

Chapter 3. Self Nurturance

A second essential prerequisite for the resolution of trauma is the development of effective self nurturance skills. What exactly does this mean? First, we must learn how to soothe ourselves when feeling emotionally raw or flooded. This is not just a matter of containing negative feelings and traumatic memories; it is also an issue of positively nurturing oneself. In addition to self-soothing when feeling emotionally raw, we need to learn to value our self. That is, we need self esteem. This is an important, separate endeavor in itself, even in the absence of trauma, because how we feel about ourselves plays such an important role in how we feel about our life. When we experience trauma, particularly if it involves human betrayal, abuse, or abandonment, especially by loved ones, there is often a huge impact upon our self-esteem, sometimes in the form of pronounced shame. In such cases, the identification and neutralization of toxic shame will also be essential if you are going to allow yourself to value or esteem yourself. Self nurturance also involves self enhancing behaviors, treating ourselves to pleasurable activities, acting as if we are worthy, not just thinking that we are worthy. Thus, we might view self nurturance as a combination of skills, including self soothing, self esteem, shame reduction, and self enhancement. And as we shall see, we might approach these tasks by focusing on both our unitary self, and our divided selves, and utilize both cognitive behavioral and ego state perspectives and techniques.

From a habit model perspective, the cognitive behavioral branch of psychology has long focused on the management of one's thoughts in order to change feelings. Addressing one's self talk, i.e., what we say to ourself about ourself, often without awareness, and examination of core negative beliefs about ourselves, are essential if we are to improve self-esteem. If you can learn to think about yourself differently, you can feel better about yourself. While self-esteem improvement is a major endeavor in itself, and not necessarily a prerequisite for learning specific self soothing techniques, it certainly falls within the broad domain of self nurturance. And good self-esteem surely makes it easier to soothe your raw feelings. We will therefore address it at this point. But if you feel your self esteem is intact, or you want to immediately explore specific self nurturing skills for managing trauma, before examining the much broader topic of self-esteem, simply skip the next

four paragraphs. You can come back to the self-esteem module later if you'd like.

From a cognitive perspective, to improve our self esteem, we must first look at our self talk. What do you say to yourself, about yourself, in the privacy of your own mind? How much are you even aware of your self talk? To change any habit, you must be aware of your behavior, whether it occurs internally or in the outside world. If you examine your internal, cognitive behavior, how often do you praise yourself, and how often do you criticize yourself? What is the ratio of your positive versus negative self talk? You may be fairly introspective and fully aware of this ratio, or you may need to deliberately tune into this frequency and monitor your self talk in order to figure it out. If you dealt with a lot of abuse or abandonment as a child, odds are that you internalized much of it, and that your self talk is accordingly rather negative. On the other hand, if your trauma is largely situational, does not involve betrayal by loved one's, and occurred as an adult, e.g., being caught in a hurricane, your trauma may have occurred on top of a foundation of fairly good self esteem. In any event, tune into your self talk, and your self talk ratio. Pay attention to what you say positively to yourself, what it is about, and whether it is accurate. Do the same for your negative self talk. What do you typically criticize yourself for? How often do you do so? How nasty or ruthless are you in your self criticism? Do you criticize specific behaviors, or do you attack yourself more globally, as a person? How accurate are your self critical thoughts? If they are accurate, do you try to correct your behavior? If they are inaccurate, do you try to correct your thoughts? These are just some of the questions to ask yourself as you address your self talk.

While sometimes overlooked, it is also important to look at what you think others think about you. As we discussed in regard to social anxiety, these thoughts may be largely a projection of your own thoughts about yourself, and may or may not be accurate. What is the evidence for your conclusions regarding what others think about you? This is important, because we tend to internalize others' reactions to us, both real and imagined. We can project our own negative self appraisals, perceive them coming from others even when this is not the case, and then reinternalize them, feeling even worse about ourselves. Therefore, we need to assess whether or not we are accurate or projecting when we perceive others thinking negatively about ourselves. Likewise, we

need to accurately examine our support system, and whether the people surrounding us are actually healthy for our self esteem.

If you determine that your self talk is largely inaccurate, that is, your self talk is distorted and does not fairly reflect your combination of strengths and weaknesses, successes and mistakes, then the distortions in your self image reflect a negative self bias. If so, I refer you to David Burns' classic book, *Feeling Good*, its companion, *The Feeling Good Handbook*, and a follow up, *Ten Days to Self Esteem*, for detailed explanations of ten common distortions, or negative thinking patterns, as well as cognitive behavioral exercises designed to help you correct such distorted thinking. Do you have a "mental filter" which selectively focuses on negatives while ignoring positives? Do you engage in "mind reading," assuming that people are thinking negatively about you? Do you engage in "all or nothing thinking," looking at issues in absolute, black and white categories? Do you "overgeneralize," viewing a negative event as a never ending pattern of failure? Do you "magnify" mistakes as failure, and "minimize" successes? Do you "label," attacking your identity by calling yourself names when you err? Do you excessively "blame" yourself for things you are not responsible for? Do you "emotionally reason," allowing your perceptions of your behavior to be distorted by how you feel about yourself? If such patterns of thinking tend to characterize your thoughts about yourself, Burns' exercises can be an excellent starting point for learning to generate more accurate self appraisals.

