Working with the Neurobiological Legacy of Trauma

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Working with Ego States and Parts of the Personality

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Through the day, we regularly pass from personality to personality. Because of the speed and fluidity of this process for most of us, and the fact that we have such a limited vocabulary for distinguishing among these inner entities, we do not usually attend to the ways in which this inner community conducts its business.”

Schwartz, 1995

Both client and therapist tend to ignore ego state phenomena . . .

Who should be attending to the inner community?

- Trauma theory tells us that “noticing” or “attending” is a prerequisite for successful treatment and that restoring frontal lobe functioning helps manage impulsivity.
- For that reason, cultivation of a witnessing self, a part of the self that can step back, become curious, notice patterns and notice the parts, should be a priority in treatment.
- Of all the parts, the Going On with Normal Life has the most access to prefrontal cortex and therefore is the best candidate. But because the Normal Life part gets overwhelmed by traumatized parts, often we have to model becoming more curious and observant first.
A Neurobiological Approach to Working with Parts

- Work on the premise that dissociation is a way of regulating arousal: switching, fading out, going away and acting out all reflect autonomic dysregulation
- Regulation of arousal is always a first priority to keep the frontal lobes online and therefore an Adult Self
- Maintain a parts focus “Does that feel like the same part? Or a different part?” The therapist’s comfort with the language of parts will help evoke curiosity
- Focus on increasing feelings of centered and grounded helps all parts of the system. The Normal Life Self can be encouraged to use somatic resources to “help the child parts” know that they are safe in a adult body now

Sensorimotor Approaches to Working with Parts, cont.

- Thoughts and beliefs are treated as communications from parts: studying the body responses in addition to the words is a way of “listening” to the parts
- Increasing awareness of somatic markers of parts: choosing on which part to focus, where that part is felt in the body, what actions to take, what thoughts to entertain
- The ANP learns to notice dysregulation or internal conflict and to intervene somatically: Fight EP to go into the backbone to increase the ANP’s courage and reassure younger EPs or by having the ANP lengthen the spine slightly to transform the collapse of theSubmit EP

Internal Family Systems

Using a model based in mindfulness techniques, Internal Family Systems proposes that, in addition to parts holding survival responses, including functioning, there is a Higher Self untouched by trauma and capable of becoming a witness and self-healer:

A “Self”
curious, compassionate, clear, creative, courageous, calm, confident, committed
IFS Adds a Concept of Defenses

In the course of childhood adaptation, parts of us are exiled and isolated, protected by other parts that engage in acceptable behavior or cause crises to divert attention from the exiled parts.

Self
- curious, compassionate, clear, calm, creative, courageous, confident, committed

“Exiles”
- Hold unacceptable or unsafe feelings/memories

“Managers”
- "Stand in" for Exiles and try to "carry on"

“Firefighters”
- Protect Exiles with emergency responses

Case Example

Suzanne

Managers
- "Standards" Part
  - Focused on maintaining the household in perfect order
- Mothering Part
  - Focused on dance recitals, homework, family vacations

Firefighters
- Angry Part
  - Reacts wrongly to any change in plan or disappointment
- Suicidal Part
  - Maintains a plan at all times, hurts the body daily

Justice-Seeking Part
- "Ashamed" Part
- Fearful Part
- "Sad and Needy" Part

Exiled Parts

Transformation = Inner Healing

Healing is the outcome of a compassionate connection between parts and Self that creates sufficient safety and trust that parts can be "unburdened," can let go of their legacies of the past.

Self
- curious, compassionate, clear, creative, calm, courageous, confident, committed

“Exiles”

“Managers”

“Firefighters”
Working in an IFS Paradigm

- The fundamental assumption is that all thoughts, feelings, and body sensations lacking the qualities of a Wise Minded 'Self' represent communications from exiled parts. As these parts are heard or observed, the therapist brings them to the attention of the client.
- Like Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, IFS cultivates the ability to be mindful and maintain [Self] awareness of parts. Dual awareness (the ability to be in a mindful relationship to the parts or the body or both) is considered to be a healing ingredient but also helps regulate the parts' triggered feelings and activation.
- In IFS, healing is intrapersonal more than interpersonal.

Cultivating “Self-energy” [Schwartz] or “Mental Energy” [Van der Hart, Nijenhuis & Steele]

- Self-energy = increased capacity for states of curiosity, compassion, calm, courage, creativity, clarity, commitment, and confidence provide a spiritual energy which is an antidote to fear and shame.
- The assumption is that ‘Self-energy’ will increase organically as parts are noticed and identified, then asked to step back to make more room for Self.
- But some of our clients have too many parts, or parts that are highly dysregulated and dysregulating. Some have parts that are in conflict with each other or even with ‘Self.’ Those clients need to be taught how to become curious, calm, compassionate, and committed.
Building “Self Energy” one “C” quality at a time . . .

“Self”
curious, compassionate, clear, creative, courageous, calm, confident, committed

“Identifying” vs. “Identifying with”

- When clients interpret the parts’ intrusive feelings, thoughts, and body sensations as “me,” they “identify” with the parts. Thoughts like “I am hopeless” or “I am afraid” can feel true when the client is blended with parts and driven by their actions and reactions.
- An important part of trauma work is helping clients to identify (i.e., to notice or recognize) input from parts and then dis-identify with it by learning to say, “That part is afraid . . . rather than I am afraid.”
- Dis-identifying with and reframing the symptoms helps to cultivate curiosity rather than hostility. The assumption must be that symptoms = parts using their “survival resources” to cope with the trauma.

