

## CHAPTER SIX

# Learning to Reflect

### AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Break
- Topic: Learning to Reflect
  - Introduction
  - Reflection: Empathic Understanding of Yourself and Others
  - Example of Reflective Functioning
  - Problems With Reflection for People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder
  - Retrospective Reflection
  - Tips for Developing Reflective Skills
- Homework
  - Reread the chapter.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 6.1, Learning to Reflect.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 6.2, Reflecting on Your Inner Experience in the Present.
  - Continue practicing the Learning to Be Present and Developing Your Anchors exercises from [chapters 1 and 2](#).

### Introduction

The empathic understanding of yourself and others involves the ability to reflect, also known as reflective functioning. This skill is defined more generally as the ability to consider our inner experience and make sense of it. A specific type of reflective

functioning, called mentalizing, is the ability to accurately infer our own motivations and intentions, as well as those of others (Fonagy & Target, 1997). Reflection is an essential skill in learning to overcome the phobia of inner experience. In this chapter you will learn how to reflect on your own experience as well as how to reflect accurately on other people's intentions toward you.

## **Reflection: Empathic Understanding of Yourself and Others**

Reflection helps us understand our own reactions rather than just being in the middle of them, and reflection supports us in changing automatic reactions to chosen responses. It also helps us more accurately predict what another person might be feeling, thinking, and what he or she is likely to do next in a relationship. When we can understand and predict ourselves and others, we naturally feel more secure and more “in sync” with those for whom we care. In other words, reflective skills involve the capacity to make sense of our own minds and the minds of others (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002).

Most animals simply react to emotions and impulses. Their emotions direct their behaviors: Anger evokes fight or attack, hunger evokes a search for food, fear evokes freezing or running away, and so forth. With a very few exceptions—such as some primates, elephants, and dolphins—animals do not seem to have self-awareness. But as humans with self-aware minds, we have the opportunity to add richness to our experience by understanding the meaning of our mental activities, challenging narrow beliefs, and changing how we respond to what we hold in mind, and to what we believe others are thinking, feeling, or perceiving. We take in what we perceive and make sense of it based on our accumulated experiences, knowledge, and beliefs, and on our needs and goals.

Reflection helps us understand the nature of feelings, our patterns of thoughts, our emotional reactions, and our habitual movements, so that we can change them and act in ways that are more effective. Reflection also helps us realize that other people also have their own minds and their own needs and goals, which may involve quite different perceptions, thoughts, feelings, motivations, and intentions than we have. Of course, we cannot “read” people's minds by assuming we know what is there, but we

can make some fairly accurate predictions based on our experience of that individual person. We can weigh different alternatives and points of view.

## **Example of Reflective Functioning**

Imagine that you are startled by someone walking into the room unexpectedly, and you react with terror and panic, convinced you are going to be hurt. This reaction is not reflective, but rather automatic, that is, prereflective (Van der Hart et al., 2006). If you can reflect, you are not just stuck in this terror, in the grip of your feeling, and behaving fearfully. Rather you are able to step back from the situation a bit and observe that your fear is not proportional or even appropriate to what is happening. Instead of just feeling or thinking without awareness, you notice what you feel and think, how you experience those feelings and thoughts in your body, and perhaps why you feel and think a certain way. This is reflective functioning. You can learn to acknowledge and accept the feeling, having some empathy for yourself: “I am feeling very afraid right now. Let me take some breaths and slow myself down. It’s OK that I have this feeling even though I know I am safe.” You can learn to observe that the person who entered the room has no expression of malice, and in fact, is not even focused on you. You remind yourself that this person is known to you and would not hurt you. You can consciously relax your body. You can give yourself time to sort out why you might be feeling so very scared. Is it something from the past? Is there a dissociative part of yourself that is reacting without much awareness of the present? You can work on calming yourself down and using the fearful experience to learn more about your patterns of emotion, thought, and behavior.

## **Problems With Reflection for People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder**

Reflective functioning is a learned skill. Children learn it over time when their caregivers are sufficiently attuned to their feelings and needs, and it can help them be curious about their mind and how it works. Unfortunately, these reflective skills are often absent to a large degree in dysfunctional and abusive families, where

caregivers typically do not have these skills to pass on to their children. So you may not have had much experience with self reflection or reflecting on others. But like any skill, reflection can be learned. However, it is not always easy: Reflection takes more energy and mental work than automatic reactions, especially as you are just beginning to learn. But be patient and persistent, and it will become a natural part of your coping.

