

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Developing an Inner Sense of Safety

### AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Topic: Developing an Inner Sense of Safety
  - Introduction
  - Developing an Inner Sense of Safety
- Break
- Exercise: Experiencing an Inner Sense of Safety
- Homework
  - Reread the chapter.
  - Practice the exercise Experiencing an Inner Sense of Safety each day.
  - Complete Homework Sheet 8.1, Developing an Inner Sense of Safety and Safe Places.

### Introduction

Being safe in the external environment is a major initial goal in therapy for traumatized people who are still threatened in their present-day life. In [chapters 28–31](#) we will address the subject of choosing safe people in your life and of setting limits when you do not feel at ease with someone. If you are not safe in your current external environment, it is imperative to discuss this serious problem with your therapist, so you can get help. However, even though many traumatized people are (relatively) safe in their environment, they still do not feel safe. Thus, a major goal in therapy is to establish a sense of inner safety, of being safe with yourself, all parts of yourself, with your inner experiences. An

inner sense of safety, also referred to as a *safe state* (O’Shea, 2009), is the awareness of feeling relaxed and calm in the present moment, when there is no actual threat or danger.

## **Developing an Inner Sense of Safety**

Inner safety is strongly related to being able to be present in the here and now, and in feeling secure in at least one or two trusting relationships with other people. When young children grow up in the context of safe and trusting relationships, where they are provided a safe environment, they naturally develop an inner sense of safety. Many people with a history of early traumatization have not had many opportunities to experience a safe environment or safe relationships, and therefore they have been unable to develop a sense of inner safety and security. Thus, it may be hard for them to even imagine what it feels like to be safe. They may know cognitively that their current environment is safe, and yet they do not feel safe or comfortable at all, as though something terrible is going to happen any minute. And even when their present situation is safe, some parts of them remain stuck in trauma-time, unable to experience the safe present. In addition, traumatized individuals often do not feel safe with their own inner experiences, that is, with some of their own emotions, thoughts, sensations, and other actions of dissociative parts. Subsequent avoidance of inner experience makes it hard to stay present, and it sets in motion an inner cycle of fear, criticism, and shame, adding yet more to a lack of inner safety.

Even if you cannot imagine feeling totally safe, probably there have been times when you have felt less unsafe than others, and you can begin learning about safety from that point. If the concept of “safety” seems too foreign to you, you may think instead of a pleasant and calm place, a place where you feel understood and accepted, or perhaps a place where you are alone and know you will not be disturbed.

Next we describe ways to create a sense of inner safety, including imagery of safe places in which you and other parts of you can find safe and calm refuge from the stresses of daily life and from your painful past, until you are able to heal more fully.

### *Being in the Present*

First, we will focus on developing an inner sense of safety in the

present. It is essential to help all parts of yourself feel calm and relaxed once you are able to determine that the *present moment* is actually safe externally. You can train yourself to consciously let go of inner tension, to allow all parts of you to notice this moment of safety and well-being, of relaxation and inner quiet, even though at first these moments may be few and far between. Some parts of you may find it easier to experience an inner sense of safety than others. For some parts of you, finding that state is easier with someone whom you trust; for others it may be when you are alone, when you are with a beloved pet, listening to your favorite music, or outdoors in a special, quiet place in nature.

Most certainly, an inner sense of safety can only be experienced when your environment is actually safe. And even if there are situations that feel threatening in the present, there are still moments when you are actually safe. It is in these moments that you can begin to focus on developing an inner sense of safety.

A sense of safety can occur when all parts of you can agree to at least temporarily let go of inner conflicts and criticism and to focus on the present moment. This may be difficult to achieve and may not last long in the beginning, but you will find that all parts of you appreciate this state, and the more you practice, the easier it will become.

### *Developing Imaginary Inner Safe Places*

Inner safe spaces are images of places where you can be safe, relaxed, and cared for. These images have been shown to be helpful to many people, not just those with dissociative disorders. This type of imaginal activity is well known to produce a feeling of relaxation and well-being in those who use it regularly. If your inner experience feels so jarring, unsafe, and frightening, as it often does in individuals with dissociative disorders, the ability to imagine these spaces becomes especially important and helpful.

When you have a dissociative disorder, some parts of you remain stuck in trauma-time and thus do not experience a sense of safety. They may be on high alert for potential danger and thus unable to relax enough to feel safe. And individuals with a dissociative disorder typically experience a vicious cycle of rage, shame, fear, and hopelessness inside that contributes to a lack of inner safety. Some parts are angry and critical, while others are hurting, afraid, or ashamed. There are often strong conflicts among

these different parts. The more parts express their pain, the angrier and more hurtful other parts become, because they cannot tolerate what they consider to be “weakness.” The more angry and critical parts are toward other parts, the more these parts suffer. This creates an endless loop of inner misery and lack of safety.

