

# When Our Clients Repeat Themselves: The Art of Hearing What Wasn't Said

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## The Signal Hidden in Repetition

Picture this: Your client has just told you something—once, twice, now a third time. The words are slightly different each iteration, but the essential message remains the same. By the seventh repetition, you might feel frustration creeping in. "I heard you," you want to say. "Why do you keep saying this?"

But here's what I've learned in decades of practice: When our clients repeat themselves, they're not being difficult. They're signaling something crucial—something we haven't yet heard, or something they haven't yet managed to say.

## What Repetition Really Means

In the consulting room, repetition is rarely about the content being repeated. It's a process communication, a meta-message that transcends the actual words: "I'm trying to reach you, and I haven't quite gotten there yet."

Sometimes we genuinely didn't hear what they said. The words were spoken, but we were momentarily elsewhere—caught in our own thoughts, distracted by something they said earlier, or simply missing the frequency they were broadcasting on.

Other times—and this is more subtle—they said something without truly *saying* it. The words existed, but the deeper meaning remained buried beneath them, wrapped in protective layers they couldn't quite penetrate themselves. Winnicott's concept of the True Self versus False Self illuminates this beautifully: the client may be speaking from a defended position, their False Self articulating acceptable words while their True Self remains hidden, waiting to be seen.

And sometimes, perhaps most painfully, we *did* hear them perfectly well, but they didn't *experience* being heard. The communication reached us, but something failed to register for them. They need not just our understanding, but our acknowledgment—a felt sense that their message has landed.



### **The Technique: Stop and Ask**

The intervention is deceptively simple, yet profoundly powerful: When you notice repetition—the second time, the fifth time, the eleventh time—stop the cycle. Pause the conversation gently but firmly, and ask directly:

*"What do you feel I didn't hear?"*

This question shifts everything. It moves from content to process, from what they're saying to what's happening between you. It acknowledges the communication failure without blame, creating space for something new to emerge.

Sometimes they'll tell you immediately: "You didn't hear that this terrified me" or "I don't think you understood how angry I am." Other times, they won't know themselves—the repetition was unconscious, driven by an unnamed need that this question helps bring into awareness.

### **When the Repetition Is Our Own**

I learned the depth of this practice not as a psychotherapist, but as a participant in a workshop years ago. I had recently given birth to my second child, and there had been complications. The aftermath left me waking eleven times each night—not because the baby needed feeding or attention, but from pain. Eleven times. I was in a zombie state, barely functioning, utterly depleted.

In that workshop, I found myself talking about it. And talking about it. And talking about it again. I wasn't aware of the repetition—I just kept circling back to the same story, the same description of waking eleven times, the exhaustion, the difficulty. After I don't know how many iterations, my facilitator stopped me. She said gently but firmly, "Elya, you've repeated yourself so many times. What is the thing I didn't hear?"

The question stopped me completely. I sat there, stunned. And then something broke open inside me. My whole soul just expressed itself. I started crying—deep, wrenching sobs—and through my tears I said: "I didn't hear how much pain... how much pain it was. It was just so, so difficult."

The tears streamed down my cheeks as I finally *felt* what I'd been trying to say. I had been talking *about* my pain, describing it, narrating it—but I hadn't allowed the pain itself to emerge, to be felt, to be witnessed. I hadn't given it space to exist as something real and overwhelming, not just a fact to report.

The repetition was me trying to reach myself. I was knocking on my own door, asking to be let in, but I couldn't hear my own knocking. My facilitator's question opened a clearing within the universal pain I carried — allowing me, at last, to hear myself, to permit the full gravity of what I had experienced to be acknowledged; not merely by others, but by me.

That moment completed something. The painful repetition could finally stop because what had needed to be expressed had, at last, been expressed — emotionally and bodily. What had needed to be heard — by me, by the witness, by the room — had finally been heard; held in the emotional resonance that passed between bodies, contained within the space we shared. This is what I mean when I say repetition is a signal. Sometimes the person we're trying to reach is ourselves.

### **When We Miss What's Missing**

I recall a trans client who kept insisting that heterosexual sexuality is appreciated and treasured by society. They said it once, twice — eventually seven times across a single session. Each time, I attempted to acknowledge their pain around growing up without that same celebration of their own sexuality, yet somehow the acknowledgment never quite landed — and I began to sense I was missing something essential.

What the client could not articulate — what lay buried within the repetition — was something far deeper than the sting of discrimination. It lived in the specific words themselves: appreciated and treasured. For them, these words carried layers of accumulated meaning: childhood longing, developmental absence, a hollow at the centre of their experience that society's current acceptance, however welcome, could never quite fill. Yet beneath even that lay something more tender still — they had never been given the chance to discover and celebrate their own sexuality from a place of genuine happiness; to encounter it fresh, with wonder, as their own.

