

# **The Role of the Therapist in Times of Division: A Strategy to Re-Orient to the Therapy Process and Build a Path Forward**

By Trevor Hardcastle, LMFT, DBT Therapist, EMDR Trainer

---

## **Introduction: Navigating a Divided World**

In today's increasingly polarized climate, therapists face a unique challenge: how to remain neutral, compassionate, and effective when external political and social divisions may be influencing both our clients and ourselves. Whether it's through elections, world events, or social movements, our clients are often experiencing anxiety, confusion, or distress related to these external divisions. As therapists, it's essential we revisit our core values and therapeutic principles to ensure our sessions remain a safe space for healing, free from the influence of political or social bias. This article explores strategies for therapists to re-orient themselves in these challenging times.

---

## **The Challenge of Political and Social Division in Therapy**

Elections happen. World events unfold. Teams win, and teams lose. Sometimes the experience is painful, sometimes apathy reigns, and sometimes we celebrate and even gloat. Whatever the response, political and social events can affect us personally and professionally, and it's easy to fall into the traps of heightened emotions, personal biases, or over-identification with one side of an issue.

However, our primary role as therapists is to build a safe, trusting relationship with clients and provide a non-judgmental space for them to heal. In a time of division. The process of re-orienting means revisiting our foundational principles as therapists and committing to a therapeutic environment that transcends ideological divides.

---

## **The Therapist's Role in a Divided World**

At the core of therapy is the relationship we build with our clients. Regardless of external circumstances, the goal is always the same: to meet our clients where they are and help them navigate the complexities of their lives. Whether or not we share the same political beliefs, cultural values, or social experiences, we are uniquely positioned to help clients explore their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors without judgment.

However, as human beings, we are strongly influenced by external events. We may feel despair, frustration, indifference, or excitement about the world around us. It's crucial that we, as

therapists, remain aware of how our emotions and beliefs might be impacting the therapeutic process. Re-orienting ourselves in times of division means ensuring that we return to empathy, neutrality, and the guiding principles of our profession.

---

## Strategies for Re-orienting in a Time of Division

In these turbulent times, we must actively recalibrate our approach to therapy. Below are strategies that can help us as therapists maintain clarity, compassion, and effectiveness.

---

### 1. Move Away from Hyper-Reactive Language

Social media, podcasts and news outlets are often filled with hyper-reactive language — terms like "gaslighting," "narcissism," "sanewashing," "neocon," and even derogatory labels like "libtard" or "wackjob." While these terms may feel cathartic in the moment, they can further polarize people and oversimplify complex issues.

As therapists, we are trained to move away from stereotypes and generalizations. We believe that each person is **fiercely unique** and that their behaviors are shaped by a complex web of life experiences. It's imperative for us as clinicians to guard against language that is inflammatory, stereotyping or overgeneralizing.

When clients use inflammatory language, we can help them express their emotions without resorting to overgeneralization. For example:

*Client:* "This group is just a bunch of narcissists!"

*Therapist:* "I hear that you're feeling frustrated and hurt by the actions of this group. Can we explore why you feel that way? What do you think is behind these behaviors of the group? What does it remind you of in your history that may be contributing to this hurt and pain?"

This response invites the client to reflect on their feelings while avoiding harmful generalizations. It also shifts the focus back to the individual's experiences, maintaining the nuanced, non-judgmental approach central to therapy. It has also prevented us from joining with the client in the overgeneralizing or stereotyping.

---

### 2. Avoid Pathologizing the Normative

One of the core principles of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is to avoid "pathologizing the normative." This means we must be cautious about labeling as abnormal or mentally unhealthy what may simply be a natural response to the current climate. It's easy to fall into the trap of

labeling others as “out of touch,” “immoral,” or “insensitive” based on political or social beliefs, but doing so can alienate clients and hinder healing.

Instead, take a step back and ask yourself: *Why might this person think and feel this way?* Every individual is shaped by a unique set of experiences, and their current worldview may be a logical response to those experiences. The therapeutic process requires us to seek first to understand before we hold judgment and/or pathologize.

---

### **3. Be Mindful of Over-Identifying with Clients**

Therapists may feel tempted to bond with clients by emphasizing shared identities or beliefs. While common ground can foster rapport, over-identifying with a client can interfere with the therapeutic process. If we overly align ourselves with a client’s worldview, it may shift the focus away from the client’s experience and make it about our own. As we are reading cues from our client, they are also reading cues from us about our personal feelings and beliefs.

Instead, be mindful of when to share personal information. The **goal of disclosure** is to support the client’s process, not to validate our own opinions or experiences. If you find yourself aligning with a client based on political or social views, take a moment to reflect: *Is this supporting the client’s growth, or is it reinforcing a division?* We always can return to the question of disclosure: *Why am I feeling compelled to share this information?* If we are unsure of this answer, we can always explore in our own therapy, with a trusted friend or colleague.

---

### **4. Keep Fidelity to Mental Health Language for Mental Health Purposes**

In times of widespread mental health discourse, it’s easy for mental health terms like “OCD,” “ADHD,” or “narcissism” to be thrown around casually in non-clinical settings. While this has contributed to increasing awareness, it also risks diluting the integrity of clinical language and potentially damaging the public’s understanding of mental health.

As therapists, it’s important to preserve the professional integrity of mental health language. We should be vigilant about maintaining clear boundaries between casual use and clinical application. When we use mental health terminology inaccurately or flippantly, we risk eroding public trust in our profession. To avoid this, we must use mental health language with reverence and only within a clinical context.

---

## **Core DBT Assumptions: A Framework for Therapy in Divided Times**

One of the most powerful tools we have as therapists, especially in times of division, is the DBT Assumptions. **I LOVE THE DBT ASSUMPTIONS.** They are a lantern at the edge of a dark forest, a way we can see our fellow humans.

The DBT assumptions provide a lens through which we can view our clients with empathy, understanding, and compassion: Here are the first 3 Assumptions:

1. **People are doing the best they can.**
2. **People want to improve and be happy.**
3. **People need to do better, try harder, and be motivated to change: the fact that people are doing the best they can, and want to do even better does not mean that this is enough to solve the problem.**

These assumptions are vital for re-orienting ourselves to the therapeutic process. As therapists, we must remind ourselves that our clients, like all people, are doing the best they can, given their current circumstances. In turn, we must work to help them build on their strengths and motivate them to change, even in the face of overwhelming external division.

---

## **Conclusion: Reaffirming Our Commitment to Healing**

In times of division, our role as therapists is more important than ever. We must continuously reflect on our own biases and assumptions and remain committed to providing a safe, non-judgmental space for healing. By avoiding hyper-reactive language, not pathologizing the normative, refraining from over-identifying, and maintaining the integrity of mental health language, we can strengthen the therapeutic relationship and reinforce the trust in our profession.

As therapists, we must remember that we are also human, and it's our responsibility to rise above the external noise and stay true to the principles that guide effective therapy.

The third DBT assumption, when viewed as an intention, resonates strongly with us as therapists in this moment: it is a commitment to do better, try harder, and stay motivated to change. While we are doing our best and striving for improvement, that alone may not be sufficient to resolve the problem.

Now is the time to reconnect with the foundational values of therapy and continue to support our clients through the complexities of these divided times.

---

I hope this article offers clarity and guidance as you reflect on your own practice. May we all continue to navigate this path forward, grounded in empathy, authenticity, and a commitment to healing.

**Trevor Hardcastle, LMFT**  
DBT Therapist | EMDR Trainer

[www.trevortherapy.com](http://www.trevortherapy.com)

---