When you are able to create one or more imaginary safe places for parts of you that are in pain or afraid, this opens the door to the possibility of alleviating this negative loop. Angry parts feel some relief once they learn that terrified or hurting parts are quieter when they feel safer. Thus, you are able to reduce conflict by helping both types of parts simultaneously. Once you are able to develop an inner imaginary safe space, all parts of you can experience it and have it available anytime you need or want. For example, when some parts of the personality are overwhelmed, and you need to accomplish an important task, these parts may go to the safe place to rest while you complete your task. Such parts may feel calmer in an imaginary safe place until such time that they can focus on their healing during therapy. Or they can remain undisturbed in some situations that might trigger painful past experiences, such as going to a doctor or being in a meeting at work in which there is conflict.

Some people find that one imaginary place is sufficient for all parts of themselves, while others feel the need for different places that match the differing needs of parts. And of course, inner safe places should always be paired with efforts to ensure your safety with other people and in the world. You cannot have an inner sense of safety without actually being safe!

### *Examples of Imaginary Inner Safe Places*

- Pleasant outdoor places such as lakes, meadows, streams, pools, islands, forests, mountains, oceans
- Structures: Tree houses, huts, porches, mountain and beach cottages, safe homes
- Rooms especially adapted to the needs of each part
- Safe cave or cavern
- Spacecraft
- Your own special planet
- Submarine or underwater home
- Hot air balloon
- Although technically not spaces, some people like the image

of protective covering: space suit, suit of armor, invisible force field, invisible cloak (for more of this type of imagery, see “The Store” exercise in [chapter 14](#)).

You may want a safe (or quiet) place for all parts of yourself together, or some parts may want their own place. Pay close attention to what various parts of you want or need. Remember that imagination is limitless and can be continually adapted as your needs change.

If you cannot imagine a place, do not hesitate to ask your therapist to help you. Sometimes it helps to draw one or to find a picture of a place that you like. And as we noted earlier, start with a feeling of being less unsafe than at other times. You can make a list of all the comfort measures you would like to have in your safe place. Also remember that a prime rule is not to criticize or judge parts for what they imagine, and for what they want or need, even if you do not agree. Perhaps not all parts of you can yet participate; that is fine. Just start where you are able.

A safe place should be a private place that only you know about, and that no one else can find or intrude upon without your permission. If you feel especially unsafe, you can imagine that your place is surrounded by a fence, a wall, a special invisible field, or an alarm system. You are in charge of whether you allow other people there. You can also negotiate with all parts to respect each other’s places and not intrude or “visit” without permission.

Your safe place can protect you or particular parts of yourself from any overwhelming stimuli in the present, and it should be comfortable and pleasant. It is a place in which you feel your needs for safety, comfort, rest, and so forth are fulfilled. Feel free to add anything you want in this place to improve your sense of comfort, well-being, and safety. You can imagine comfortable beds; your favorite foods, games, and movies; and animals that you like. Your place can be populated with animals or other people, or no one but yourself. You can have people nearby, but not too close. This place is yours to construct, and yours alone.

Any part of you may go to a safe place at any time. Some parts may voluntarily go to a safe place when there has been some inner collaboration and agreement that this might provide temporary relief or containment. However, never try to shut away or hide parts to get rid of them! Prisons are not safe places, and trying to avoid

parts in this manner will only heighten your inner sense of being unsafe. It is important for all parts of you to see the value of a sense of safety and the use of safe places, and to do their best to cooperate together to create this healing image.

A literal safe place at home is also important for many people. You can create a special room or corner of a room that represents your safe place. You may add items to this place that represent safety and calm to you. Choose colors and textures that are pleasant or quieting, objects that have a positive meaning to you, photographs of people who care about you, or of places that you find pleasant.

### **EXERCISE: EXPERIENCING AN INNER SENSE OF SAFETY**

Using the section above and Homework Sheet 8.1 as guides, you can practice developing an inner sense of safety and a safe space now. In group, you can help each other as desired, and you may use your group trainers as resources as well.

## **Homework Sheet 8.1**

### **Developing an Inner Sense of Safety and Safe Places**

1. Practice feeling an inner sense of safety or calm.
  - a. First, describe a situation in which you can experience a moment of inner safety and/or calmness. Would it be at home alone, with another person, outside in nature, listening to music?
  - b. Next, allow yourself and all parts of you to experience that inner sense of safety. Describe your experience of it, that is, your thoughts, emotions, sensations.
  - c. Notice what, if anything, disrupts your inner sense of safety and describe it below. Is it a thought, a feeling, a sensation, a shift away from being present? Is it another part of you that is not yet able to share in this sense of safety in the current moment?
  - d. Imagine that experience of inner safety now and notice again what it feels like.
  - e. Try to create moments of inner safety every day. Regular practice improves your ability to create your inner sense of safety.
  
2. Describe, if you feel comfortable, your safe place. If you do not want to share it, try to describe what you feel like when you are in that place. Describe what is helpful about your safe place to you, or other parts of yourself.



3. If other parts of you need their own unique safe place, work on creating those images. Pay close attention to what those parts want or need in terms of safety and comfort. If you feel comfortable doing so, describe those places here.

4. If you have difficulties in developing an inner sense of safety or safe places, please describe what has interfered below. You are encouraged to get help from your therapist with these temporary difficulties.