And what if portions of your negative self talk are largely accurate? Do you take responsibility for your mistakes, or do you protect yourself by denying faults, perhaps blaming others, and thereby maintain the inadequacies which contribute to your low self esteem? As we discussed in the chapter dealing with guilt, it is important to use your guilt constructively, by changing your behavior rather than attacking yourself. If you are able to value yourself as a person, but accept accountability for your mistakes and their correction, you have an optimal approach to your identity and behavior. Another well-known author in the self esteem arena is Matthew McKay. His well received book, *Self-Esteem: A Proven Program for Assessing, Improving and Maintaining Your Self-Esteem*, is another excellent resource. He notes that an accurate self assessment of strengths and weaknesses is an essential first step in building self esteem, while also underscoring the importance of developing compassion for yourself. He describes how

compassion, toward both others and yourself, involves understanding, acceptance and forgiveness. Ultimately, you will need to improve your capacity for unconditional valuing of yourself, while increasing your positive self talk via affirmations. Likewise, you will need to decrease your negative self talk, by correcting distorted thinking and unduly negative self appraisals, and by investing energy into changing actual behaviors which you find unacceptable. Keep in mind Burns' truism that there is only one person who can make you feel good or bad about yourself: YOU. As we discussed in our section on anger, others can provoke you, or give you a strong invitation to erupt, feel guilty, etc. But only you decide, amongst your many choices, how to respond. Likewise, If you make mistake, or someone criticizes you, with or without justification, only you decide how to respond. Your power lies in your choice of response. Both Burns and McKay provide a treasure trove of ideas and exercises for such self esteem building, at a depth far beyond the constraints of this chapter. I highly recommend each of their books.

Self nurturance also involves self nurturing behavior. How often do you initiate pleasurable behaviors for yourself, and for your primary relationship? Do you codependently caretaker for others without arranging time for the activities which you enjoy the most? When was your last date? When asking this question in couples' therapy, I always fear two responses: "What do you mean? We're married," as if dating is no longer needed once you are married, and "I can't remember." We can easily fall into the trap of taking care of work and family responsibilities without nurturing our own personal pleasures or primary relationships. Make an inventory of your favorite activities, whether they be social, creative, athletic, intellectual, spiritual, recreational, intimate, or solitary activities. How often do you engage in each? How often would you need to engage in each activity in order to be reasonably happy with your lifestyle? Act on your findings, or watch yourself whither away to a pale imitation of your ideal self. Are you pursuing the life goals which add meaning and purpose in you life? If not, what are your excuses? How can you work around these roadblocks to fulfill yourself? Tolerate your death anxiety long enough to imagine yourself one step away from your eventual grave. What do you see looking back? What did you miss? Use this death anxiety and these imagined regrets productively to act on your goals and develop your pleasures.

Returning to our discussion of trauma, the ability to self soothe is essential when approaching horrid memories which often leave you

feeling raw or flooded emotionally. Containment of these memories is an important skill, but needs to be accompanied by an ability to soothe the person who endured those events, you. And from an ego state perspective, you also need to soothe the younger, traumatized part of yourself as well, since most of your pain may be partially split off from consciousness and located in this part of yourself. Soothing yourself when distressed does not involve denial, wholesale escape from, or elimination of your pain. It involves an internal focus upon, acknowledgement, acceptance, and tolerance of your distressing emotions, as well as a judicious use of your ability to externally focus upon your five senses in order to experience pleasurable, calming images or activities to counteract your distress. We can move toward gradual acceptance rather than alienation from our emotions, and use our capacity for sensory satisfaction to make them more tolerable at the moment.

We will explore the concept of mindfulness, along with meditation exercises, more extensively in a later chapter on spirituality. But essentially, via mindfulness, we allow ourselves to be fully in the present, rather than trying to escape the present. We allow ourselves experience the moment rather than plan for the future or dwell on the past. Mindfulness also teaches us to notice and experience our distressing feelings, embracing their presence, rather than fighting against them. We all tend to operate according to a pleasure principle, constantly trying to maximize pleasure while minimizing pain. The problem is that emotional pain is inevitable and unavoidable. We may imagine bliss in heaven, but on this planet, we cannot escape the reality of frequent minor distress and periodically severe emotional pain. Mindfulness is a mental practice which can be cultivated, allowing us to embrace the moment, including the pleasures and painful moments that we experience in the moment. We might define mindfulness as both a focus upon, AND ACCEPTANCE OF experience in the present moment. The acceptance portion of this process is typically more difficult than the experiencing component. As Ronald Siegel notes in *The Mindfulness Solution*, "When we practice mindfulness meditation, we practice being with whatever is occurring at the moment without doing anything to try to change or escape it. We pay attention to how things actually are rather than how we want them to be. This is very different from our usual approach to discomfort. Instead of trying to make it go away, we work on increasing our capacity to bear it." Siegel adds that "In