Meanwhile, I carried my own strong reaction to those words — appreciated and treasured. As someone born a woman, who had spent years holding clients' stories of sexual trauma — rape, abuse, objectification — the words felt jarring, even offensive. How could heterosexual experience be characterised as appreciated and treasured when so many women's sexuality had been violated, diminished, taken without consent?

Yet neither of us was truly hearing the other. They were held fast in their adolescent pain, unable to mentalise beyond it. I was caught in my own reaction to the words themselves, unable to fully receive their grief. The repetition was attempting to bridge that gap — a quiet, insistent signal that something crucial was not yet finding its way through.

### **The Power of the Question**

When the psychotherapist finally asked — not "What do you mean?" but "What do you feel I haven't heard?" — something shifted. The question itself became an act of emotional mentalisation, unlocking that capacity to understand how behaviour rises from emotional states drifting upward through the body — one's own, and another's.

This is what makes the technique so powerful. We are not merely gathering more information — we are teaching our clients, and ourselves, to notice when communication has broken down; when embodied communication, most of all, has failed to cross the threshold between two people. It teaches us to slow down, to grow curious about the space between bodies rather than simply pressing more content across it — to turn inward, towards the felt sense of emotion as it moves through the body and let that be the guide.

My facilitator's question did the same for me. She wasn't asking for more details about the eleven wakings, the complications, or the exhaustion. She was inviting me to notice the gap between what I was saying and what I was feeling, between my narration and my lived experience.

That question—*What didn't I hear?*—assumes that something real exists beyond the words already spoken. It assumes there's depth we haven't yet reached, meaning we haven't yet accessed. It treats repetition not as annoying redundancy but as a breadcrumb trail leading somewhere important.

### **Beyond the Consulting Room: Couples and Repetition**

This pattern arises constantly in couples' work. Partners become trapped in loops, each feeling perpetually unheard. He says something once, then again, then three more times, his voice climbing. She responds in kind, her answers growing clipped, guarded. Neither notices they have long since left the realm of true communication and entered a repetitive dance — its steps painfully choreographed by wounds that predate them both.

The aching sensation of not being heard can become its own reality, regardless of whether genuine hearing has occurred. He feels unheard, so he repeats. She feels besieged by the repetition, so she withdraws into defence. And round they go, orbiting one another's pain without ever quite touching it.



When we gently interrupt this cycle — "Pause for a moment. You have both said versions of this several times now. What do you each feel the other has not yet heard?" — we create a clearing for something deeper to surface. And what emerges is rarely about the content at all. It is about feeling valued, respected, truly seen. It is about old wounds that were there long before this relationship began — wounds that have simply found, in this beloved person, a familiar place to ache.

### **The Three Scenarios of Repetition**

There are essentially three possibilities when repetition arises in the therapeutic space.

The first: we, the psychotherapists, did not truly hear. We were distracted, overwhelmed, or caught in the undertow of our own reaction. This is a simple human limitation — and naming it openly creates connection rather than shame. "I don't think I fully heard you. Shall we slow down together? Would you be willing to say it once more?"

The second: they did not quite say it. The words were present, but the emotional core meaning remained encoded within them — inaccessible, perhaps, even to themselves. This calls for gentle excavation, a soft and patient uncovering: "You have returned to this several times now, and I sense there is something underneath that we have not yet quite reached."

The third — and perhaps the most tender of all: we heard perfectly, yet they did not experience being heard. This is the wound of attunement failure, the aching gap between cognitive understanding and emotional resonance. Here, it is not enough to reflect back what was said — we must also reach towards how it must have felt, inhabiting their experience with them rather than observing it from a careful distance: "I hear that you felt abandoned — and I imagine that carried you straight back to those frightening times in childhood, when..."

My own experience in that workshop belonged, above all, to the second possibility: I was speaking about the pain, but I had not yet truly allowed myself to feel it — had not granted it permission to exist as the overwhelming, embodied reality it was. The words were present, faithfully repeated, but the truth beneath them remained quietly locked away, waiting. Waiting until someone asked the right question — and, in doing so, gently turned the key.

### **Training Ourselves to Notice**

The hardest part is not asking the question — it is catching ourselves within the repetition early enough to interrupt it with care. This requires a kind of meta-awareness, a capacity to observe the process even whilst remaining present within the content.

I have found it helpful to attend to my own internal experience. When I notice frustration rising in me, or a creeping sense of boredom or stuckness, that is often a quiet signal that we have entered repetitive territory. The same is true when I catch myself offering variations of the same response — reaching for slightly different words to convey, essentially, the same thing. And sometimes the more uncomfortable question is this: what have I failed to acknowledge — perhaps not even to myself, and therefore not to the client — because doing so might require me to sit with an unwelcome truth?



