UNDERSTANDING DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is a central issue in trauma and part of the freeze response. We all have an innate ability to dissociate and the degree can vary along a continuum.

- present – “zoning out” – no explicit memory – dissociative identity

Dissociation Is

- A part of our survival instinct – when we cannot fight or escape any other way.
- A reaction to “inescapable shock” and part of going into immobility or freeze.
- A mechanism that allows us to temporarily escape distressing experiences, emotions, sensations and thoughts.

Dissociation Becomes Problematic When

- The intensity of the feedback loop makes the person more sensitive and quicker to dissociate with milder stimulation.
- The parts of implicit memory that are encoded can show up when triggered by similar environmental cues, which is usually very disorienting.
- Without addressing it, dissociation can become part of longer term symptoms.

Dissociation in the Longer Term Shows Up As

- **Constriction**: Our awareness of events is blunted, as well as our emotions. This affects everything happening at the moment, so a person will have a hard time focussing or concentrating, will see and hear less clearly, and be easily distracted.
- **Withdrawal**: A person will withdraw more, perhaps becoming socially isolated, and put a lot of energy into avoiding reminders of the trauma, which may be outside of explicit memory, so they may not know why they are avoiding something.
- **Detachment**: The detached parts of implicit memory can make time seem distorted and continue to make memory not work well. There is a loss of boundary awareness, so people can be clumsier and be injured easily.
- **Rigidity**: Sometimes in order to cope with this people will gravitate to the other extreme of being super-organized and seem over-controlling of oneself or others. They also may exhibit obsessive and compulsive behaviours and thoughts. Decision making and problem solving is more difficult so people can struggle with change or new situations.

Coming Out of Dissociation

Since the freeze response is so often part of a person’s experience of trauma, understanding and working with dissociation is a key part of working through trauma.
Since dissociation is a protective mechanism it can be a crucial and life-saving strategy and part of the survival response. It is not harmful in and of itself. However, there is a high amount of activation in the nervous system in a dissociated state which needs to be released or discharged to regain equilibrium. This often doesn’t occur, which leaves a state of helplessness and immobility in the nervous system and makes it more likely the person will go back into dissociation in any situation of threat.

**Supporting Someone When They Are Dissociating**

- First of all recognize what it is and ensure you are grounded and present.
- Normalize and validate the state – do more education when not dissociated.
- Speak slowly and calmly – avoid adding more activation and stress.
- Work at helping the person regain a sense of boundary and containment:
  - Physically – noticing and sensing where walls are.
  - Visually – drawing a container, drawing lines around a picture, using yarn to mark a boundary, imagining positive protection.
  - Tactile – feeling one’s skin, feeling the edge of a chair, feet on floor.
- Normalize coming into high activation when coming out of dissociation and support its contained release: e.g., sweating, breathing, tears, physical energy...
- Support slow, small steps – remember that a person who dissociates will go back into dissociation with little activation. Be cautious with exposure to trauma material.
- Acknowledge and normalize any feelings of fear, shame, rage, etc. This helps enlarge the ability to manage these emotions and let them move through.