mindfulness practice, we change our relationship to difficult experiences—instead of trying to escape or avoid them, we move toward them. Over time, difficult experiences become much easier to bear and we are less readily overwhelmed.” As we noted during an introductory chapter, the short and long-term consequences of behavior are often opposite. We contrasted defenses, which yield a short-term positive but a long-term negative consequence, with coping skills, which require tolerating a short-term negative in order to produce a long-term positive consequence. In contrast to avoidance defenses, mindfulness as a coping skill involves noticing, accepting, and experiencing our painful emotional states in the moment, which over time, makes them more tolerable. Alternatively, avoidance defenses (e.g., denial, suppression, numbing via substances, etc.) provide a short-term relief from conscious pain, but when repeated excessively, they typically entrench our intolerance of negative emotions, via behaviors which often produce additional and escalating long-term negative consequences. On the other hand, when judiciously and sparingly, avoidance defenses can be helpful. When we are particularly overwhelmed, the need for increased emotional stability may require us to distract ourselves from our internal distress, and focus outwardly. Alternatively, when feeling only mildly or moderately distressed, we can embrace our current experience and painful emotions via mindfulness exercises, which help us develop our capacity for awareness of our emotions and mental processes, with acceptance. As we discussed earlier, we learn to become a wise general in her own recovery, retreating when necessary, but advancing when feeling more stable. Siegel notes that amongst the various meditation exercises we can choose from, concentration practices help to focus and stabilize the mind, whereas mindfulness practices help us gain internal insight regarding the workings of our minds. Likewise, loving-kindness meditation helps us develop compassion toward ourselves, and is a self-soothing exercise itself. I highly recommend *The Mindfulness Solution* as a starting point if you want to develop your meditation and mindfulness skills as a means of managing emotional distress. For current purposes, the point is that self-soothing involves exercises designed to alter the balance of emotional pleasure and pain at the moment. We can do so by embracing, learning from, and learning to better tolerate our distress, or we can temporarily distract ourselves from our distress when overwhelmed, and perhaps add some pleasure when doing so.

When overwhelmed, we can utilize all five senses, either in reality or via imagery, in order to direct our focus externally, away from internal distress, adding pleasurable, relaxing, and calming experiences to take the edge off of our distress. In our discussion of anxiety management, we reviewed a slow, deep breathing technique, including the use of vivid imagery, via all five senses, as a means of calming oneself. When discussing containment strategies, we discussed the development and use of a “safe place,” which uses our imagination to contain and distract ourselves from trauma memories, but is also a self soothing device. Likewise, we can rely on real life sensory pleasuring as a means of soothing ourselves in the midst of distress. This may, for example, involve a visual focus on the way the late afternoon sunshine and shadows play upon the threads of Spanish moss drifting back and forth in the breeze from the tree outside my backyard Florida window. It may involve sipping from a cup of your favorite tea, attending to the aroma, the warmth, and different aspects of its taste in different areas of your tongue. It could include listening to some soft, relaxing music, or the soothing touch of your partner massaging your back, or perhaps the pleasure you experience petting your purring cat. Or it may involve a combination of such pleasures, involving simultaneous input through multiple senses. Such behaviors do not eliminate your distress or its source, but they may distract you, or at least add a positive experience alongside your distress, to render it more tolerable.

Switching to an ego state perspective, we need to calm our adult self, but we also need to soothe and value the younger, more dissociated, traumatized part of oneself. Depending on the age and nature of our trauma or abuse, this may be our abused child self, our horror or guilt stricken combat soldier self, or some other variant of the traumatized self. From this ego state model, dissociation as a result of trauma can result in subtle or more dramatic splits in our identity, not just a splitting off of memories or numbing of feelings. Rather than focusing on our SELF, our unitary identity, as in the cognitive behavioral approach, we might also focus on our SELVES, particularly the most traumatized part of oneself that we distance ourselves from, as well as any part of self which may actively criticize, devalue, and suppress the traumatized self. Thus, we must address the harsh tone of the Tough Soldier Self as well as the emotional wounds of the Injured Soldier Self; the Internalized Critical Parent as well as the Abused Child Self, etc. By attending to these splits within ourselves, and repairing the relationship

between these conflicting parts of self, we become more whole (integrated). In addition, we learn to target our soothing efforts toward the most needy part of oneself, while reducing the critical, suppressing actions by the most damaging part of oneself. Addressing our affirmations and positive self talk toward the adult self in the mirror can be helpful, but will in some cases prove to be less effective than locating, accepting, and nurturing the largely disowned child self who carries the bulk of our shame and other distress. In other words, we need to deliver self-nurturance where it is most needed, which may be the least conscious, most traumatized part of oneself. Thus, an ego state perspective addresses any subpersonalities, a unit of self which, if present due to dissociation, is much broader than mere thoughts, and can therefore provide a bigger impact, when healed effectively, than merely addressing one's thoughts.

