

## CHAPTER TEN

# Establishing a Healthy Daily Structure

### AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Exercises
- Break
- Topic: Establishing a Healthy Daily Structure
  - Introduction
  - Problems With Daily Structure for People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder
  - Reflections on Developing a Healthy Daily Structure
  - Keeping Track of Time
  - Tips for Keeping Track of Time
  - Developing Healthy Work Habits
  - Reflections on Developing a New Healthy Daily Structure
- Homework
  - Reread the chapter.
  - Continue working on your sleep kit and bedtime routine if needed.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 10.1, Your Current Daily Structure.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 10.2, Developing a Realistic and Healthy Daily Structure and Routine.

### Introduction

A daily and weekly structure, with a balanced distribution of work,

activity, and leisure, is of great importance for everyone. A satisfying life includes knowing how to enjoy working but also how to enjoy and use to best advantage your leisure or free time. Everyone does best with a daily structure that is consistent, but not too rigid. Structure helps people keep track of time and of what they are doing, so they can be more attentive and able to concentrate, and less worried or confused about what comes next. Structure may help reduce the risk of intrusion of, or switching among, parts of the personality; it may also help reduce the risk of prolonged flashbacks or sinking into depression. Everyone has the need to start and complete certain tasks in a timely manner, to manage a household, and to make relatively balanced choices about how he or she spends free time.

Daily and weekly structures should include a regular time to get up and go to bed, regular and healthy meals, necessary chores (for instance, shopping, cooking, paying bills, cleaning), time for relationships and social contacts, personal (“me”) time, inner check-ins, physical exercise, fun, and other safely stimulating activities, and so forth. In this chapter we will focus on tools for establishing a daily structure, including keeping track of time, healthy work habits, and using your leisure time to best advantage.

## **Problems With Daily Structure for People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder**

The establishment of a daily structure is often difficult for individuals with a dissociative disorder for a number of the following reasons:

- Disrupted time sense and an often chaotic and conflicted inner world.
- Dissociative parts may fight for time and have many conflicting wishes, needs, and preferences about how to spend time.
- As a consequence, different parts may begin certain activities but cannot finish because other parts interfere or shift to another task.
- Difficulty concentrating and completing tasks.
- Problems with impulse control and difficulty finishing a task that does not easily hold your attention, for instance,

- cleaning, paying bills, studying.
- Structure and routine were often not something that was modeled for you as a child, so you never learned how to develop and keep a healthy structure and have not experienced its benefits.
  - You may have created an excessive and rigid structure, incessantly going from one activity to the next, never taking a rest, exhausting yourself (see also discussion that follows).

Finding a balance in your daily structure may present a big challenge. Too much structure and busyness may be a way for you to avoid feeling or knowing more about yourself or your inner world. And perhaps it may be an attempt to feel competent by doing “everything” or to prevent other parts from taking over from you. But excessive busyness can deplete you more than you might be aware.

On the other hand, if you have too little structure, problematic symptoms can increase dramatically. Perhaps it is difficult for you to decide exactly what you would like to do, or you have no idea what you want or need to do, and thus plan nothing for the day. You may notice that you have a more difficult time on totally unstructured days, especially on the weekends. You may start and stop a number of different tasks without finishing anything. This “start-stop” behavior, often due to the interference of parts, leaves all parts of you burdened by yet more unfinished business, depleting your energy further. Or perhaps you feel unmotivated to do anything, and just sit, watch TV, play computer games, or sleep.

For people with DID, some parts may be active at the expense of others, so that they lose time and do things that they were not intending to do, for instance, painting or watching TV instead of completing tasks that need to be done, such as cleaning the house. And without inner communication and cooperation, the activities and plans of some parts may overlap and interfere with those of other parts of yourself. Then you may find yourself overcommitted, adding to a sense of being overwhelmed and conflicted.

## **Reflections on Developing a Healthy Daily Structure**

Make a list of your basic daily tasks, for example, work or volunteer time, taking care of children, cleaning, shopping and

other errands, cooking, laundry, paying bills, taking care of pets, gardening or yard work, and so on. If more than one part of you is engaged in these tasks, set aside some quiet time to communicate and coordinate a reasonable schedule. The following questions may be important as part of your inner reflection:

- Are there specific tasks that cause inner problems among parts? For example, is a part triggered by caring for children, or overwhelmed by the many choices presented to you in the grocery store, or too impulsive to deal with spending money?
- If there are inner problems evoked by a certain task, which seem the easiest to solve? Begin with that problem and as you gain more confidence and practice with inner communication and cooperation, you may move to the next problem. Remember to be patient: You cannot change everything at once, and no one expects you to do so.
- Do you or parts of you have a tendency to have too much structure and exhaust yourself? If so, see if you can notice why, for example, avoiding feelings or memories, feeling pressured to achieve, afraid to stop, and so forth.
- What might be the benefits to you and other parts of you if you were more flexible with your daily structure? For example, better capacity to tolerate emotions, permission not to work so hard, and the like.
- What activities are important for you as a whole person? Negotiate with parts inside to plan a set number of activities each week that is comfortable and reasonable to you and all parts of you, not too many and not too few. If you are overly active and busy, make sure you plan for down time between engagements. And be sure to plan for the time it takes to get from one place to another without having to rush.
- Do you or parts of you have too little structure? If so, see if you can determine why. For example, some people are too depressed or tired to provide themselves with structure to do anything; others may not know where to start or how to use structure, and so on.
- What might parts of you need in order to develop more structure? For example, more support from other people or from parts inside, some suggestions for structure, and so forth.

- Would you be willing to push just a little to do one or two activities each day?
- If you decide to develop a new structure or routine, do not criticize yourself or other parts if you are not able to keep it all the time. Just try again! You do not have to be perfect to be successful. For most people, it takes several months (and sometimes even more) to make a new routine become a more automatic habit.

### ***Additional Tips***

- Everyone needs time for relaxation and pleasure. Make time for yourself and for parts of yourself every day, preferably during the day or in the early evening, not at bedtime (see [chapter 11](#)).
- Everyone needs time for personal reflection and inner deliberation. Some people with a dissociative disorder find it helpful to have an inner meeting with parts of themselves to discuss daily routines, plans, and so forth (see [chapter 27](#)).
- Engage in some type of physical exercise every day (cycling, walking, or some other form of activity). Try to go outside every day and get 15 to 20 minutes of sun.
- Try to have contact with other people at least several times a week, especially if you live alone. Isolating yourself is often a habit that is not helpful. Be aware of when you want to isolate and intentionally make plans with friends or acquaintances instead, or just walk around where people are nearby, for example, in a park or a mall.
- If you tend to lose yourself in an activity, try setting an alarm to stay aware of time. Virtually every personal electronic device now has reminder alerts that can be set.
- If you are living with someone else, you will both benefit by having clear and fixed arrangements about who does which chores. Fuzzy arrangements and lack of clarity can cause irritation and resentment. You may need to be assertive to make sure you have personal time for yourself and your parts, and to make sure the tasks are distributed fairly.
- Many books and Web sites are dedicated to offering practical tips for organization, routines, and structure. Make use of these as needed. Personal organizers, trained individuals who

help with your daily organization, are also available in most areas.

## **Keeping Track of Time**

A sense of time is essential to maintain structure and routines, but when you have a dissociative disorder, an accurate time sense and adequate time management are often problems. It is as though some parts of you do not live in time and even have trouble understanding the concept of time (Van der Hart & Steele, 1997). Time can seem too fast or too slow, gaps of lost time make it hard to keep track of the day, time may not be experienced at all, and time sense may differ among various dissociative parts. All these problems with a sense of time lead to confusion. In addition, many people with a dissociative disorder have trouble with time management due to problems with executive functioning, that is, with planning, organizing, sequencing, and prioritizing abilities.

## **Tips for Keeping Track of Time**

- Use a diary, a calendar, or a planning board, or all three (even if you feel there is inner conflict about planning). Keep your calendar in a place where you will see it every day. Mark off days as they pass so you can easily find the day and date.
- If you have DID and lose time, written communication may help all parts of you begin to coordinate a single schedule. Invite parts to use the same planning tool. And the more you have inner agreement about a schedule, the better you will be able to keep it. Try to plan one week at a time.
- Put important reminders on your calendar, for instance, due dates for bills and taxes, appointments, and errands to run during the week.
- Wear a watch, so you can keep track of hours. Preferably use a watch that has an alarm, so you can set it as a reminder for appointments or tasks. Some people prefer to use their cell phone to track time instead of a watch; that is fine, too, but a watch on your wrist is a visual reminder to check the time, perhaps more so than your phone.
- When you have an appointment, set a reminder alarm for 15 minutes before you should leave to make it on time. For



example, if it will take you 30 minutes to drive to your therapist, set your alarm to remind you that your appointment is in 45 minutes. Do not allow yourself to get involved in another task before you leave.