### *Reflective Functioning Can Be Impeded by Dissociation*

As we explained in previous chapters ([chapters 2](#) and [3](#)), people with a complex dissociative disorder experience a division in their self or personality and, as a result, have conflicting and alternating experiences and perceptions of themselves and others. They may be influenced by wishes, needs, emotions, thoughts, and so forth, that emerge from other parts of self, and they may be relatively unaware of these parts. Thus, their inner experience seems arbitrary, inconsistent, and confusing, making reflection more difficult than usual. As we explained earlier, people may be very phobic of their inner experiences, including dissociative parts of self. This phobic reaction can seriously hamper their ability to reflect.

Revisit the earlier example about being startled by someone coming into the room unexpectedly. Imagine that you were so frightened that you dissociated and lost time as soon as someone walked in the room, and you became aware again only after the person left. You might then have no idea what happened and be afraid that perhaps something bad had occurred. The very fact that you do not remember frightens you, increasing your fear reaction. Perhaps you found yourself huddled in a corner and cannot recall how you got there, or you have a strong urge to run away and hide that does not make sense to you as an adult. Various parts of yourself may be activated; you may hear crying in your head, or yelling about what a coward you are, or a voice that urges you just to get back to work and not think about it. You may begin to have flashbacks of past traumatic experiences. Perhaps you experience contradictory feelings, impulses, thoughts, and so much inner chaos in your head that you find it hard to think at all, much less reflect on what is happening and how best to respond. These are some of the added burdens of dissociation when learning how to reflect.

The materials in this manual begin to help you overcome your dissociation through regular reflection. In this chapter you will

begin to learn how to reflect on your own inner experiences, including the ways in which you interact (or avoid interacting) with dissociative parts of yourself. You will also learn more about how to reflect about other people so that you are able to “read” their intentions more accurately. In fact, you will be using reflective skills in every chapter of this book, and in therapy, so you will have a lot of practice! At first, you will learn to reflect in retrospect, that is, you may only be able to reflect on a situation after the fact. Gradually it will become a more natural skill that you employ in the moment.

Just like everyone else, you will be able to reflect most easily when you feel relatively safe, relaxed, calm, and free from distractions. You also need to learn to become more curious about yourself, for example, why you always respond to criticism by freezing, and explore the possibility of physically responding differently. You can never know everything about yourself; no one can. The first step is just accepting your experience as it is, without judgment or urgent need to change or avoid it. You do not need to know everything about yourself all at once, and in fact, uncertainty is a very normal part of everyone’s experience.

## **Retrospective Reflection**

As noted earlier, you first learn reflection by looking back at an experience. In the following section, you will find some examples of retrospective reflection that will help you understand more about how to use it for yourself, including all parts of you, and for other people.

### ***Example 1: Using Reflection With a Chronic Reaction to an Emotion***

We all develop automatic (conditioned) reactions based on past experience. For example you, or parts of yourself, may have learned to automatically isolate from others when you feel sad, because you believe you will be ridiculed or hurt when you are vulnerable (this likely involves core beliefs; see [chapter 21](#)). You may or may not realize that you are sad; you just withdraw. And perhaps you may not even be especially aware of becoming more isolated. You just stop spending time with others. Perhaps you do not even notice that you feel sad, but you hear a persistent crying or keening in your head that greatly disturbs you, or just have an uneasy sense that



something is not right.

Reflection helps you notice that you feel sad, to recognize the physical sensations of sadness, and notice the thoughts that accompany the feeling. You may or may not know why you (or parts of you) are sad, but you can accept that it is what you are feeling in the present. If you hear a sad or crying voice, you do not avoid it, but try to understand and help that part of you, or perhaps ask other parts to help. The sad part of you may then feel comforted and understood, the voice quiets, and you feel calmer. You notice that you are isolating yourself, and that this may not be the best solution. You learn early signs of your tendency to withdraw so you can do something different. You call a friend to have dinner, even though it takes energy. You remind yourself that connection with others helps sadness. You can work with isolated parts of yourself to help them learn to feel safer with people. You are now learning to be more in charge of your experiences by understanding all parts of yourself better and by taking all their needs and points of view into consideration. You are learning to reflect on your own inner experience, make sense of it, and use it to help you feel better.

