Treating the Dissociative Child: A Step-by-Step Model

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Psychotherapy Networker Symposium, March 22, 2013

What I most want you to know:

• They can be treated successfully.
• Treatment involves the complex management of the child or adolescent’s symptoms, the family and the systems in which the child interacts
• Treatment involves awareness and attention to the ways their traumatic lives have impacted developmental processes.
• The development of an attachment to a loving caregiver and a nuanced therapeutic relationship that counters the traumatic transference is key to recovery.

Dissociation

Disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity or perception.

When your inner life is a place you have to stay out of, having an identity is impossible. Remembering not to remember, fractures you.

Lynda Barry, One Hundred Demons, 2002

I try to forget to remember. It hurts to remember. It gives me bad dreams.

6 year old Billy when asked about sexual abuse.

Funny, though how much energy it takes in the present to avoid making sense of the past.

Martin Moran
Adina’s description of dissociation

• It’s like a brain seizure. Your brain does this so don’t have thoughts, and you don’t know what’s going on.

My face was smiling but my brain was crying.
Adina, after a supervised visit.

Dissociation

Disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity or perception.

Why is this definition inadequate?

• What is normal?
• How do these functions really develop?
• Must take into account what we know about neurobiological development.
• Doesn’t explain how the disruption happens.

What neurophysiological affects of trauma lead to dissociation?

• Excessive activation of amygdala
• Suppression of activity in left prefrontal cortex: observing ego
• Underdevelopment of right orbitofrontal cortex, ability to self-regulate
• Decreased hippocampal volume: Putting experience into chronology
• Underdeveloped corpus collosum: disintegration of left and right
• Decreased serotonin: mood is dysregulated.

At each moment the state of the self is constructed from the ground up. . . So continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows it is being remade unless something goes wrong with the remaking.  
Antonio Damasio
Insights from Putnam’s Discrete Behavioral States Theory

- States become increasingly flexible through development.
- Fear-based states are rigid and resistant to change.
- The child’s relationship with a loving caregiver helps to regulate emotional states.

Affect Theory

Tomkins Nine Innate Affects

- Interest—excitement
- Enjoyment-Joy
- Surprise-startle
- Fear-terror
- Distress-anguish
- Anger-Rage
- Shame-Humiliation
- Disgust
- Dismell

Awareness and expression of feelings are the tools which build healthy consciousness.

Affect is an amplifier. It either makes good things better or bad things worse.
Tomkins, affect theory

Affect is the “psychic glue” of consciousness and identity.
“So complex and pervasive are habits of script formation that we live more within these personal scripts for the modulation and detoxification of affect than in the world of innate affect.” Nathanson, 1992

Key Insights From Interpersonal Neurobiology

- The mind is a regulator.
- Transitions between states are key moments when the self is built.
- Interpersonal processes shape the mind.

“The mind is a system for regulating the flow of energy.”
Daniel Siegel
“Who you are is what you let in and what you keep out.”

The mind works on data as a sculptor works on stone. The statue stood there from eternity, but there were thousand different ones beside it. And the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. By slowly cumulative strokes of choice we have extracted the real world by simply rejecting portions of the given stuff. William James

The brilliance of the mind lay in what is discarded not what is retained. Tor Norretranders
It is at the moments of transition that new self-organizational forms can be constructed. Indeed, integrating coherence of the mind is about state shifts.”

Daniel Siegel, The Developing Mind

The mind emerges from the activity of the brain whose structure and function are directly shaped by interpersonal experience.”

Daniel Siegel, The Developing Mind

Dissociative shifts in a child create reciprocal states in caregivers and therapists.

Children encode contradictory parental behaviors and messages and realities, and represent environmental dissociation within.

How might a pathological environment inhibit the development of the mind?

“Lies, deceptions and other sources of seriously distorted family interaction cause the growing child to exclude new and potentially meaningful information from communication and therefore from semantic processing and from conscious thought.”

G. Liotti
Healthy attachment promotes integrated functioning by allowing the child to grow with freedom to trust emotional information.

Unsoothed Trauma Destroys Relationships

- Trauma Disrupts the Integration of experience of others because child learns people cannot be counted on, no soothing is possible.

A Healthy Mind.

