



Specialising in Personality Disorder
and Complex Trauma



Working with the sense of self

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Disclaimer on the notion self

- There are many ways of working with the sense of self and given the brief nature of this presentation I will present an overview and a collection of what I have learnt in 25yrs of working in clinical practice
- Some people and therapies do not identify with the concept of "a self as an entity" and this must be considered as part of this history of this abstract construct



Global objectives

- A brief overview of the concept/construct of the self
- How a sense of self develops and the benefits of having an intact sense of self
- Discussion about the impact of a disrupted sense of self
- Tips on how to work therapeutically to help someone develop their sense of self



Sense of self: A construct

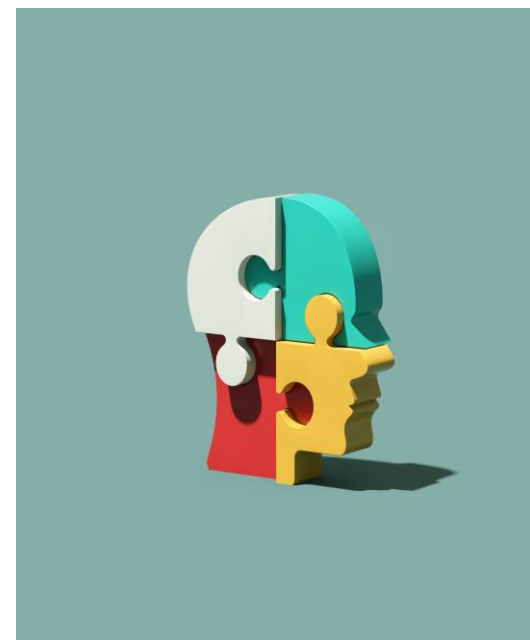
The self is a construct not a fact or an observable object

- The cognitive representation of one's identity
 - Our sense of **who we are** with a sense of continuity and coherence in our interest, beliefs, attitudes, emotions and capabilities
 - Our own personal past, present experiences and future intentions
 - A sense of **being a separate individual** with our own thoughts, feelings and views, knowing the boundaries where you and others stop/start
 - The entity that initiates, organizes and interprets our experiences

The self is always held in reference to the other as such is a socio-cognitive concept

Sense of self: a multi-faceted concept

- **Self-worth:** one's internal belief in their own value or worth as a human being (more fixed, based on person's core beliefs)
- **Self-esteem:** one's subjective belief in the value of their traits and abilities based on self-perceived external comparisons, judgments and opinions (more transient, impacts feelings of happiness, success and confidence).
- **Self-efficacy:** one's perceived self-belief in their capacity to do things, to use their human agency produce desired effects by their actions (Bandura, 1997)



These are all judgment based self-evaluations that can lead to success or distress

Healthy Self-esteem

- **Self-esteem** develops when we a child:
 - Is valued for who they are as a person not what they do or achieve (unconditional worth)
 - Has their opinions asked for and respected
 - Is loved and interest is shown by others in them
 - Is encouraged to grow at their own pace with encouragement and nurturance



Self as context

- "A transcendent sense of self: **a consistent perspective from which to observe and accept all changing experiences** (often called **the observing self**).\" Dr Russ Harris
- Not a fixed entity rather a stance and knowing within a person that requires an awareness to enacted, edited and expressed to others. The statement ***"I am not myself"*** requires a concept of myself.
- Equally, a negative self-evaluation leads to **low self-worth**. This negative self-evaluation is based on a global evaluation of the worth of themselves in comparison to others
- ***What factors do you think a person considers when making this evaluation?***

Brief: Observer Self reflection



Who's doing the noticing

- Notice your feet on the floor
- Be aware that you are noticing
- Notice what you can smell
- Be aware you're noticing
- Notice the sounds in the room
- Be aware of what you noticed
- Notice that you are thinking right now
- Be aware that you noticed your thinking

