

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beginning Work With Dissociative Parts

AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Topic: Beginning Work With Dissociative Parts
 - Introduction
 - Initial Dilemmas in Working With Dissociative Parts of the Self
 - First Steps in Working With Dissociative Parts of the Self
 - Forms of Inner Awareness and Communication
 - Techniques for Inner Communication
- Break
- Homework
 - Reread the chapter.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 7.1, Stages of Awareness and Acceptance of Dissociation.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 7.2., Recognizing Dissociative Parts of Yourself.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 7.3, Practicing Inner Communication.
 - Consult with your therapist as needed for help with working with parts of yourself.
 - Continue to practice the Learning to Be Present exercise and practice your reflecting skills.

Introduction

Connecting with yourself and reflecting on your experiences are essential tasks in which you must engage every day in order to function at your best. The more you know and understand about yourself—all of you—the better decisions you can make to improve your life. Every day you need to make many choices and compromises. All people sometimes have conflicting thoughts, wishes, needs, and feelings. This is no different for individuals with dissociative disorders, except that their inner experience happens to be organized as relatively compartmentalized or divided parts of the personality that have their own “minds,” so it is harder for you to be aware of inner conflicts or to resolve them. You must learn to take into account the various needs and feelings of dissociative parts that seem as though they do not belong to yourself. In this chapter you will learn some basic approaches to understanding more about parts of yourself and how to work with them.

Initial Dilemmas in Working With Dissociative Parts of the Self

Cooperating with various parts of yourself is sometimes more easily said than done because there is so much avoidance and conflict that keeps dissociative parts separated. We previously mentioned that many people initially find it difficult to accept their diagnosis, in part because they have a strong avoidance, that is, a phobia for dissociative parts of the personality (Van der Hart et al., 2006). Others find it a great relief to finally be understood. People with dissociative disorders often make comments such as: “That (part) isn’t me!” or “That voice doesn’t belong to me!” or “I don’t want anything to do with those voices or those other parts!” These attitudes are quite understandable and are the result of confusion about, or fear or shame of the experiences contained by other parts.

People also fear losing control to other parts because some parts may have such different or unacceptable emotions and behaviors. For instance, some parts want to come to therapy, while others would rather avoid it or believe that there is no need for it. Some parts want to focus on work, while others find work boring and would rather have fun or stay in bed. Some parts want to have a close relationship, while others are terrified of being close. Some parts are focused on daily life, while others are stuck in the past. The more you tend to avoid these conflicts and dissociative parts of

yourself, the more difficulties you are likely to have in daily life. The less collaboration among parts, the more inner conflict you have.

First Steps in Working With Dissociative Parts of the Self

When you have a dissociative disorder, there are several stages of realization about how your personality and self are organized and function. In your homework in this chapter you will find a description of these stages, which range from complete unawareness or avoidance to complete acceptance. First, you must learn to acknowledge dissociative parts, and accept the sense of being and feeling fragmented. It is typical for you to need support to overcome your fear or shame of other parts of yourself. Then you can decide how you might be able to make conscious efforts to communicate internally with parts.

The first dialogues among parts should be focused on building internal communication and cooperation solely toward improving the quality of everyday life. These inner dialogues include the following:

- Learning to deal with triggers, that is, stimuli that evoke (aspects) of traumatic memories (see [chapters 15 and 16](#))
- Increasing internal and external safety
- Working together in therapy
- Cooperating to complete daily life tasks

Traumatic memories, emotions, or sensations generally should not be shared among parts at this point. That work is for later, when you feel more calm and steady, and parts have more empathy toward each other, are working together well, and are better able to cope with emotions.

Finally, it is important to realize that various parts actually have often been cooperating for years for mutual aid or protection without your conscious awareness. Sometimes this happens almost automatically (for instance, one part automatically takes over from another part in a particular situation, or some parts that are very troubled are inactive while you are at work). Other times it is a deliberate, conscious choice.

When parts of yourself are not cooperating with each other, when they do not function in a coordinated and effective way, and when they each emphasize different priorities, then inner conflict, chaos, and confusion can ensue. The first step toward resolution is to help all parts of yourself to focus on what you are doing in the present, especially in relation to therapy and daily life tasks.

Forms of Inner Awareness and Communication

Cooperation among parts of yourself requires you to learn to accept and then communicate with all of you. We will now focus on basic inner communication.

Gradually Acknowledge and Accept Parts of Yourself

When you have not been very reflective in your life, you are not accustomed to paying attention internally. Becoming aware of parts of yourself is one of the early tasks toward the end of acknowledging and accepting yourself as a whole person, with all your thoughts, emotions, your body, and your behaviors. We have already discussed some ways in which you can begin to notice parts of yourself in Homework Sheet 2.3. Acknowledging and accepting yourself is not always easy, even for people who do not have a dissociative disorder. It can be complex and sometimes daunting at first. But each time you are aware of a part of yourself, you can also begin to be aware of how you think and feel about that part of you. Those thoughts and feelings are extremely important to your therapy work.

Once you notice parts of yourself, you can begin to accept them without judgment. When you are less judgmental, you feel less afraid or ashamed, less threatened. And when you feel less anxious, you may become more curious about parts of yourself, how they function, and how you can work together more effectively.

Listen to and Communicate With Parts of Yourself

Once you are able to acknowledge and accept parts of yourself, you can then learn to communicate, which involves listening and sharing. Many people with a dissociative disorder hear inner voices that represent various dissociative parts. They are able to carry on internal conversations. Others may experience this a little more indirectly, by “sensing” or having a kind of strange “knowing”

about what parts are trying to communicate. In learning to communicate with another part, others find it helpful to imagine talking to a real person, though, of course, parts of yourself are not other people. The imaginal exercise is just a way to develop a better sense of other parts of you. Some people find it effective to write from the perspective of each part. It is important for you to find your own way of communicating that is comfortable for you. Listening to and talking with the voices in your head instead of trying to make them go away will ultimately be the fastest and most effective way of healing.

