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Countertransference and the Therapeutic Relationship: A Cognitive Perspective

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The current article discusses the potentially inappropriate application of psychodynamic constructs regarding the therapeutic relationship (i.e., transference-countertransference) to cognitive therapy, offering a discussion of the fundamental principles of cognitive therapy that are violated. The therapeutic belief system is defined and offered as an alternative conceptual framework for addressing therapeutic relationship variables in cognitive therapy and the ways in which it is more consistent with the fundamental principles of cognitive therapy are identified and discussed. Finally, application of the therapeutic belief system to the treatment of suicidal patients is provided as a clinical example. Potential implications for treatment and research are noted.

Countertransference in psychotherapy has been well defined and extensively discussed (e.g., Kernberg, 1965,1967,1972,1975; Reich, 1951; Winnicott, 1949, 1958,1960), along with its importance in the treatment of suicidal patients well established by Maltsberger & Buie (1974,1989). From a classic analytical perspective, countertransference has been conceptualized as the therapist's unconscious reactions to the patient's transference and, for the most part, viewed as a hindrance to the treatment process (Kernberg, 1965, 1967, 1972, 1975). More recently, however, countertransference has been conceptualized more broadly as the therapist's emotional reaction(s) to the patient, a natural component of any psychotherapy, and a potential ally in the treatment process (Eber, 1990; Mendelsohn,