Brief: Observer Self reflection



Who's doing the noticing

- Notice that you are feeling right now
- Be aware of the noticing
- Notice that there is a **YOU** in there that is aware of all you can see, feel touch, taste, smell, hear, think and feel.
- This **YOU** can be accessed by shifting your awareness to your observer self

A disrupted sense of self

- In the absence of a stable, dyadic relationship with a significant other the following occurs:
 - Unstable, context dependant and rapidly changing self-understanding
 - Fragmented self-narrative with a lack of continuity across time, place and person
 - Poor connection to inner experiences, values, beliefs and low trust in the validity of personal experiences leading to self-invalidation and self-criticism
- Resulting in:
 - Low self-esteem & undermined self-worth
 - Sense of self-loathing, inherent badness
 - Unlovable & undeserving of caring relationships
 - Need to adapt self for others



Development of a personality disorder

- Unlike DSM 5's Categorical Model the ICD-11 uses a Dimensional approach that focuses on global severity and 5 trait qualifiers to determine the presence and severity of a personality disorder.
- The **Dimensions of self and interpersonal functioning** are used to plot the severity of a personality disorder on a continuum, from personality intact /no disorder to severe, based on level of functioning
 - ☐ **Personality difficulty** (not a mental disorder)
 - ☐ **Mild, moderate, severe PD**
 - ☐ Can also be **severity unspecified**
- The focus here is on **clinical utility** guiding management and treatment

(Application of the ICD-11 Classification of Personality Disorders (2018) B.Bach & M. First, BMC Psychiatry)

DSM V: Self dimension

Self- integration

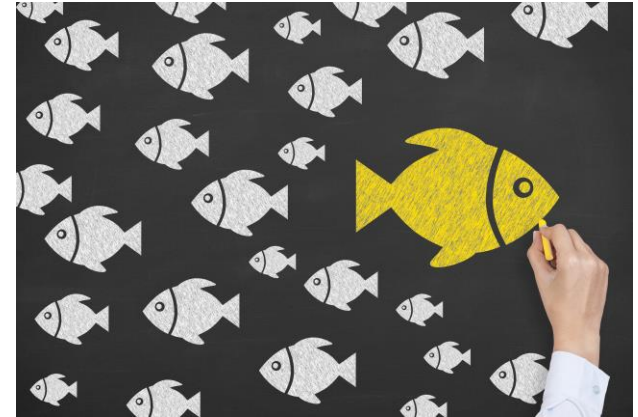
- Regulation of self-states
- Coherent sense of time and personal history
- An experience of a unique self
- Boundaries between self and other
- Capacity for self-reflections

Integrity of self-concept

- Regulation of self-esteem and self-respect
- Sense of autonomous agency
- Accurate self-appraisal
- Quality of self-representations (complex, different& integrated)

Self-directedness

- Internal standards for one's behaviour
- Coherent and meaningful ST and Life goals





Treatment



Self-psychology: a mirroring framework

Self-Psychology Heinz Kohut (1971) postulates that:

- A mirroring response from the others a child's environment helps them develop and maintain a sense of self-esteem, self-cohesion and wellbeing.
- This self-object/ 2- person relationship works to repair deficits in normative development through **a restorative dyad** where mirroring, validating, soothing and affirmations are central to a regulated self- concept.
- In this a relationship a person develops pure narcissistic impulses and ego damage is transformed to healthy ambitions, values and ideas by which to live by





Therapeutic use of self

The therapeutic relationship is a major means of changing relationship patterns and fostering the development of the self and interpersonal skills:

- Building trust in a consistent, empathetic relationship helps to counteract negative beliefs about the self and develop a coherent, more positive self-narrative.
- Habitual problematic relationship patterns tend to be repeated in relationships with clinicians.
- The emergence of these ruptures allow for the development of self-regulation skills in a safe environment where they can be explored, understood and the person supported to respond differently.