I remember one such moment: after several exchanges circling the same ground with a mother, I finally allowed myself to say what had been hovering unspoken between us — that yes, she was genuinely difficult to satisfy as a mother, and that she was, at the same time, a good enough mother. I held both truths aloud, without resolving the tension between them, and we simply sat there together within it. That willingness to remain in the discomfort, rather than smooth it away, was what finally allowed something to breathe.

These are the moments to pause, step back, and ask with gentle curiosity: what is this repetition trying to accomplish? What communication is quietly failing here?

Sometimes — as my own facilitator so wisely recognised — the repetition carries within it a quality of desperation; the sense of someone knocking harder and harder upon a door that will not open. That is precisely when we must stop and ask with tenderness what lies waiting on the other side.

## **The Deeper Invitation**

This technique — pausing to ask what we, as psychotherapists, have failed to hear — is ultimately an act of teaching mentalisation. When we model genuine curiosity about the moments communication breaks down, when we slow ourselves and grow interested in what is not being transmitted, we quietly invite our clients into that same capacity within themselves.

They begin, in time, to notice their own repetitions: "I think I have said this now for the third time. Perhaps something isn't reaching you — or perhaps I have not yet found the words for what I truly mean."

This is tender, sophisticated work. It asks us to hold two truths simultaneously, without collapsing one into the other: I heard you — and something did not land. Both are real. Neither carries blame. We are simply two human beings, doing our best to reach one another across the inevitable distances that exist between us.

And sometimes — as I discovered in that workshop, in that moment of grace — we are also trying to reach ourselves across our own interior distances. Across the gap between what we are able to say and what we are finally able to feel. Between the stories we have long carried in the body and the truths we have not yet dared to fully live.

That, perhaps, is the deepest invitation of all.

## **"What do you feel I haven't heard yet?"**

### **The Completion That Becomes Possible**

After my facilitator asked her question — after the tears came, and I finally allowed myself to feel the full depth of what I had been reaching towards — something shifted. The need to repeat simply dissolved. I felt complete; not because the pain had gone, for it had not, and not because anything in the world had changed, for it had not either. But because what had needed to be witnessed had, at last, been witnessed.

The repetition could cease because its emotional purpose had been fulfilled. What had been straining upward through the body — that emotional updrift seeking expression, seeking receipt — had finally broken through to the surface and been truly received.

This is what we are reaching for in therapeutic work. Not necessarily that pain disappears or that problems are resolved, but that what needs to be expressed finds its expression — that what needs to be heard is truly heard, and what needs to be witnessed is received, with full and compassionate presence, by another.

Sometimes that witnessing happens between a psychotherapist and a client. Sometimes between partners, or between parent and child. And sometimes — perhaps more often than we dare to recognise — it happens between a person and themselves, made possible by someone who holds enough stillness and courage to ask, with quiet tenderness: "What have I not yet allowed myself to hear? What is it that I have been trying, all this time, to tell myself?"

And in time, with practice and with care, this capacity becomes something the person can carry beyond the therapy room — a quiet inner companion for the dailiness of life; the ability to pause, to notice the repetition, and to ask themselves, with the same gentle curiosity once offered by another: what is it, still, that I am trying to hear?

### **The Practice**

Next time you notice repetition—in your consulting room, your relationship, your own speech—try this:

Pause. Breathe. Ask with genuine curiosity: "What do you feel I haven't heard yet?" Then listen. Not to the content you've already heard seven times, but to what emerges in the space created by the question itself.

Often, what wasn't heard is simpler and more profound than the words that kept repeating. "I needed you to know I'm scared." "I wanted you to see how much this hurt." "I'm trying to tell you I need you."

Or, as in my case: "I need to feel this, not just describe it. I need to let the pain be real, not just reportable. I need to stop protecting myself from my own experience."

The repetition was never really about the content. It was about being met, being seen, being reached by another, or sometimes by ourselves.

And when we finally ask the right question, when we create space for what wasn't yet said, something shifts. The repetition stops. Real communication begins. Something completes. After all, every repetition is an invitation—an often unconscious reaching toward connection that hasn't quite been achieved. Our job isn't to make it stop. It's to hear what's trying to be born through it.

And sometimes, if we are very fortunate, we have someone in our lives who knows to pause us gently mid-repetition and ask: "What is it that I haven't yet heard?" That question — offered at the right moment, with genuine curiosity and a voice slowed by compassion — can open doors we did not even know were closed.

*In accordance with ethical requirements, all identifying details of clients have been changed to safeguard confidentiality.*



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