

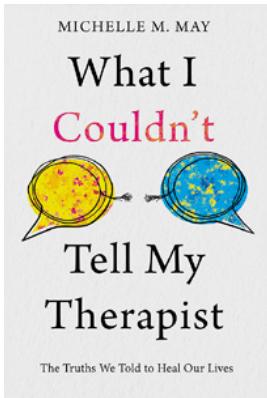
# Review of *What I Couldn't Tell My Therapist: The Truths We Told to Heal Our Lives* by Michelle M. May

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The title, “What I Couldn’t Tell My Therapist,” refers to the idea that we can’t tell what we are not aware of—but that our anxiety and defenses will. In “What I Couldn’t Tell My Therapist”, the reader gets to follow three persons undergoing Intensive Short Term Dynamic Psychodynamic Therapy (ISTDP) – Michelle (the author), Emma and Walter. May alternates between the cases, weaving in theory and applications of ISTDP as the stories unfold. She also demonstrates how the three patients cannot fully articulate what is causing them pain but instead show it through how they present themselves in the therapy room. This illustrates the powerful possibility in ISTDP to not only listen to the ‘lyrics’—the content of what the patient is saying—but also to the ‘music’—the anxiety, defenses, and underlying feelings conveyed.

I was intrigued by this book from the start and, as a true ISTDP enthusiast, I chose it as my vacation read. I am also a big fan of a good novel, and this book spoke to both of these interests. Truth be told, the book lover in me sometimes wanted to skip the theoretical parts and enjoy it purely as a novel with a great story that I couldn’t wait to finish. My eagerness to get to the end of a thrilling story (or three) aside, I can see the benefits of describing the theory as it applies to the cases told. May’s beautiful, sometimes poetic language and elegant yet simple ways to describe the complexity that lies within us and therapy is inspiring. She paints a vivid picture of what ISTDP is in a way that is easy to understand without caving in on complexity. I can easily see the book’s great appeal



to therapists who are curious about ISTDP. But what really stands out for me is May’s bravery in writing about her own difficulties in a courageous and honest way. May invites the reader to follow her closely in her struggles, experiences, and victories.

I read a quote by the psychoanalyst Nancy McWilliams during my psychology studies that have followed me since. When I read “What I couldn’t Tell My Therapist” this quote once again came to mind: “...I do not make the assumption that the therapist is or must be emotionally healthier than the client...” (2004). This quote made a difference to me as a student and later as an aspiring therapist and satisfied a deep craving to know that I was ok, that I could follow this career path even though I was human, even though I also really struggled. What resonated most deeply with me about this book was how it, much like that quote, brought me so much comfort. To read about May’s struggles – one colleague to another – felt like a warm letter from a friend. It’s also beautiful to recognize, as May does, that our personal struggles and our personal healing can enrich our work as therapists and that it is really quite special to help someone else in the way that you yourself have been helped. It adds extra value that the reader gets to follow May in the patient chair through three therapies with three therapists. Sometimes, people need different things from different individuals at various times, which is natural and not a failure on anyone’s part. This simply reflects the journey of life and the fact that progress is an ongoing thing.

Another thing that really stands out for me about this book is how it gives life to the therapy process in a way that is similar to when video is being shown in presentations. As I read this book, I remembered my own very first ISTDP session, over ten years ago. How I felt after the session – as if someone (my therapist) had opened a window in a room where there had been none. I was still in that same room, but I could suddenly see that *maybe I didn't have to be* – I could see that there was another world out there. This

both the interest and the value it could have. The more I thought about it, the idea of presenting a therapist's view of difficulties, behaviors and what they could mean grew on me. I like the transparency of this approach.

Also, the book is not mostly technicalities and theory. It is really mostly about the depth of the human experience. Perhaps the trapped reader can ignore the language of therapy if it is not of interest,

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book vividly shows just that: the possibilities that lie within ISTDP, the ambition, the hopes – well, really – the belief – that anxiety can be not just tolerated but also cured, that self-attacks don't have to be an ever-present part of life and that it is possible to get to the roots of suffering. I have always been drawn to these very high expectations in ISTDP – high expectations of therapy and, thus, of life. The cases described in this book make the possibilities that lie within therapy come to life in a very hopeful way, opening a window and letting in light in a dark room as the stories unfold.

Reading this book, I wondered who it was written for. Or, rather, first I was fully convinced that it was a book about ISTDP for the curious therapist. It did surprise me to find out that it is also aimed for a more general audience. Knowing that, I went back to read the book again, trying to hold another perspective. The book does include some very specific therapy language, such as describing and naming defenses and interventions, and I found myself wondering how interesting this would be to the general audience. Then again, maybe I am underestimating

and instead embrace the story of the ocean's depth and of invisible windows not yet opened. *In case no one ever told you, this is exactly how deep the sea can be. There may be hidden windows in your dark room, even if you cannot see them yet.* But – can a book really open someone's internal windows? Can a book help us regulate anxiety? Build structure and capacity? Or is there an inherent limitation to how much a book – any book – can contribute to healing? Perhaps it is still only through meeting with someone else that we can truly see ourselves and begin to heal. But until then... there is hope to be found in hearing stories of hidden windows to be opened and deep seas. And sometimes, hope is everything. All in all, this book is beautiful. I did not know that I had missed it on my bookshelf until I read it. It is a read that is immensely hopeful and deeply painful at the same time. I look forward to recommending this book to colleagues and to including it in the reading lists of my core training groups.

*What I Couldn't Tell My Therapist: The Truths We Told to Heal Our Lives* was published in English by Seven Leaves Press in fall 2024.