But initially you may find inner communication difficult. Do not hesitate to ask your therapist to help you during these initial attempts. Everyone finds it helpful to set aside a specific, quiet, calm time each day for inner communication. At first, you are likely quite naturally afraid or ashamed of parts of yourself, and you may want to avoid communication. And some parts may also want to avoid you. Sometimes it may seem as though all parts of you are talking at once. People describe this as a chaotic noise or incessant murmur in their head which is overwhelming and confusing, making it hard to think. Generally this experience occurs when you (or other parts of you) are feeling especially anxious, threatened, or ashamed.

A common difficulty in the beginning is inner threats when you try to communicate with parts of yourself. Usually this comes from a dominant, highly critical part of you. Such parts, as noted in early chapters, are only trying to protect you by reacting with the limited and rigid patterns of response that are familiar to them. These parts need help to learn more effective and empathic ways of protecting you and dealing with fear, anger, and shame. It is easiest, if possible, to start inner dialogue with a part of yourself with which you feel most comfortable.

One way to start communication is to find common ground upon which all parts can agree. For example, it is highly likely that all parts of you want to feel better, no matter how they seem to feel or act. Usually every part can agree with this goal, even though they are not likely to agree on how to achieve it in the beginning. But it is a place to start.

When daily life is going more smoothly, we all tend to feel better. One of your first objectives is to focus on learning to help all parts of you become more cooperative and communicative about

daily life. You might have inner discussions, for example, about how to work together to get to appointments on time or to complete chores more efficiently, or how to best use your leisure time. You may not be able to communicate with every part of yourself immediately. This is normal and expected. It may take some time for all parts of you to feel comfortable and safe enough to allow more communication.

Techniques for Inner Communication

Following are some alternatives to “inner dialogue” that might be helpful to try.

Written Forms of Communication

Try writing to parts of yourself, introducing your therapy as an avenue of healing, and sharing your good intentions. Emphasize that even though you are scared or ashamed, you still want to make the effort to get to know all parts of yourself in a paced way. You are willing to try. Also emphasize that traumatic memories should be contained for the time being, until parts begin to feel more safe and comfortable with each other and are able to work together more effectively in daily life. Many people like to write on the computer. It is faster and the file may be deleted quickly if you are worried that someone might read what you have written. What is most important is that you begin to learn to tolerate knowing a little more about parts of yourself in the present.

Talk Inwardly

Another way of communicating or making contact is “talking inwardly,” in other words, having a one-sided conversation with parts of the personality, even if you are not yet ready for them to communicate back to you. You can use this technique if you seem agitated, anxious, confused, or afraid inside. You do not always need to know immediately the reason for your inner turmoil or which part(s) is having trouble to be able to help. Just quietly talk inwardly to all parts of yourself, calming and reassuring these parts of you that you are safe, that you are willing to learn to care for yourself more effectively, that you are getting help. Remind all parts of the present by looking around and noticing your surroundings. Use your anchors in the safe present from the first

two chapters. The goal is to connect to parts of yourself and let them know you are willing to pay attention and help.

Inner Meetings

Some people may be ready to conduct “inner meetings,” in which parts come together internally to discuss issues. Some may find this too overwhelming or not fitting. We describe the details of this technique in [chapter 27](#), if you feel ready to practice it at this point in time. It is essential to take your time and go at your own pace.

Homework Sheet 7.1

Stages of Awareness and Acceptance of Dissociation

Below you will find a list of steps toward acknowledging, accepting, communicating, and cooperating with parts of yourself. You should work at your own pace and not expect to be able to accomplish all these steps at once. Circle all statements that apply to you now. Later in the course of therapy, you can revisit these steps to check your progress.

- I do not want to accept that I have dissociative parts.
- I am aware that some parts exist with which I am not in communication.
- I am aware, but avoidant of (some of) my parts.
- I accept the existence of (some of) my parts.
- I am beginning to communicate with (some of) my parts.
- I can negotiate and collaborate about some issues in daily life with (some of) my parts.
- I take into account the needs of (some) parts of myself.
- I understand and accept the functions of (some of) my parts.
- I feel empathy for (some of) my parts.
- I am able to help (some of) my parts feel more safe and comfortable.
- I have regular communication with (some of) my parts to discuss issues of daily life.

Homework Sheet 7.2

Recognizing Dissociative Parts of Yourself

There are various ways in which you can notice the presence of another part of yourself. Read the following examples and see if they fit your experience. Below the examples, describe one experience of becoming aware of a part of yourself.

- You have lost time and discover that you have done something of which you have no memory, yet you know you must have done it.

- You hear yourself talking, but it seems as though the words you hear are not your “own.”

- You experience yourself outside your body, as though you are looking at someone else from a distance and you cannot control your actions.

- You have thoughts, emotions, sensations, memories that you experience as not belonging to you.

- You hear voices in your head that talk to you or to each other.

- You find yourself in a place and have no idea how you got there.

- You feel your body, your movements, or actions are not within your control.

Homework Sheet 7.3

Practicing Inner Communication

Record your attempts at inner communication each day this week.

Answer these questions for each day of the week.

1. Describe what you said or did to establish empathic communication with a part of yourself.

2. Describe the response of that part of yourself.

3. What, if anything, made it difficult to communicate?

4. What if, anything, helped you communicate?

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2.

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Monday

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Tuesday

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Wednesday

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Thursday

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Friday

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Saturday

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