- Effectively selects the information that will allow
- Seamlessly managing the transitions between states, between affects, between contexts, and between developmental challenges in a way that is
- Adaptive to each shifting environmental demand.

In the normal brain affect is a signal for memory retrieval, approach or avoidance action plans, assessment and reorganization.

In the dissociative brain, affect is a signal of avoidance, memory loss, initiation of nonconscious action plans, and disorganization.

So what happens if the mind has organized itself around the idea of avoiding the experience of innate affect, and substituting practiced patterns of behavior, and relating, automatically triggered by environmental cues?
Dissociative behavior and accompanying symptoms.

New Definition of Dissociation:
The Automatic Activation of Patterns of Actions, Thought, Perception, Identity, or Affect which are overlearned and conditioned avoidance responses to traumatic cues and emotions.

It’s like you’re on autopilot and someone else is controlling the switches.

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A short synthesis of the Affect Avoidance Theory of Dissociation

• Brain learns not to feel. Emotions are stimuli for avoidance, not processing and integration.
• Brain becomes organized around the principle of dissociation: Can’t know, can’t feel, can’t bond.
• Disintegration, Fragmentation, Rigid Dichotomies become the norm, not integration, flexible adaptation, seamless transitions.
• Dissociative behavior span a spectrum of severity.

For Example:

• Stimulation of unintegrated emotionally laden memory: Sonya breaks her bed
• Switch to combative personality under stress: Brian lets Deep Anger cut up the Persian rug
• Affect is cue to self harm to regulate intensity: Sally cuts herself in tranced out state.
• Scolding from parents triggers inner world of imagination that takes salience over current world. (Gabrielle goes to the world of Gabrielle 6)

Five Classes of Dissociative Symptoms

• Perplexing Shifts in consciousness
• Vivid Hallunicanitary Experiences
• Marked shifts in behavior, mood, knowledge.
• Memory Lapses
• Abnormal Somatic Experiences

Regarding Dissociative Pathology

• How severe the symptoms? Where on continuum
• How receptive to intervention?
• How disruptive to trajectory of normal development?
• What precedes and precipitates dissociation?

A Healthy Mind. . .

■ Effectively selects the information that will allow
■ Seamlessly managing the transitions between states, between affects, between contexts, and between developmental challenges in a way that is
■ Adaptive to each shifting environmental demand.
Dissociation in children and adolescents organizes the brain in such a way as to inhibit the healing effects of corrective experiences. Treating dissociation involves unraveling the hidden islands of segregated affect and experience and integrating them into a cohesive experience of self.

Dissociative Symptoms

- Fluctuating Moods, Behaviors, Identity, Relationships and Skills
- Perplexing Shifts in Consciousness: Trances, lapses in attention, flashbacks, sleepwalking
- Amnesia, denial of observed behavior
- Somatic symptoms: Lack of Pain Sensitivity, Multiple physical complaints
- Hallucinatory experiences, imaginary friends, voices, separate selves.

Why is this framework useful?

- Helps normalize and destigmatize much childhood psychopathology: voices, hallucinations, dramatic shifts in mood.
- Fits in with what we are learning about the brain, attachment, importance of attunement.
- Increases sensitivity to traumatic roots of many childhood disorders: OCD, depression, oppositionality, attentional problems.
- Teaches vehicle for powerful communication tools with children that bypass defenses.
- Interventions are powerful and can lead to successful treatment without medicine.

Principles of Therapeutic Technique with Traumatized Children and Adolescents

- Deep respect for wisdom of their coping technique/psycho-education
- Intense Belief in their possibilities to heal and their potential for future thriving.
- Practical approach to symptom management.
- Deal with trauma as relevant to life now.
- Relationship of validation and expectation.
- Address traumatic symptoms as both CONDITIONED and LEARNED.

Differences in Treatment of Dissociative Disorders in Children Vs. Adults

- Must work with family system and other institutional systems to sustain change
- Dissociative patterns have not been overlearned and are not as rigid.
- Boundary issues may differ.
- Facilitation of developmental challenges is key.

Dissociation Focused Interventions

- Educate: about dissociative processes
- Dissociation Motivation
- Understand what’s hidden.
- Claim as own affects of shame, fear, sexuality, anger.
- Affect regulation/Attachment
- Triggers and Trauma
- Every part makes up the integrated self.
Educate about Dissociative Processes

Promote education about traumatic symptoms and dissociation.

