A lot of the time, this field is akin to detective work. We worry that our helpees are not being honest with us, or we wonder about which parts they’re hiding. “I’m smelling underlying trauma,” we say to one another, or, “Maybe a talk with the department head?” or, “I have to wonder if he’s using more often than he’s telling me.” This search for what’s real makes so much sense. We know how much of ourselves *we’re* concealing. We hide most of our unpleasant, nutso thoughts and our weird, compulsive behaviors because we know that if the world saw us as we really are, the world would reject us. We conceal ourselves in shawls of mindful, positive gratitude because the world is largely not a safe place. We strive to create a safe place in which our clients can actually access their experience and move toward ever-increasing congruence. We watch our clients for signs of dishonesty because we want to do all that we can to help them move into their authentic selves.

And at the same time, we’re fighting imposter syndrome, or freaking out about whether we’re offering clients the correct kind of psychoeducation, or if that psychoeducation piece is even accurate, or are we encouraging the coping skills folks need right now, or worrying whether we’re practicing some new intervention we just got trained on the right way. There’s an underlying current that we need to be the expert in the room. Otherwise, what’s the point of the degree, of the program, of the job title, of the salary? If we aren’t experts, then wouldn’t it just be cheaper and easier for people to talk to their friends or family about their problems? Oh wait, but right, the world is not a safe place. We need to become experts in being the safe place. That’s paramount.

I’m thinking now about the group norms of case presentations in grad school, and of consult groups afterward. One person shares what they can about their feelings about this work, and the rest of the circle is encouraged… to offer advice. Not to empathize, or invite curiosity, or learn from the speaker, really - just to offer advice. “Have you considered ACT?” “Have you talked about sleep hygiene?”

Grad students worry about whether profs notice they’re not doing the readings, or whether they’re aligning with the right professors. Grad programs worry about accreditation and the liability of expelling students who aren’t meeting basic standards. Interns worry about lying about their contact hours while not giving clients enough advice about coping skills. Big agencies worry about whether they’re adequately aligning with donors. Agency applicants and new adjuncts worry about portraying themselves as emotionally healthy and knowledgeable about change-inducers. Scarf shoppers new to private practice worry about presenting themselves as naturally warm experts deserving of taking down clients’ credit card numbers. And then clients worry about whether or not their therapist’s “good enough,” being liked by their (anxious) therapists, what topics feel safe to broach, and how do they go about being “good” patients?

I bring this all up to provide context for this sentiment: we are *so grateful* to our authors this quarter, for choosing to bravely show us some parts of themselves that aren’t super-positive. They write about how hard it is to be broke; they write that they suffer from anxiety; they tell us they’re dealing with profound grief. Not easy things to share with an anxious, judgmental world.

Last month, I learned that a colleague killed himself following a disciplinary action. He did something wrong, wasn’t able to talk to his supervisor about it, got caught, and then couldn’t see a way forward. Not all of us can trust our colleagues or supervisors (or therapists) to accept us, wherever we’re at, whatever mistakes we’ve made, no matter how inconvenient (or incorrect) our perspective. This makes it so much harder for us to learn. When we’re trapped in silence, in communities of fake positivity or performed expertness it can be so much harder to differentiate between our crappy behaviors or weird-o thoughts and our underlying identity. Which makes it really difficult to accept ourselves and others - and when we can’t do that, it can feel impossible to imagine a future in which we’re actually grounded, focused, grateful, and calm enough to truly accept where our clients are at.

**Moira Ryan, LPC** is in private practice in Portland.