

## **Dissociation: the mind's immune system.**

*by Lowell Routley, Ph.D.*

As the teacher supervised the kindergartners on the playground, Johnny socked Susie. Confronting Johnny with the incident brought the response, "I didn't hit Susie." "But I saw you hit her," replied the teacher. Johnny's answer was, "No I didn't; my hand did." Dissociation is behavior frequently manifest in young children as a means of dealing with intense circumstances.

Avoiding punishment or embarrassment is just one context in which children utilize this mechanism. In temporizing a highly stressful context like a chaotic home life, the mind protects the child by going inward mentally to a place far from the outside screaming and chaos. And yet another context is that of a child experiencing overwhelming physical pain; like the child who pulls the pan of boiling water off the stove and is burned.

This natural mental defense is used from childhood on to adulthood, the mind thereby protecting us through overwhelming events. The events of September 11, 2001 are often reported by survivors with a sense of detachment and a minimal amount of emotion indicating the survivor's mind still protecting to varying degrees. The same can be true for survivors of accidents or natural disasters.

What then is relevant for us to know about dissociation? The physical immune system, depleted by illness, can leave you run down and not able to function to your potential. Medical intervention allows us to return to a desired quality of life. Understanding the mind's immune system is crucial for us to know how to return to thriving after the mind has had to protect in highly stressful, traumatic events.

The mind's dissociative defense ultimately protects our Core self. (The Core self is defined as the person who was born into the body; who is the age of the body; whose life and identity it is; and who deals with present day life. In other words the real person who we are.) The mind's dissociative defense develops mechanisms of encapsulating, personifying, differentiating, transitioning, and organizing to protect the Core self. Which of these mechanisms evolve is determined by the age of onset, the intensity, and the frequency of traumatic stress.

*Encapsulating* is the mechanism by which the mind holds a traumatic experience prior to 32 months of age. Encapsulation at that developmental stage is sensorimotor in nature and is held as primitive feelings and experienced sensations. The encapsulation further assists the Core self at that age to "put away" the trauma so that he/she can continue to relate to the immediate external world. This mechanism is active until such time as it is safe enough to address the trauma.

Using the example of a burn trauma, the encapsulation of the pain sensations may be observed during medical intervention by the child's initial pain and fear reactions, then a

spaced out look, and then the child whimpering at its conclusion. Soon the child will interact and be playful as if the trauma hadn't happened, until reminded by reexperiencing pain.

*Personifying* occurs after 32 months of age when the child has language and begins to concretize his/her world. Recent studies from the University of Chicago indicate that this is when normative (non-trauma) experience of memory and recall begins. Normative concretization allows the Core self to assign meaning to people, places, and things. As a social being, at this stage, the child's internal world is a reflection of the external social world. Internal consciousness involves the components of behavior, affect, sensation, knowledge, and volition that match the external.

In the occurrence of trauma, the mind protects with a "not me" persona that holds the encapsulation to keep the Core self dynamically separate from the trauma. The Core self creates and perceives internally this identity (persona, part, ego state, etc.) who holds the consciousness of the traumatic event as separate from the Core self. Thus, an immunity from the trauma experience is provided the Core self. Because the mind seeks order, encapsulations of trauma experiences prior to 32 months are personified at that time to be held until trauma resolution can take place.

It is important to keep in mind that in personification, parts that are created have specific jobs that are dictated by the social contexts. For example, Core self is protected from family trauma by parts who relate to perpetrators in the manner required by them. Dysfunctional families have expectations of the child in public settings. A part who holds the knowledge of the parents' public expectations will blend with the Core self to assure right behavior and avoid punishment.

*Differentiating* takes place normatively as the child recognizes the boundaries between the internal world of the mind and the external social world. The development of that awareness allows the child to access and hold information inside the mind and to be able to tell it apart from external experiences. This differentiation is unremarkable and taken for granted in normative development.

But, in the case of a trauma survivor, the mind concretizes a nexus at the point where the boundaries of internal process and external experience meet. The nexus is defined as where the internal mind and the external world interact, where past and present meet, and where mind and body connect. A nexus is necessary to differentiate which part(s) is(are) to help the Core self with the context of external events. When the child's internal personification system reaches a certain size, the nexus maintains order as a place of consciousness in the mind where communication occurs.

