

Abstract.

This study is a qualitative exploration into how psychotherapists are affected by working with substance abusers who might die accidentally or by committing suicide.

Four therapists working with substance abusers in outpatient clinics were interviewed through a loosely structured interview. A phenomenological method was used to analyse the written transcripts from the interviews. This analysis gave basis to organise the findings into four core themes. The themes included attitudes towards the clients, the importance of support systems, emergency management and emotional reactions.

A textural-structural synthesis of the essence of the therapists' experience showed that the therapists seem to live in a dilemma with regards to responsibility and also regarding closeness/avoidance. The possible consequences of these dilemmas on the client-therapist relationship are discussed.

The implications for gestalt therapy and for possible future research are explored.