

"In Treatment"



SOLUTIONS

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In Treatment and the Human Condition

David Olsen, PhD
Executive Director

HBO has allowed us to be voyeurs into the lives of a therapist, four of his patients, and a therapist's supervisor. While HBO obviously attempts to entertain by amping up the drama, and occasionally even waxes soap operatic – it still contains valuable lessons and reminders of what it means to be human, and the complexities of intimate relationships.

The characters or patients vary from a young female physician struggling with relationships, to a type A navy fighter pilot, an adolescent Olympic caliber gymnast and a couple struggling with whether or not to stay married. All the characters have in common a painful history that they have not been able to come to grips with, difficulties in their most important relationships, and aspects of their behavior and personality that are unconscious to them. What is interesting is that their therapist, far from being a "perfect person" is also struggling with his own history, his own family struggles, and often seems unaware of what is motivating him. In that sense, their stories are interesting because they on some level resonate with us. Like the colorful patients in *In Treatment*, we all identify with some aspect of their struggles.

We all have a history and carry within us the legacies of all the generations that have gone before us. Those legacies contain wonderful stories and

traditions, but may also include abuse or addiction, poor parenting, absence of attunement and attachment, not to mention secrets that can haunt for generations. Murray Bowen, the great family therapist, called it "multigenerational transmission" – the way legacies of the past are passed on to future generations. Too often we fail to realize, like the characters of *In Treatment*, the impact of those histories, of the unresolved wounds that they can leave within us and the necessity of

working through them in order to create health in our present families.

HBO's show also powerfully demonstrates the complicated nature of human relationships. A woman who is trying to decide whether to commit to her boyfriend, a male pilot struggling in his relationship with his wife, his son, and his father. Then there is an endearing adolescent with divorced

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Inside HBO's *In Treatment*

A Psychoanalytic Critique of the program with
Russell Denea, MD, Psychiatrist/Psychoanalyst

David C. Olsen, PhD., Executive Director, Samaritan Counseling Center
Jenness Clairmont, LCSW, Training Director, Samaritan Counseling Center

Sponsored by the Training Program at
Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region

May 30th
9 am - 12 noon
(Registration begins at 8:30)

First Reformed Church of Scotia
224 N. Ballston Ave.
Scotia, NY

Russ Denea and the staff at Samaritan Counseling Center will provide an experiential review of the interviews and interventions depicted on the evocative HBO series *In Treatment*. The workshop will include a review of episodes, role play and exploration of the lessons to be learned from *In Treatment's* portrayal of psychotherapy from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Cost is \$35 per person and includes a continental breakfast
Please call (518) 374-3514 to register by May 23rd

HBO's *In Treatment* Shows Us the Need for Clinical Supervision

Jeness Clairmont, LCSW LMFT
Staff Psychotherapist

New York State Law requires that all mental health practitioners require many hours of supervision in order to become fully licensed. In fact, it is a pretty rigorous process. However, upon obtaining that long sought after piece of paper, many states, including New York, do not require ongoing supervision. And so, after licensure, many clinicians are left to their own devices. Even so, one rule guides all treatment: "Do No Harm."

But what happens to the private practitioner who is isolated and receives little feedback about their work, who never seeks out guidance regarding a particularly difficult case? Paul Westin in HBO's *In Treatment* provides us with a grueling example of the need for ongoing supervision. It is a process that may prevent the incidence of multiple legal and ethical violations, professional burnout, and even personal crisis.

Practitioners need to be involved enough to feel for and care for clients, yet distant enough to implement treatment. Identifying and understanding intense feelings in professional relationships is central to the management of professional boundaries. Many times, feelings toward certain clients move us closer, push us away, confuse or irritate us. Maintaining boundaries is complex. Without such precautions, mental health professionals run the risk of engaging in behaviors that do not benefit their clients. We've all heard shocking stories of boundary violations and professional misconduct.

I think we would all agree Paul's "treatment" of the alluring patient Laura has little to do with clear clinical judgment. Rather his unexamined desire for her morphs into what any decent clinician

would consider an ethical, legal and moral violation of the vulnerability of a client in the therapeutic relationship. Similarly, Paul's experience of Sophie appears complicated by the similarities she shares with his own daughter. Paul is also treating a couple on the verge of divorce, and this mimics a dynamic he is currently experiencing in his own marriage.

Moments of overwhelming emotion and boundary dilemmas occur constantly throughout a clinician's professional life. Particular clients may challenge our capacity to manage our feelings, expose professional "blind spots," or touch on areas of personal vulnerability. When the patient Alex obtains personal information about Paul, he is so triggered that he throws his coffee in Alex's face—not an action we here at the Samaritan Counseling Center would consider therapeutic. Practitioners need a judgment-free, trusting relationship to sort out dilemmas that arise in therapy. Supervision acts as a safe place to process treatment plans. This ultimately protects the client as well as the practitioner. Paul's supervisor Gina reminds him of this when she points out the danger of his attraction to Laura and its relation to other parts of his life. Gina is also clear with Paul, despite his many creative protests, that if he acts on his desire for Laura his professional life will likely be over, not to mention his marriage.

