

Red Flags

Some adults who were abused as children have not recovered from the trauma they encountered in their youth. They may appear to be healthy, highly functioning individuals on the outside, but often they are still the small child who was abused on the inside. In other words, they're little tiny children who live in great big bodies.

When confronted with a stressful situation, or encountering a traumatic memory for which they are not ready, some of these adults will react in highly inappropriate ways; some will even react in violent or psychotic ways.

If you believe your client is in any way unable to deal with her memories in a healthy manner, refer her immediately to a professional therapist who specializes in child abuse cases.

Some of the signs to watch for:

- No boundaries

This client will tell you all about himself the first time you meet him. He may be overly ingratiating, hoping to curry your favor instantly -- your "new best friend." He may call too often or at inappropriate times, like two o'clock in the morning. He may make unreasonable demands, such as asking that you make special arrangements for him. He will imagine himself to be "special," not subject to the usual client/facilitator boundaries. Reasonable limits must be set with these clients. If they refuse, refer them to a professional therapist.

- Doctor shoppers

This client will tell you about all of the other people she has been to for help. They all started out to be great, but in the end they all "failed" her. She will idealize you, praise and flatter you for your wonderful work, then turn on you when the going gets tough. She will describe one catastrophe in her life after another -- all someone else's fault. She will be fragmented, unable to process her work and unwilling to face most of her issues. Exercise great caution with these clients. If thwarted, some will do anything they can to "get back at you" after you, too, have "failed" them.

- Overly emotional

This client will display an uncommon and unreasonable amount of crying. Or he may be angry to the point of fury. He may become acutely depressed. This is generally a sign of "flooding" of emotion, and signals an inability to process or handle the situation. These clients must have slower work, sometimes taken in shorter sessions. If you are uncomfortable, refer them to a professional therapist.

Remember that it is important to get a history from your client before working with her. Look for alcohol and drug abuse, instability in relationships and several recent losses. All of these point to trauma in childhood, and should be dealt with cautiously and responsibly.

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