### ***Example 2: Using Reflection with a Dissociative Part of Yourself***

You often hear the voice of an inner part of yourself that makes negative comments about what you are doing, or says that you are stupid. You react by being afraid of that part, and even of hearing the voice, and ashamed because you believe what it says is true (at least on some level). Sometimes your reaction to the voice is so painful that you engage in some destructive behavior to make it stop, such as using alcohol or drugs, physically hurting yourself, or overeating. This cycle may go on and on. You may label yourself as crazy because you hear this voice and you feel very ashamed (see [chapter 24](#)).

Reflective skills can help you observe the process of what happens when you hear this voice, and to change your reaction to it, and eventually to change the entire interchange between you and that critical part of you. You can begin to notice what you feel as you hear that voice: perhaps crazy, or afraid, or ashamed, or frustrated. You notice when you hear that voice, you stop talking in therapy and perhaps have a panic attack. Every time you hear that inner criticism, you notice that you cringe, your body gets tight, your head hangs down, and you do not want to move. When you can notice your tendency to react without doing so immediately, you can then begin to respond differently. You can be curious about why that voice is there (you may have always assumed it is there just to speak the “truth” about yourself, but there are likely other reasons). You could begin to dialogue with the part whose voice you are hearing. You could ask that part of you to help, and begin to work to develop inner empathy and cooperation, as you will be learning through this manual. You can empathize with yourself about how painful it is to always feel criticized, scared, less than others, hopeless. You

can empathize with how hard that part of you works, yet never seems to get satisfactory results. You could take some deep breaths, hold your head up, and put your shoulders back. You have options to respond to the voice that you did not have before.

In the same way that we use our ability to reflect to better understand ourselves, we also use reflection to understand the minds of other people, that is, to make sense of their motivations and intentions.

### ***Example 3: Using Reflection to Understand Other People***

You call a friend to invite her out to dinner. She does not return your call. You assume she has not responded because she does not want to be your friend anymore or that you are not important to her. You decide you do not want to have anything to do with her.

These prereflective beliefs about why your friend did not call back are typically based on your past experiences and on your ongoing fears of being rejected, long before you could even think of the many possibilities of why she might not have returned your call. They are a kind of implicit and inaccurate reflection, a reaction based on a reaction, your own reactions (from the past) rather than on really understanding your friend. And you may have contradictory thoughts and feelings about your friend coming from parts inside—some wanting to continue the relationship, some feeling she is not worth having as a friend, some believing she is dangerous—confusing you even more. However, it turns out that your friend's phone was out of order, and she did not receive the message.

You have a tendency to react the same way each time you feel rejected: You withdraw, feel hurt, and assume that people do not like or want to be around you. But reflective skills allow you to explore many possibilities of your friend's intentions toward you. We will start with the one that you probably assumed, and then move to other possibilities that allow for reconnection and relational repair.

- Your friend does not like you or care enough about you and she intentionally chose not to call you back (intentionally hurtful; the reason you assumed).
- She was sick, or out of town (unable to respond to you, and not intentional).
- She did not expect a call from you and did not check her messages (not intentional).
- She intended to call you back, but forgot to respond because there was a crisis at work or in her family (unintentional, and not because you are unimportant or she does not care, but still hurtful).
- She forgot to call you back because she tends to be scattered,

forgetful, and not very reliable (in this case, her own issues have created a problem, but still it was not intentional, although hurtful).

- She did call you back, but when you did not answer the phone, she did not leave a message (not intentional, but irritating!).

Reflective skills can also help you sort out your own experience and those of other parts of yourself. You might say something like, *“Of course, I am disappointed that she didn’t respond to me. It is only natural that I would first assume that she didn’t like me or was mad at me. But I can understand that perhaps there might be other reasons she did not call back which have nothing to do with me. I feel sad that it is so hard for me to trust others, and that I always tend to assume people don’t like me. It feels very lonely and shameful to feel I am not likable. Perhaps next time, if someone doesn’t respond to my first call, I will take the risk to call again.”* You might have an inner dialogue with parts of yourself that may have had different interpretations of and feelings about the situation, empathizing with each one, but also reminding all parts of you that there are many possible motives and intentions behind the behavior of others. It is always helpful to get more information before jumping to conclusions.

