

## Chapter 2. Containment

As we discussed above, containment techniques are a means of temporarily suppressing bothersome feelings and memories, to shield ourselves from their impact. We can use these techniques when we are too overwhelmed to address such feelings, when we are too involved with meaningful or pleasurable activities to be pulled into the quagmire, or after successfully completing a round of trauma resolution, when it is time to rest. I will provide an explanation of four different approaches to containment, distraction, a safe place, grounding, and the use of container images and techniques. This is not an exhaustive inventory of containment. From the outset, I want to emphasize that your creativity is your greatest asset in devising methods to contain your distressing memories and associated feelings.

First of all, simple distraction is no doubt the most commonly practiced strategy for containment. For example, if you suffer the tragedy of your spouse's death, you might throw yourself into an 80 hour work week in order to keep your mind so occupied that your traumatic loss has little free time to intrude. Some people end up with anxiety disorders as a result of engaging in a continuing flurry of activity designed to avoid bothersome feelings. The anxiety results from both the stress of trying to do too many things in a given time period without taking adequate time to relax, as well as the ever present underlying threat that your traumatic feelings will nonetheless break through into consciousness. But this pseudomaniac anxiety is, at least in the short run, preferable to the dreaded surfacing of suppressed trauma memories and overwhelming feelings. While such distraction can be used to supplement suppression, the consistent use of such defenses tends to have quite negative long term consequences, most notably the inability to resolve the most central issues in our lives. Nonetheless, the judicious use of distraction and other containment skills can help us manage our emotional distress when it does threaten to overwhelm us, thereby allowing us to regain our equilibrium so that we can later address the trauma from a position of strength. The idea is to shift your attention to something that actively occupies the mind, preferably something stimulating and compelling, rather than something quiet that requires only passive attention. Thus, a computer game, which requires ongoing, rapid responses, is likely to be more distracting than a television show, and a conversation is likely to be more distracting than

reading a book. Have you ever been reading a book and noticed that your mind was elsewhere during the last two pages? We are all subject to daydreaming, which is a commonplace, mild dissociative behavior, and is easy to engage in when we are involved in an activity which does not require active responses (e.g., when reading, watching TV, sitting in a classroom, etc.). In such daydreaming can sometimes drift into distressing issues which are a source of internal preoccupation when we are not adequately distracted by external stimuli. Accordingly, active participation in such external events is a means of temporarily distracting ourselves from our preoccupation with internally disturbing memories and feelings.

The use of a "safe place" is a means of both distracting and calming oneself at the same time. Imagine a time and place in your life when you felt very calm, safe, and protected. The emphasis may be on serenity, as in a beautiful beach at sunset, or on safety, as in a secluded spot in the remote wilderness, or on top of a mountain on a small, uninhabited island, where you can detect anyone approaching from any angle. Your safe place may be a place you imagine, or a real life oasis where you have actually retreated in the past for safety. Examples of the latter might include the tree at the far end of the orchard that separated you from the home in which you were abused as a child, the rooftop restaurant in Saigon where you went for R&R to escape the horrors of combat, or the loving oasis of your grandmother's home where you consumed milk and cookies at the kitchen table. Examples of the former might include sitting behind a waterfall with your protective husband and pet German shepherd, or fishing in a boat ten miles out to sea, away from it all. Your safe place could include the comforting presence of loved ones, or complete isolation, as in the overstuffed leather chair in your best friend's living room, or all by yourself in the perfect hiding place. That is, your safe place can include people that you trust and feel safe with, or the safety of being alone and having to trust no one but yourself. Your safe place is an imaginary retreat from the threats of traumatic memories, horrible feelings, and overwhelming stressors. The nature of your safe place is limited only by the limits of your creativity. It can include anything and anyone that you want, anywhere that you want, in exquisite detail if you prefer. In fact, the more detail you add to it, the more it will absorb your attention and take you away from the trauma that you are seeking to escape. It is a resource to retreat to when feeling temporarily overwhelmed, but it should not be

over used. It is not an alternative to satisfaction in real life, only a retreat for temporary stabilization. Thus, fantasy should not be abused, but can be utilized wisely as a means of both distracting and calming ourselves when we are feeling grossly overwhelmed or fundamentally unsafe due to intrusive traumatic memories and feelings.