Blending, Shifting, and Switching

- One of the key features in all forms of structural dissociation is the shifting of states. This is the mechanism by which parts assert power and have the ability to influence the mind, body, and Normal Life self.
- One state change is “blending,” in which a part’s thoughts and feelings seep into or flood the body and mind. Blending makes it hard for clients to distinguish “me” from “part.”
- Clients also “shift” states: e.g., the Adult shifts into a sad child state but is consciously aware of both states.
- Dissociative disorder clients switch or get “highjacked:” i.e., the client “becomes” the part with little to no awareness of the part’s activities or words or behavior or even feelings.
"Unblending" (Schwartz, 2001) Self from Traumatized Parts

"Unblending" refers to any technique that decreases merging with the emotions and perspectives of parts and increases the ability to hold multiple perspectives in mind.

- The therapist’s job to just to name the parts and foster empathy for them:
  - about the defeated part ruining everything, isn’t it? You know, the teenager was really trying to help by lashing out
- As the therapist’s Self communicates compassion, calm, and clarity to the system, the client’s unblending efforts are supported, and the nervous system regulates, increasing the somatic sense of safety and calm.

Teaching Parts to “Sit Back”

- In Internal Family Systems therapy, unblending and mindful awareness of the parts are enhanced by asking them to "step back" to "make more room for Self.
- The therapist asks, "Would you ask this part if it would be willing to sit back a little to make more room for you?"
  - Often, there is an immediate softening or settling of feelings and sensations, creating dual awareness.
- Sometimes, the part resists, and the client is instructed to ask, "Would you ask that part what she’s worried about if she sits back? What does she need from you to be able to sit back?"
  - "Oh, so she needs to know that you won’t ignore her if she sits back—could you reassure her of that?"

Teaching Parts to “Sit Back,” cont.

- "Sitting back" is a particularly useful skill for clients who are overwhelmed or dissociating or experiencing a lot of "noise" in their heads. It quiets the noise and also helps to build compassion for the parts. When they sit back, their feelings are not so overwhelming and can be "heard" more easily rather than just felt as flooding.
- Because "sitting back" is a skill, clients are asked to practice it at home between sessions, and the therapist tries to be consistent in using it in sessions.
- When the therapist has confidence that this instruction will work and that it is key to successful trauma treatment, clients (and their parts) respond accordingly.
Fostering Internal Communication

• Assumption that there “more than one ‘I’. consistently asking, “Which ‘I’ feels so hopeless?”

• Mental contents must be connected to “right self:” the Structural Dissociation model can be used to predict which affects and responses “belong” to particular types of child or adult selves.

• The goal is co-consciousness: each time connections are made between a feeling and a part of the self, dissociative barriers are made more permeable, and the seeds of co-consciousness are planted.

• The therapist enhances co-consciousness further by teaching the client’s Adult Self to gather information internally by “asking inside.” i.e., by directing questions internally, asking, “What part feels this way? What is s/he afraid of? What does s/he need from me to be less afraid/angry/sad?” Fisher, 2011

The “Noticing Brain”

• With DID and DDNOS clients, it is often more helpful to build mindful internal awareness in even simpler ways, especially when there is inner conflict among parts that leads to frontal lobe shutdown.

• The therapist: “Let’s get some help from a different part of your brain—let’s switch to using your ‘noticing brain’ instead of your ‘thinking brain.’ Remember, the noticing brain just notices thoughts as just thoughts, feelings as just feelings, body sensations as just body sensations.”

• “So, you are feeling some tightness in your chest and a lot of anxiety. . . Could you use your noticing brain to just notice the tightness and anxiety as just feelings and sensations? Just body memory.” Fisher, 2009

Teaching the Adult Self to inhibit old responses and practice new ones

• Notice the triggering. Notice what’s happening right now. What do you notice? What feelings? What thoughts? What gut reactions?

• And as you are noticing those thoughts and sensations, just Acknowledge them as body memory. . . As just sensation, just a thought. . . Just parts remembering . . .

• And then Welcome them . . . Notice them as parts having a body memory. . . and welcome them.

Fisher, 2009
How and why does it work?

- **N** = “As those feelings come up, NOTICE what happens inside…” facilitates mindful noticing by directing attention to the thoughts, feeling and body sensations that comprise the habitual pattern rather than allowing the client to interpret it or react to it.
- **A** = “ACKNOWLEDGE these as body memory…” asks the client to practice an updated interpretation of the nonverbal memories as past, not present, ‘just memory’.
- **W** = “WELCOME them…” Welcoming or acceptance is a mindfulness practice that facilitates integration of new responses, presumably also decreasing activity in the amygdala. Welcoming the new pattern increases focus on it and provides repetition.

Using Multimodal Techniques

“When you hear something, you will forget it. When you see something, you will remember it. But only when you do something, will you understand it”

- Multimodal techniques increase the integrative potential of every intervention we use.
- If we add a visual component to the auditory, or a movement to the words we choose, or a visual image or auditory cue to an abstract concept or quality, the chances of retention and generalization are increased.

Using Diagramming to Promote Internal Awareness

- Adult parts of self grounded in the present
- Child and teenage parts still living in the past
- Trigger of traumatic activation
- Impact of one part on another
- Empathic connection between parts
The Feedback Loop

Adult Elizabeth
Little One
Critical Part
Enforcer

"I'm scared— all alone. Someone please help me!"
"Get a grip! Stop that whining! Shape up, loser!"
"You deserve to die—your body is worthless anyway."

These threats re-trigger the child part and re-ignite the cycle.

Fisher, 2004

Internal Problem-Solving

Med doctor is moving to a clinic
Little Saint
Warrior
Warrior
The Hypervigilent Protectors: "We will be exposed—it isn't safe."

"We don't feel safe here."
"
"It reminds us of those social workers."

13
Depressed, suicidal: "I need those pills."

"I want to stop all my meds."

9
5
7
3

"We just want to feel better."

Fisher, 2002

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