## **Tips for Developing Reflective Skills**

To be reflective, you will be learning how to gradually have more awareness of the present moment, of all parts of yourself, and of other people.

### *Be in the Present*

It is impossible to reflect on your inner experience if you avoid or are not aware of it. Likewise, it is hard to reflect on your current situation if you do not feel present. Reflection begins with being as present in the moment as much as you are able, which takes consistent and concentrated practice. Use your anchors for the present (practice the exercises on anchors in [chapters 1 and 2](#)).

### *Notice Your Inner Experience Without Judgment*

Take time to turn your attention inwardly to your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and other parts of yourself. If you do not understand what you notice, do not judge yourself; just do the best you can and move on. If you do not notice anything, do not judge yourself; simply note that you do not notice anything and move on.



It helps for you to be curious about yourself, about what is going on inside, and why you think or feel or behave in particular ways.

Even though you may try to understand your mind and that of others, some of your perceptions, assumptions, or beliefs may be inaccurate (you will learn more about inaccurate thoughts and beliefs in [chapters 21, 22, and 23](#)). Your reflection may be limited by past experiences that are no longer relevant to the current situation (for example, having a prereflective belief that your therapist is going to yell at you in anger, because your parents did so, even though your therapist has never yelled) or by inaccurate beliefs and predictions (for example, believing you are crazy and will “be put away” because you hear inner voices). In fact, each part of you likely has a particular set of reactions to other people, many of them inaccurate. Notice these beliefs and thoughts, as well as the feelings and behavioral tendencies that accompany them. Write them down so you can reflect on them more easily.

### *Notice Similarities and Differences*

It helps for you, and all parts of you, to notice similarities and differences—in your inner experience, in others, in situations. That is, you can begin to separate the past from the present, your inner fears or beliefs from external realities. You can notice that you react similarly each time you feel lonely, rejected, sad, or angry. You can notice that you have patterns of reactions that go back to your past history, that have become automatic. You can begin to notice what is different about the current circumstances that might call for a different response from you (for example, your friend will never hit you, so you need not expect it).

### *Be Empathic*

You must be empathic with yourself, including all parts of yourself, each toward the others, and also empathic with other people’s foibles and struggles. You can develop the capacity to “walk in the shoes” of another and of different parts of yourself (for instance, noticing yourself with empathy when you feel angry, incompetent, or ashamed). Over time, you will be able to recognize all parts of yourself as you. And you will learn much more about successfully developing and maintaining secure and safe relationships with others.

## Homework Sheet 6.1

### Learning to Reflect

Reflect in retrospect on a minor situation in which reflective skills might have been helpful. Use the aforementioned examples as a guide.

- Briefly describe the situation as you perceived it at the time.
- What were your thoughts, feelings, sensations, predictions?
- What did you do in this situation?
- If you are aware that any other parts of yourself were involved in the situation, whether directly, or by having an inner, private reaction, please describe those reactions.
- Describe ways, if any, in which dissociative parts of yourself affected your behaviors and decisions in that situation.
- Was your reaction (for example, your feelings, thoughts, sensations, or behavior), or that of other parts of yourself, a familiar pattern? If so, please describe the pattern.
- Notice in retrospect ways in which you or other parts of yourself might have reacted not only to the situation but to your own feelings, thoughts, or behaviors. For example, feeling ashamed of feeling jealous, and criticizing yourself for being jealous.

## **Homework Sheet 6.2**

### **Reflecting on Your Inner Experience in the Present**

1. Notice your current inner experience, including any thoughts, feelings, sensations, or other parts of yourself. Try to acknowledge and accept those experiences with interest and without judgment. Notice any possible negative reactions that may occur during this exercise, for example, thinking that this is a stupid exercise or being convinced that you cannot succeed in learning the skills in this manual. You may write down what you notice.

2. Reflecting about another person's intentions and motivations. Choose a person with whom you are acquainted but not very close, and whose behavior has bothered you at some point in time. Describe the behavior and in what ways it bothered you or other parts of yourself.

- a. Describe what you thought and felt about yourself and the other person.
- b. Describe what you imagine the other person thought and felt.
- c. Imagine and list possibilities, even if you do not agree with them, about why that person might have acted in that particular way.
- d. Can you feel empathy for that person and for yourself? If so, please describe your experience of feeling empathy (for example, your thought and feelings). If not, describe what you did think and feel (without judgment).