Psychoeducation starts the process of reeducation of the mind so that interventions can be accepted.

Explaining the Brain and Dissociation
- Draw picture of brain
- Show items coming in causing walls to go up
- Show how connections are healthy
- Have child draw in connection

Explanation of flashbacks and bad memories.
- When your mind doesn’t put things away neatly, they can keep popping up again when you don’t want them to.
- An alarm system going off that’s too sensitive.

Psychoeducation
- Flashbacks
- Dissociation
- What are voices?
- Automatic Triggering
- Somatic Memory
- Oversensitized alarm system
- Importance of emotion
Explanation of flashbacks and bad memories.

- When your mind doesn’t put things away neatly, they can keep popping up again when you don’t want them to.
- An alarm system going off that’s too sensitive.
- Your mind is trying to tell you something is still not safe. Let’s figure out what.

Dissociation Motivation

The Pro Con List

- I can do better in school
- My friends won’t think I’m weird
- It will make my mom happy.
- I won’t be lonely.
- It is easier.
- I can avoid remembering.

What I Learned About Myself

- The voices I hear in my mind are like parts of me. They are like my feelings talking to me.
- I used to call one of the voices the bad one. I learned that no feelings are bad, feelings like being mad, or feeling sexy, or lonely are not bad.
- I can become a cosmetologist and I can have my own family one day.
- I do not have to be the kind of mother my mother was to me.

Understand What’s Hidden
Sometimes the self-knowledge is:

- Embarrassing
- Painful
- Frightening
- Enraging
- DETOXIFY!!!! There is nothing so bad you cannot feel it. Feelings go away. Feelings are not the Trauma!

Claim As Own Hidden Affects and Repair conflicts

Techniques for working with amnesia

- Provide safe context for remembering
- Role-play the affects and events
- Imagine together
- Use affect bridges and connectors
- Destigmatize the event
- Fill in the mystery, interview staff, keep journal
- Reward remembering, but not the behavior
- Never take I don’t know as an answer

Shame and fear about the self and its secrets prevents internal awareness

- De-stigmatize internal negative self-representations
- Promote Self-acceptance

Dealing with Aggression in Dissociative Children

- Consolidate Attachment of dissociative states.
- Address safety concerns.
- Identify triggering moments and underlying feelings.
- Explore underlying feelings and facilitate communication.

Dissociation Focused Interventions

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Arousal and Affect Regulation and Attachment

Learning about emotions
- What are they?
- How do you tolerate them?
- How do you manage them?
- How do you use them?
- How do you avoid contagion?

More About Feelings
- Difference Between feeling and doing.
- Survival Value of Feelings
- Why did God create anger?
- Why did God (evolution) create sex?
- Boundaries: Are feelings contagious?
- Desensitization to Expressions of Parents

Countering Traumatic Transference in the Therapeutic relationship
- “I can accept you no matter how terrible you think you are.”
- “You are in charge of yourself. I cannot control you.”
- “I deeply want you to get well, but it is ultimately completely within your control.”
- “I can accept your anger and disappointment and not reject you.”
- “You can abandon me, I can’t/won’t abandon you.”
- “You don’t have to do anything to please me. We are here for you.”

Dysfunctional Beliefs of Traumatized Families
- You are damaged just like me.
- I deserved it—you deserved it. This is my punishment.
- I am helpless to parent you/The abuser is more powerful than me.
- You can never be normal.
- I’ll always be there because you can’t protect yourself.
- I am better than the ones that hurt you.
- You’ll be just like them. I won’t let you do to me what they did.
- It’s me and you against the world.

Being a child is a traumatic trigger for a child. How can you give a child a sense of power?
Family Therapy Must Include:

- Practice in Feeling validation
- Empathy
- Implosion
- Tolerating defects in the other without abandonment fears.
- Building attachment across all states.
- Boundaries

Dissociation in Family Relationships

- Illusion that it preserves attachment
- Helps disown anger
- Preserves specialness
- Helps avoid processing painful knowledge
- Avoids focus on present

I am hugging all of you, the grown up you and the little Sammy inside and every feeling and part no matter how it feels or how angry it is.