Unfortunately, Paul may have been too late in seeking supervision. Gina's responses seem to arouse more agitation than a recognition of her supportive role. *In Treatment* and Paul's decline show us that in order to be effective as therapists we must obtain ongoing feedback from other professionals. Safe practice includes self-awareness and ongoing review of challenging or difficult cases with a supervisor. Many training programs

neglect to teach practitioners how to deal with the intense feelings that arise in the therapeutic relationship. Samaritan Counseling Center consistently ranks as one of the strongest training programs in the region. Therapists receive between two and five hours of supervision per week in individual and team meetings. Perhaps HBO should film their second season here! 📺

Upcoming Events

For information about any event visit www.samaritancounselingcenter.org

April

Are Men Really from Mars and Women from Venus? Building Partnerships in Marriage

Tuesday, April 29, 7 PM - 9 PM
Niskayuna Reformed Church

May

The Tipping Point: Getting Couples Back in Balance

Saturday, May 3, 4 PM - 6 PM
Seventh Day Adventist Church,
Schenectady

Is Timothy's Law Enough?

w/ Guest Speaker Tom O'Clair
Tuesday, May 6th, 5:30 - 7:30 PM
Italian Community Center, Troy

More Than One Way to be Smart: Emotionally Intelligent Leadership

Wednesday, May 7, 9 AM - 1 PM
Hamilton Union Presbyterian
Church, Guilderland

Inside HBO's *In Treatment*

Wednesday, May 30, 9 AM - Noon
First Reformed Church of Scotia

In Treatment and the Human Condition

... Continued from Cover

parents, trying to make sense of those relationships. A couple on the show cannot connect, appears to hurt each other deeply, and must decide whether they can save their marriage. And even Paul, the therapist, is struggling with a failing marriage, distant relationships with his kids, and seems more comfortable with his relationships with some of his patients than with his own family. What a powerful reminder of the ways in which we all long for depth, for understanding, and commitment from those we care about most. Like the characters in that show, we know how hard and how painful it can be when our most important relationships are not what we want them to be.

In Treatment powerfully demonstrates the power of the unconscious and

its impact on relational functioning. Freud offended many of his contemporaries by suggesting that much of human behavior was motivated by the unconscious and not nearly as under the control of the conscious mind as we might hope. Jung spoke powerfully about the “shadow”—that part of our personality that we would rather not see, or be in touch with. It is the opposite of the polished “persona” that we attempt to project to the world. The characters of *In Treatment* struggle powerfully with their “shadows” or parts of their behavior that are unconsciously driven, and at times are terrified of what they find. We can resonate with their struggle, because like St. Paul, we often resonate with his words “the good that I would do...” Too often, that which we long to do,

especially in our intimate relationships is not at all what we do. We struggle to make sense of our own behavior and what motivates it.

In the end, to live well we must find a way to work through the impact of our histories, understand our shadow, and find intimacy and meaning in our relationships. Therapies that are goal oriented or technique driven often miss the point. Good therapy must wrestle with the complexities of the human condition and be able to move into depth. Our relationships, and our families can often be transformed by the outcome of the work we do in treatment. 🌱

ARE MEN REALLY FROM MARS AND Women, from Venus?

Building Partnerships in Marriage

Tuesday, April 29, 2008
7 p.m. - 9 p.m.

Niskayuna Reformed Church
3041 Troy Schenectady Rd
Niskayuna, NY

Led by David and Cheryl Olsen

Cost is \$35 per couple
Please call (518) 374-3514 to register

Sponsored by
The Relationship Institute
at Samaritan Counseling Center



Are men and women really so different that they appear to be from different planets? Is it true that much marital miscommunication is the result of gender differences? This is the premise of John Gray's best-seller *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*.

Do rigidly held gender stereotypes actually block formation of healthy marital partnerships?

This workshop, lead by David and Cheryl Olsen, will explore the impact of gender roles and stereotypes in marriage with an emphasis on building quality marital partnerships and understanding individual and couples' communication styles.

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Address Change? Duplicate Mailings?

If your address has changed or if you receive more than one copy of our newsletter, please alert our office at (518) 374-3514 so that we can streamline our database. Thank you!

Solutions is published by Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region, 220 North Ballston Ave., Scotia, NY 12302, (518) 374-3514, fax: (518) 374-9193, online at www.samaritancounselingcenter.org.

Samaritan Services: Individual, Couples, Family & Group Therapy, Educational Workshops, Professional/Organizational Consultation.

Office Locations: Schenectady/Scotia, Albany, Rensselaer, Clifton Park, Jonesville, Wilton. Please call the Scotia office at (518) 374-3514 to schedule an appointment. Financial statements for Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region are available upon request through the New York State Attorney General's office.