Survivors know this as a "blending place" where parts and the Core self interact with the external world. This "in-between place" is a major concept that is missing in the literature of trauma. This phenomenology that survivors report is a crucial dynamic in the understanding and treatment of trauma. As survivors report symptoms, they are describing what is happening in the nexus of consciousness. Interventions that address

what is up in the nexus bring about stabilization or trauma resolution quickly.

The nexus phenomenology is observable in a non-traumatized person like the case of the daydreamer. He hears the teacher call his name even though he is staring out the window and is miles away in a mentally perceived place. The teacher's voice brings him consciously back to the present circumstances. The response to the external is a mental "about face" in the mind. Depending on how far away he had gone would mitigate the time taken in responding to the external stimuli.

*Transitioning* as a normative dynamic is not as observable as in the case of trauma. It is logical to assume its presence in a non-traumatized person. What leads to the need for a mechanism of transition is the size of the system of parts and the need for internal order and control. Parts do jobs for the Core self by blending with him/her in the nexus or "blending place".

When the system size becomes unwieldy, a third dynamic comes in to play to prevent chaos within the mind. A part is created to do the job of bringing the right parts to the nexus to blend with the Core self or to be present in her/his stead. This part "bridges" between the internal and external world. Hypnosis has long referred to the "observer" or "observing mind" which alludes to this specific part.

The Bridge part is present in the nexus to provide vigilance, continuity, and transition. The Bridge part is aware of both the Outside parts and Inside parts and where to find them in the mind. Upon finding them, they are brought forward to be available to do their job. Because the Bridge part remains in the nexus, it also provides continuity and awareness of time.

For example, the therapist working with trauma survivors has seen times when an Outside part is present who will answer a question about time with a response oriented to the past. The reported date differs from the session date. This is a rare occasion because the Bridge part will fill in parts to give the appropriate time-related information. This leads the therapist without knowledge of dissociation to believe that the client is correctly oriented in time. This is one of the accommodations made for survival's sake by the mind to pass as "normal".

*Compartmentalizing* is the final dynamic that the mind makes to immunize the Core self. This is a process that also has a normative base. As the child's life experiences and knowledge increase, the mind uses the external social reality to concretized and organize the internal self-system. This organization is represented by a natural introjection of a social landscape as an organized matrix of memory.

An example from a non-traumatized person is the individual who was trying to remember information about an incident in childhood to share with a friend. She reported dreaming that night of walking through an apartment building, a house, and a yard with a workshop in a city. While exploring one of the rooms, the memory came to mind. On recounting the dream, she realized that she had been exploring her grandparents' apartments that stood

behind their home.

The dream represented her matrix and the memory she sought was found in the location on the property where the event happened. One could say the phenomenology of a normative recall came from a search of the matrix of the past. This was her systemic means to organize her mind. The observer role in the dream as she walked through the property was the Core self blending with her Bridge part.

In the case of trauma, the matrix is even more compartmentalized. Parts of self are seen in the structure as compartmentalized by job, context, and time. A closet, for example, in the childhood bedroom where the survivor was locked in darkness for days without food, represents the compartment where the part can be found. If as an adult, she were to visit a cave and the lights were turned out, the Bridge part would go into the matrix and find a part who had a parallel experience. That part would come into the nexus to blend with the Core self to get through the experience. The Core self would at the same time be experiencing the consciousness of the part that is blending. Her experience would be sensations of hunger, emotions of terror and loneliness, behavioral urge to curl up on the ground, and thoughts of not being cared about or wanted. All these phenomena are components of the memory brought forward with the blending part.

An exception to a social matrix needs to be mentioned. Some survivors report a matrix of memory that is not a concretized social structure. Rather they perceive the mind's matrix as a linear structure (like a Rubik's Cube). That non-human structure can be indicative of a trauma in which the self-system was to organize according to external directives as in the case of mind control. Such a dynamic takes executive control away from the Core self and her/his system. Conditioning to respond according to external expectations of certain authority figures becomes the purpose. This does not respect the freedom for one to have ownership of one's own mind. Treatment will address this and allow the mind to organize as desired.

Dissociation is an important dynamic to comprehend when treating survivors of trauma. The natural immunity that the dynamic provides the mind and self allows people to continue to function beyond the trauma. However, like the physical immune system, chronic demands can wear down the resilience of the mind. Recognizing the chronic use of dissociation from unresolved trauma, applying these concepts related to the survivor's experience, and utilizing the process as an intervention will facilitate the mind's ability to recover from the most extreme traumatic history.