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Family Interaction strategies

- De-pathologizing the behaviors
- Making caring messages explicit
- Processing parental trauma

Triggers and Trauma
Working with Traumatic Memory

- Process content.
- Process sensory and affective information.
- Process Meaning.
- Validate in the context of relationship.
- Make it a mastery experience

Examples of Traumatic Thoughts and Their Opposites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traumatic Thought</th>
<th>Opposite</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Everyone will give me away.</td>
<td>• When people know the real me they will love me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I am bad and don’t deserve good things.</td>
<td>• Bad things have happened to me but it was not my fault.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I have done terrible things and should be punished.</td>
<td>• My behavior was a reaction to my circumstances, and I can forgive my self.</td>
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Points to remember regarding processing memories:

- Empower to make it a mastery experience
  - A. Now is different.
  - B. I am different.
  - C. I did something right.
- Don’t assume what the terrible moment was. Find out.
- Tell the important people and help them hear it.
- Make it relevant to current context.

Flashbacks

- Carefully evaluate context of flashback—what proceeds it, what follows it—internal and external.
- Carefully evaluate what is meant by flashback.
- Imagery techniques
- Behavioral contingencies
- Verbal and nonverbal processing
- Memory book
- Bedtime rituals: confining memory to designated times

Dealing with Powerlessness

- Metaphors about natural events, warning systems.
- Spiritual Acceptance.
- Distinguishing between then and now.
- Taking action in the world.
- Understanding the power you did have and how you used it.
The Cycle of Traumatic Attachment

My abuser harmed me

My abuser loved me

I deserved it
I am worthless.

I hate myself.
I am unlovable

What to Do About it?

- De-identify with abusive person.
- Show personal effectiveness.
- Re-assurance about safety—concrete as well as emotional.

Healing Rituals

- May the burning of these objects release the pain, the despair, all of your built up anger, and let it float with these ashes and this smoke back into the universe. May the universe fill you with gratefulness for the safety and blessings you now have. May the energy released in the burning of these objects be transferred into energy for healing, growth, and change.

Ending Stage of Treatment

The cycle of Traumatic Demoralization

Too painful to feel powerless  Too painful to blame self

Extreme powerlessness

Ending Stage of Therapy will Involve

- Philosophical Questions.
- The Cycle of Traumatic Demoralization.
- Is Now Different than Then?
- Finding meaning and posttraumatic growth.
- Finding relationships that are reciprocal.
Self-Forgiveness

- What did I do? Describe it and accept it.
- Why did I do it?
- Make a new commitment.
- Make Amends.
- Forgive self.

Traumatic Beliefs of Traumatized Children

- No one can keep me safe (the abuser is the most powerful one around.)
- The world has no justice
- I am worthless, bad.
- I deserved it.
- Only thing I am good for is to be used by others.
- I inherited badness.
- I ruined my family.
- There is no one I can count on
- I can’t help myself.

Empowering Messages for Traumatized Children

- Your brain is adaptive, not sick.
- Be grateful to yourself for your survival strengths.
- You can risk attachment and trust.
- You can be in charge of your behavior and choose your future.
- Love is more powerful than hate. Don’t identify with the abusers. Break the cycle.

Healthy Beliefs for Traumatized Children

- Abuse is not their fault. The fault lies outside of them.
- They are powerful and able to determine their future.
- Suffering is not inevitable for them.
- They are intrinsically loveable.
- They will gain autonomy and increasing self-determination.
- Their caretakers are strong enough to protect them and prevent future suffering.

Wisdom From a Girl’s Group

- Your body is a temple. Respect it.
- Honor all parts of yourself. You have wisdom you may not yet know.
- You have a right to your feelings. If someone does not accept your feelings it is their problem not yours.
- If something is getting you panicky, it may remind you of something from the past. Notice the differences.

Wisdom From a Girl’s Group

- People are constantly expecting you to behave in certain ways. You don’t have to do it.
- Don’t necessarily believe what people tell you about yourself. Trust yourself.
- Dissociation has helped you cope. You will know when you won’t need it anymore.
- Never use dissociation as an excuse. Accept responsibility for all of your behavior even if it is embarrassing.
- As you solve problems in the real world, your dissociative world will become less important.