Grounding is yet another containment skill, and is particularly useful when we are experiencing dissociation in the form of partial flashbacks. Flashbacks are a post-traumatic symptom which occurs in response to a stimulus which is similar to our original traumatic situation. A trigger can be anything which in any way resembles some aspect of our trauma. For example, the sound of a car backfiring is similar to the sound of a rifle, and therefore may have the power to elicit a combat flashback. Or, the aftershave of the boy filling your grocery bags at the checkout counter may be similar to that of the uncle that sexually abused you, precipitating an intrusive memory of that abuse, or perhaps even a partial or full flashback, reexperiencing that trauma as if it were ongoing in the present. In a full flashback, we are totally immersed in the past, completely unaware of the present, and of the passage of time since the trauma, and we are therefore fully reexperiencing the horrible original impact of the trauma. In this state of complete dissociation from current reality, there is little that we can do to return ourselves to the safety of the present, just as we have little power to deliberately awaken ourselves from nightmares, as we have no awareness that we are even in the midst of a dissociated state. We require an external noise, or the intervention of a helpful partner (preferably by voice, not touching) to interrupt the nightmare or flashback and return us to the safety of current reality. However, we can use our grounding skills to help ourselves out of a partial flashback. In this state of mind, we find ourselves feeling "as if" we are back in the midst of the trauma, yet to some degree we are also aware that we are in the present. Thus, a partial flashback is more compelling, and involves more dissociation than a mere intrusive memory, but does not involve the complete dissociation of a full flashback. In a partial flashback, we can use and expand upon our awareness of the present to bring ourselves fully back into the reality of the present by using grounding skills. Specifically, this involves focusing upon everything in our environment that is different from the original traumatic situation. Just as stimuli similar to the original trauma have the triggering power to pull our minds back into the trauma, stimuli that are different from the

trauma have the power to pull us out of it. For example, if I was sitting in my office in the midst of a thunderstorm which triggered memories of monsoons in Vietnam, I might find myself getting progressively immersed in these memories to point of feeling as if I was in combat, even though I was dimly aware that I was sitting in my office. In this situation, I could intentionally ground myself back into the safety of the present by focusing on everything inside and outside my office that could not have been present in Vietnam, such as my laptop computer, the pictures of my children, modern automobiles with Florida license plates in the parking lot, my degrees on the wall, etc. This focus upon contradictory stimuli breaks the dissociative spell cast by the familiar, similar thunderstorm stimulus, bringing me back to the present where I can then remind myself that I am safe.

A brief digression may be timely at this point, to discuss the management of transference, which is similar in some ways to the management of partial flashbacks. Transference involves the transfer of feelings from one situation or one person to another. For example, if I was beaten by my father, I may find myself to be excessively angry and oppositional toward male authority figures. Or if I was sexually abused by my stepfather as a child, I may find certain types of sexual touch by my husband to be particularly distressing or triggering, and may even find my anger toward my stepfather being transferred onto my husband during sexual relations. While partial flashbacks involve more dissociation than does simple transference, each involves the intrusion of past feelings into the present. In both situations, a similarity between the present and past (male authority, or sexual touch in the above examples) contributes to a distortion of perceptions, as well as a magnification of feelings in the present. Since the similarity between past and present contributes to the distortion, we need to focus upon the DIFFERENCES between the present and past in order to correct the distortion. The male teacher or policeman may be a helpful public servant, and certainly is not our abusive father; our loving husband is not our abusive stepfather, and loving sex is not an abusive exploitation of my body. Past and present situations and persons are different, and a focus upon these differences can reduce transference as well as partial flashbacks.