- Keep a list of things to do and appointments posted on your refrigerator or calendar, which you will see every day.
- Put a colored hair band around your wrist to remind you that you need to do something.
- If you tend to lose lists, keep them in a single notebook used only for that purpose and keep the notebook in the same place at all times. Make an agreement among parts not to hide or destroy the notebook.
- Before going to the store, make a list of what you need that is agreeable to all parts of you, so you need not spend hours shopping or overspend. Only buy what is on your list; then leave.
- If you have trouble remembering when and if you have taken your medication (if you take any), buy a weekly pill organizer box, available at any pharmacy. Each week, put your medications in the appropriate box, and you can check the box to see whether you have taken them. Set an alarm to take your medication, if necessary.
- If you have DID, you may find some part of you is able to keep good time and can remind you.

## **Developing Healthy Work Habits**

Whether people go to a job each day, or whether they work at home, raise children, or volunteer, they all need healthy work habits. This includes the ability to concentrate and focus, organize one's work, start and stop activities on time, and balance work with other important life priorities. People who work too much set up a lifestyle of chronic exhaustion, rigidity, and imbalance, which makes them more vulnerable to switching, flashbacks, and periods of poor functioning. People who are unable to work generally do not feel very worthwhile and may be unable to take care of themselves financially. The resulting stress can lead to increased symptoms and difficulties.

People often have particular dissociative parts that deal with work, while other parts may be unaware of work. Some parts may

sabotage or interfere with work or projects, or prefer to play instead of work. And parts living in trauma-time may become triggered by various situations at work, such as an angry or irritated boss.

Dissociative parts that are focused solely on work typically are not sufficiently aware of your body to know when you are tired or stressed; thus, they tend to overdo. On the whole, such parts may not be particularly interested in “cooperation” and slowing down but are often only focused on a work goal that needs to be accomplished. This is hardly surprising, because such parts likely use work as a protection against the intrusion of painful memories or the realization of a painful past, or against dealing with other dissociative parts that might not be appropriate at work.

All people need to feel successful at their work, whatever it is, because success helps us feel competent and good about ourselves. It is thus understandable that people with dissociative disorders do not want to take the risk of losing that area of competence and thus are reluctant to decrease the barriers that protect parts that are able to work. But as noted earlier, overworking prevents you from having to cope with and confront your inner world. Thus, “staying busy” and forcing yourself to do more and more is a very common form of unhealthy coping. To heal, you must develop inner collaboration to balance yourself in life and cope more effectively.

## **Reflections on Developing a New Healthy Daily Structure**

- Reflect on how you would like to ideally and realistically spend your time. Please note if there are conflicts among parts of you about how to spend time.
- What are your priorities about which activities you would like to spend your time (for instance, work, being with friends, play, reading)?
- When do you need more or less structure? Weekends? Evenings? Daytime? Holidays?
- Are there particular times of day that are especially hard for you? If so, imagine what changes you could make in your routines and structure to help you (see [chapter 16](#) on planning to cope with difficult times).
- Consider how much time you can or should spend on work or



tasks in a given day.

- Notice how your time is distributed among work/chores, and leisure/social time, play and rest, and personal (“me”) time.
- Reflect on how to give yourself meaningful private time for tending to your inner needs (including those of other parts of you). This should include time for inner reflection and contact with parts of yourself. How might you structure that time to be fair and agreeable to all parts of yourself?
- Consider which activities give you energy or drain you of energy. Try to cooperate with all parts of yourself to set a realistic daily pace, given your energy level and the amount of energy your activities give or demand of you.
- Take into account other ways to balance your life, for example, exercise, socializing, getting out of the house, enjoying a hobby.

## **Homework Sheet 10.1**

### **Your Current Daily Structure**

Describe your current daily structure and routines so you assess what is working well for you and what might need to be different. Include the approximate amount of time you spend in each of the four categories listed below. You do not have to go into detail.

1. Work / tasks / chores / appointments / meals
2. Leisure and social time, for instance, hobbies, being with friends or family
3. Personal time for yourself, including inner reflection and communication with parts
4. Do nothing; that is, watch mindless TV, surf the Internet, play video games, stare at the wall, sleep, and so on

***Sunday***

***Monday***

***Tuesday***

***Wednesday***

***Thursday***

***Friday***

***Saturday***

## **Homework Sheet 10.2**

### **Developing a Realistic and Healthy Daily Structure and Routine**

Now describe a realistic and healthy structure and routine that you would like to develop in the next few months. Before you begin, you may want to refer back to the earlier section on reflections for helping you develop your new structure and routine. Remember to change only one thing at a time so you will not become overwhelmed or discouraged.

1. Work / tasks / chores / appointments / meals
2. Leisure and social time, for instance, hobbies, being with friends or acquaintances
3. Personal time for yourself, including inner reflection and communication with parts
4. Do nothing; that is, watch mindless TV, surf the Internet, play video games, stare at the wall, sleep, and so on

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