



SYNERGETIC
PLAY THERAPY™

Avoiding Compassion Fatigue: How to Leave Work in the Playroom



As play therapists, it's not always easy for us to leave our work in the playroom. Some of us carry it with us – like sand inside our shoes, we track it through the doorways and into our homes. It lingers in the back of our minds, sometimes burrowing up to the front – we carry it wherever we go.

We often do this because we're dedicated; we care about our clients and we want to help them. So, we think about ways to do this even when we're in the middle of other things (like going to sleep). But taking our work home can do more harm than good.

The propensity for this habit is often correlated with the difficulty of a case – when you work with populations full of trauma or children who are particularly complex or complicated, it's easy to bring them home with you as effortlessly as you bring your car keys. Yet doing this sets you up for compassion fatigue – something you can blame on your nervous system!

Whenever we, as humans or therapists, perceive a challenge, the data from that challenge is processed through the amygdala in the limbic system. It decides what part of the nervous system to activate: the sympathetic or the dorsal parasympathetic branch.

If the sympathetic nervous system is activated, we move into “fight or flight” and find ourselves aggressive, alert, hypervigilant, irritable, or anxious. If the dorsal parasympathetic

nervous system is activated, we move into a collapse response and our system begins to shut down.

You can tell which system is activated by looking at your symptoms: are you hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused? Either way, it's a problem: your nervous system needs help regulating.

Of course, this is normal; it's your body doing what a body does. Anytime you're outside your Window of Tolerance, you'll find yourself dysregulated. Thus, it's your job to expand this window, so that you can hold all that your child clients are asking you to hold.

The way you do this is simple: Be happy. Be mad. Be scared. Be sad. Be you. Be. And Move.

Authenticity in the playroom (and outside of it) is a key to regulation. Therapists who fail to practice this – those who say things they think they should say or act ways they think they should act – can't regulate as efficiently as a therapist who allows herself to feel all the feelings.

You can practice authenticity by having a genuine reaction to your child client's initiated play. Don't role play- be yourself. Add these few tips in backed by neuroscience to really help your nervous system manage the intensity in your sessions: rock back and forth, engage in movement, name your experiences aloud, and modulate your own energy.

Focusing on your breath is vital as well – if the room is chaotic, lengthen your breath. If the room is heavy, take deep, full breaths and bring in air. Practice mindfulness too and attach back to self. Each moment of regulation opens your Window of Tolerance a little more.