Returning to containment techniques, we can also use visual container images to box our trauma, as a means of reducing intrusive reexperiencing of these traumas. I find a pair of separate techniques

useful, and choose one or the other based on whether or not you experience your traumatic memories as frozen snapshots or moving pictures. If you experience your trauma as visual flashes that are more like snapshots than movie clips, you might first imagine yourself holding the picture in your hand rather than in your mind. This allows you to mentally move this image from your distressing internal container (your mind), into a more concrete external object in your hand, which you can then contain in an external container. Yes, it is true that this all takes place in your mind, in imagination, but as with other containment techniques, we are using your mental capacity for dissociation in a positive way, to temporarily dissociate traumatic images from your conscious mind back into your subconscious for safekeeping and later revisiting, when you again feel strong enough to tackle them. If you imagine your trauma memory as a concrete external object, you can then imagine yourself boxing this memory in a concrete external container, which obviously symbolizes your subconscious mind, but nonetheless feels like you are exporting it from consciousness. Imagine carrying the snapshot in your hand, as you walk down the stairway of your mind into the basement, or if you prefer, walk up the stairway of your mind into the attic. When I lived up north, most of us had basements, but here in Florida, we live on a giant sandbar where basements are often ill advised, leaving attics as the preferred storage site. Regardless of where you live, you can construct either a mental basement or attic, as you wish. Along the way, attend to details, as the use of details makes this process more vivid in your imagination, and more effective as a dissociative containment technique. So use your skeleton key to open the door to your mental basement or attic, turn on the light, via the switch on the wall or the pull chain, and notice the railing and the number of steps on the stairway. When you reach the basement or attic floor, survey the contents of the room, then look across the room at the locked closet on the far side of the room. Walk toward it, while remembering the simple number sequence which opens the combination lock on the door. Turn the dial on the lock two full turns to the right and further until you reach the first number, then one full turn to the left and beyond until you reach the second number, and finally a partial turn to the right until you reach the third number. Remove the lock. Opening the closet door, notice the empty shelves, except for a single shoebox, covered, with a long piece of ribbon or string (which is it, and what color?) wrapped around the shoebox and

tied in a bow on top. Untie and unwrap the bow, remove the top of the box, and you'll notice that it contains other photos, which represent other difficult times in your life. Place the photo in your hand in the front of the box, telling yourself that you will look at it again later, when you are fully ready. But for now, placed the top back on the shoebox, wrap the ribbon or string around the box and make a tight bow on top, and push the box to the back of the shelf. Close the closet door, snap the combination lock back into place, spin the dial, and walk back across the room to the stairway. When you reach the end of the stairway, open the door, turn out the light, close the door, lock it with your skeleton key, and put it in your pocket. If you'd like, walk out your front door, and around the side of your house, through small set of trees, until the pathway magically leads to your safe place, where you can rest, safely and serenely, for awhile. Again, imagine your safe place in vivid detail, through all five senses if you can. This entire process may seem cumbersome or even silly to some, but we are simply using your dissociative skills to protect your conscious mind. Just as triggers can involuntarily lead you into the dark corners of your mind where you have previously dissociated traumatic memories and feelings, you can use your dissociative talents to redissociate those memories temporarily.

If you instead tend to reexperience your trauma as if it were a movie, rolling from one scene to the next, you might try the following containment strategy instead. Imagine that you are in your own private movie theater. You have personally designed and constructed it, with whatever furnishings and decorations you choose. Perhaps it is a traditional theater, complete with velvet curtains, and maybe a chandelier hanging from a mosaic or painted ceiling, with one hundred seats, and perhaps a balcony as well. Or perhaps it is a small home theater, with one or two comfortable recliners. It is your personal theater, so construct it as you please, preferably in exquisite detail. Imagine a DVR at the front edge of the stage beneath the movie screen. It is playing the DVD disc of your trauma at this very moment, specifically the movie clip that is currently intruding into your mind. Fortunately, from your theater seat, you are holding a remote control in your hand, which controls that disc. And this is no ordinary remote control. Even Adam Sandler would be envious of this device. It has the standard on/off switch, play, pause, rewind, and fast-forward buttons, and up and down volume control buttons. But if you look more carefully,