Following the next chapter on our third goal, catharsis, we will view integration as a fourth goal in the process of recovery. Integration begins with awareness of split off parts of oneself, then internal communication, eventually leading to valuing, nurturing and cooperating with our disowned self, and greater wholeness. We will eventually focus on the "multiplicity of everyday life," and suggest that the "inner child" approach to therapy captures this natural multiplicity, and is therefore an excellent vehicle for healing and eliminating symptoms associated with milder, everyday forms of identity dissociation which contribute to inconsistent and unintentional behavior. Using this approach, we will learn how to access the "higher parent," that is, the wise and loving part of ourselves, if we are to learn how to nurture and soothe the "inner child"/traumatized part of ourselves. We will also learn how to use our higher parent to set limits on the self critical, emotionally abusive part of ourselves that is internalized from perpetrators and contained within the "codependent" part of ourselves. For the moment, the essential point is that the often dormant, self nurturing side of oneself can be gradually accessed and activated in order to minimize our self abusive tendencies, and to increase our ability to give ourselves the nurturance we deserve.

But how do we do so, when we are so used to criticizing and devaluing ourself? The formal "inner child" approach described later includes the development of your "higher parent" ego state (the wise and loving part of self, the internal equivalent of a wise and loving God) as the leader of your personality. Sometimes, however, you just haven't

reached this point in your recovery yet. You may not know what constitutes recovery wisdom yet, and your capacity for self love is minimal. In such cases, the codependent “sleight of hand” technique is sometimes effective, as is the use of your religious resources if you are so inclined. Let’s examine each of these approaches to self nurturance.

Often, abused or emotionally abandoned children become codependent, not just in the sense of developing a false self to conceal true feelings which could get them in trouble, but also by becoming highly attuned to the feelings and needs of their caretaker, in order to minimize further abuse and abandonment. They thereby become quite skilled in identifying and taking care of the feelings and needs of others, while ignoring their own feelings and needs. It is therefore difficult to get them to nurture themselves as adults. So what can you do if you have excellent skills in nurturing others, but poor skills in nurturing yourself? Act as if you (or at least the traumatized part of yourself which holds the bulk of your distress), are someone else! Codependent mothers are often quite nurturing (though also enabling) with their children. Their maternal love is freely given to their sons and daughters. If you can treat yourself (or your traumatized inner child) as if it was your own child, you can then access your love, and deliver it to the most needy part of yourself. You use the most healthy part of yourself to soothe the most damaged, emotionally bleeding part of yourself. I have seen many female clients hold a large teddy bear, representing their disowned child self, and deliver warmth, both verbally and nonverbally, in a very effective manner. Journaling between your wise, loving, maternal higher parent, and your internally abandoned child self can have the same impact. These techniques will be examined more closely in our chapter on inner child work and codependency.

Likewise, if you are religious, and you believe in a wise and loving God, you can use your spiritual connection to access and receive God’s love. If you believe that God is all wise, and accept that all God’s children are worthy of His love, then you can utilize your faith to receive divine love while you are struggling to learn how to give it to yourself. Thus, you can use your underutilized self nurturance resources, internally accessing your maternal or paternal “higher parent,” or by externally connecting to your “higher power” via your spiritual connectedness and the power of prayer.

Finally, we come to shame, which is all too often the toxic waste dump at the core of our personality pollution. Self esteem and self

nurturing behaviors will be difficult to produce if you feel toxic shame and self loathing. Under such circumstances, you will find it difficult to feel worthy enough to receive such benefits. We will examine the resolution of toxic shame in our later chapter on inner child work and codependency, as it requires a rescuing and reintegration of the disowned self, a reconnection which awaits our more global focus on establishing connectedness.

In summary, my second clinical goal in trauma recovery is self nurturance. Self soothing techniques, overall improvement in self talk and self esteem, and improved self enhancing behaviors each play a role. Self nurturance, particularly self soothing behavior, is typically pursued quite early in the healing process, along with containment skills. It is necessary to develop some capacity to nurture oneself, as well as a capacity to contain bothersome feelings and memories, when we began our attempt to access, express, cathart, and unload our accumulated radioactive feelings associated with trauma.