle processes in session

Space Defined

To "hold space" is to remain emotionally grounded and attentive while another person processes their experience—without trying to fix, judge, or withdraw.

It looks effortless but is metabolically and psychologically taxing.



The Paradox of Professionalism

Expected:

- composure
- containment
- empathy

Hidden:

- exhaustion
- grief
- vicarious trauma

Systemic culture discourages visible struggle

Invisible Work in Different Settings



Private Practice:

Emotional containment between sessions



Agencies:

Crisis triage, documentation load



Hospitals:

Interdisciplinary coordination



Schools:

Emotional labor with staff + students + parents

Discussion Prompt:

What's one invisible task you perform weekly?

How Systems Erase Invisible Work



Productivity metrics = measurable hours



EHR and note templates favor quantifiable outcomes



Compassion becomes "extra," not "essential"



"The deepest parts of care are the
hardest to count."

— Allison Pugh, *The Last Human Job*

The Hidden Costs



Psychological:

Burnout, compassion fatigue, emotional numbing



Professional:

Devaluation of relational skills



Ethical:

Reduced authenticity, moral injury

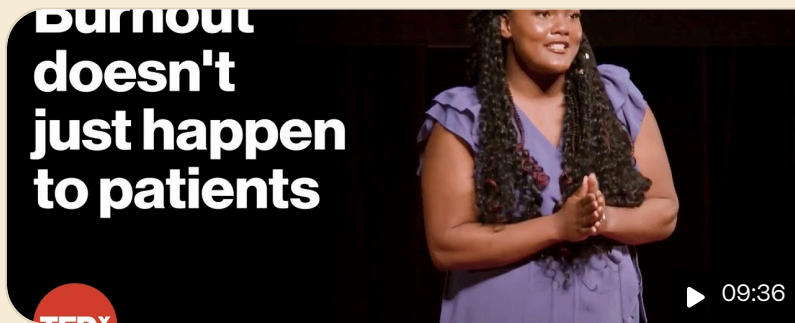
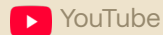
Burnout as Systemic, Not Personal

Burnout ≠ personal weakness

»→ It's a structural issue: the invisibility of emotional labor in productivity-driven systems



Video Reflection: “Why Therapists Need Support Too”



Why therapists need support too | Tanisha Shedden | TEDxSaltLakeCity

Mental health professionals provide vital support to patients, but many are experiencing burnout. And Tanisha Shedden contends that self care practices aren't as effective at deterring burnout ...



Case Study: Rosalie at the Agency

- ❏ Rosalie spends an unbilled hour managing a school crisis with a client she can't bill for because they don't have the correct insurance, then comforts a colleague, then catches up on notes at home.

Discussion:

- What examples of invisible labor (emotional, connective, cognitive) are present?
- How does the system respond (or fail to)?

Therapist Identity and Worth

We are not data producers; we are
meaning makers.

Exploring:

Identity loss when empathy feels transactional

The internal conflict between values and metrics



The Moral Injury of Efficiency

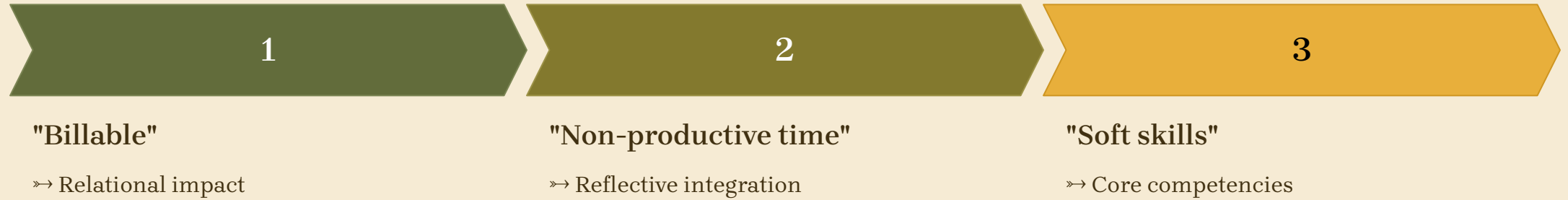
- Being forced to choose between client care and productivity
- "Shortcutting" empathy to stay on schedule
- Disconnect between values and required behaviors

Reflection: When Did You Feel Most Human?

Think of a moment in your work when connection felt pure and real. What made it possible?

Reclaiming Language

Reframe:



Strategies for Sustainability – Personal



Micro-rituals for decompression



Emotional residue check-ins



Scheduling "recovery minutes"



Naming invisible labor in supervision



Strategies for Sustainability – Relational

Peer consultation that includes emotional processing

Co-regulation rituals (team check-ins, closing breaths)

Collaborative storytelling to re-humanize work

Strategies for Sustainability – Structural



Add relational metrics to performance reviews



Advocate for "reflective supervision" as standard



Present data linking clinician well-being to client outcomes

Group Brainstorm

Question:

If you could redesign your agency's or practice's definition of productivity, what would you include?

Integrating the Learning

The invisible can become
visible when named

Change starts with
language and shared
recognition

**Every act of presence is
advocacy**

Thank You



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Thank you for showing up — for your clients, for your teams, and for each other — and for helping make the invisible work of therapy visible.



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Video

Why therapists need support too | Tanisha Shedden | TEDxSaltLakeCity - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_dsl2uv6pw