it also has a pair of up and down emotional volume control buttons. Start by pressing the pause button, and watch the movie stop, displaying only a frozen frame of your trauma. Press the play button and watch it resume. Find the up and down volume buttons. Press the down button once or twice and listen to the volume decrease. Press the up button three or four times and hear it increase along with your discomfort. Then continue to establish your control over the sound of your trauma, and calm yourself by pressing the down button slowly, five or six times, until the sound is barely audible. Next, locate the emotional volume control buttons. Once again, practice your control over the trauma by pressing the down button once or twice to reduce the intensity of your traumatic feelings, pressing the up button to briefly increase it substantially, then pressing the down button slowly but repeatedly as you feel yourself numbing out, decreasing your feelings to a tolerable intensity level. Feel the peace. Now press the pause button once again, and observe the trauma sequence freeze into a single moment. Press the fast-forward button and watch the flurry of images speed by. Press the pause button once again, and watch the scene freeze once again, on a scene that occurred later on that traumatic day. Press the rewind button and watch the flurry of images speed by in reverse. Press the pause button and watch the movie screen freeze again in a single image earlier in the trauma. Press the rewind button again and watch the trauma accelerate backwards, all the way back to the first scene on the DVD, a calm moment well before the trauma began that day. Now press the stop button, and you will see a blank, white screen. Push the eject button on your remote control, and watch the drawer of the DVD player on the stage open up. Walk up to the stage with your remote control in hand, take the disc out of the DVD player, press the button to close the DVD drawer, and then the on/off button to turn off the DVD player. For now, hold on to the disk. Now locate the curtain control buttons on your remote control, and push the button that closes the curtains that are pulled to each side of the large movie screen. Once the curtains have united and fully blocked the movie screen, look toward the right side of the theater, where you will find a second, smaller set of curtains that you may not have noticed before. Find and push the remote control button that opens these small curtains, thereby revealing a small, shiny silver vault. Look on the back of your remote control and find the numbers for the tumbler that opens the vault. Turn the tumbler a couple of turns to the right until you reach the first number, to the left a turn until you

reach the second number, and back to the right until you reach the third number. Pull on the handle of the vault. You'll find that it opens on its ball bearings quite easily. Inside the vault, you will find a number of DVDs, each in their own individual slots, each containing past traumatic memories. Look on the shelf and you'll find the empty DVD pearlbox for the trauma disk that you are holding. Put the disc inside, close the box, and slide it into its open slot in the shelf. Close the vault tightly, spin the tumbler, and press the button to close the curtains, which once again conceal the vault. Walk back to your seat and put the remote control on the armrest. Then walk to the back of the theater and into the lobby toward the front doors. Open the door, walk outside, then turn, close and lock the door behind you with the key on your keychain. Now walk around the side of the theater, through the woods, on the pathway that soon reveals your personal safe place. Immerse yourself in the serenity and safety of your personal retreat. Take it in through all five senses, in vivid detail, enjoying the luxury of your peacefulness. Congratulations. You have taken control of your mind, and put aside some difficult memories for safekeeping, to be addressed later, when you are ready.

Notice, if you will, that this containment technique involved four steps. First, you symbolically ejected the trauma scene that intruded into your mind by projecting it onto a movie screen. Then you practiced controlling it with your remote control, and eventually stopped it in its tracks. Then you contained it in a vault, back in your subconscious mind. And finally, you immersed yourself in the serenity and peace of your safe place. The procedure may seem lengthy and complicated, but the use of detail makes it seem more real, and therefore more effective. This and other containment techniques will not permanently contain your trauma memory, but will help you do so temporarily so you can regain your emotional equilibrium, at least for awhile. Gradually, you will eventually learn how to pace your trauma work, approaching it when strong enough to do so, while containing it when necessary, all the while improving your ability to nurture yourself, and your traumatized disowned self, along the way.