

Killing Neutrality

Walking a tight rope between helping and harming

Abstract

In this paper, I trace the historical development of the concept of neutrality from Sigmund and Anna Freud through Klein, Winnicott, and Bion, and on to later theorists such as Kris and Cooper. We can understand neutrality as a constantly shifting process that must be functionally attuned to how the patient experiences it. There is also a group of patients who, at specific moments, seem unable to tolerate any form of neutrality. They feel that the analyst's neutral stance is "killing," and will therefore do everything they can to "kill" that neutrality. Using clinical material, I describe how thin the line can be between helping and harming patients. By addressing the anxiety that emerges on different levels and working it through in the transference, space for separation can arise, in which neutrality can also be experienced as emotional involvement—particularly when the patient comes to life within the analyst in a truly intense way.