Use of self in the therapy relationship



Values

Qualities important to me
What creates meaning, purpose
Gives direction by aligning actions with values



Self-validation & Self compassion

Through validation learns self-validation skills
Negative self-perceptions challenged through exploration, curiosity and validation
Opportunity for self-reflection and different self-experiences



Boundaries

Modelling and experiencing consistent boundaries
Setting of reasonable limits creates self-respect and safety



Mentalising

The capacity for people to imagine the mental states (thoughts, desires, needs, beliefs, motivations and feeling) in one's own mind and in other's minds of others.
Psychological flexibility



Values:

- What motivates me?
- What do I want my life to be about?
- What makes my heart sing?
- What do I want my life to stand for?
- Deep down inside, what is important to me?
- What sort of qualities do I want to grow as a person?
- How do I want to be in my relationships?



Brainstorming

- What we value (or don't value) in others can be a great way to get started.



Self-compassion

- **Self-compassion:** the ability to turn love, acceptance and understanding inward when one is in pain or things have not been ideal
 - Self-validate
 - Being kind to ourselves
 - Practice self-love and validation
 - Embrace strengths
 - Engage in self-forgiveness
 - Be in your authentic self
 - Use affirmations
 - Challenge self-blaming tendencies





Teaching self-validation – 3 steps

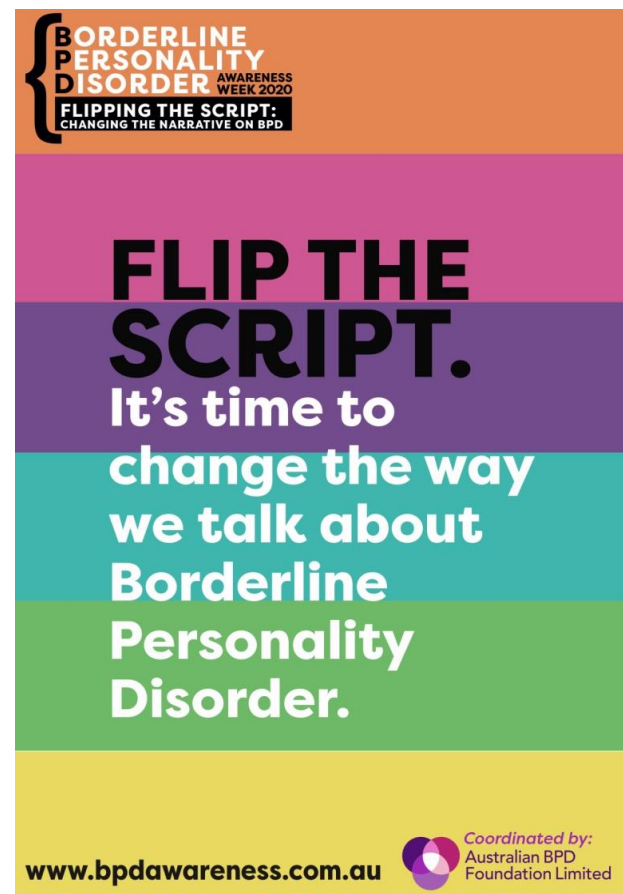
1. Notice and acknowledge how you are feeling
E.g., recognise and acknowledge: 'I feel unhappy'
2. Allow yourself to feel the emotion, take it seriously, affirm that it is okay to feel this way, even if you don't like it
E.g., 'It's okay that I feel unhappy'
3. Understand the context for why you may be having this feeling, make some sense of it. Sometimes the context will not be clear, but historical difficulties can provide context
E.g., 'It makes sense I feel unhappy, given the difficulties I have had in my life and how this makes it hard for me to feel okay in relationships now'



Self-talk can be change-talk

- How we talk to ourselves shaped what we think and feel hence of our self esteem
- If we are constantly telling ourselves that we are bad, we will look for evidence of our badness and feel bad
- The intervention here is to use the time in therapy to work with someone to create a more cohesive, positive and nuanced self-concept
 - Be curious about what is happening in your own mind and in the mind of others *“Can you help me understand what just happened?”*
 - Mark, name and challenge negative self-talk *“Can you tell me what you just said to yourself?”*

Flipping the Script

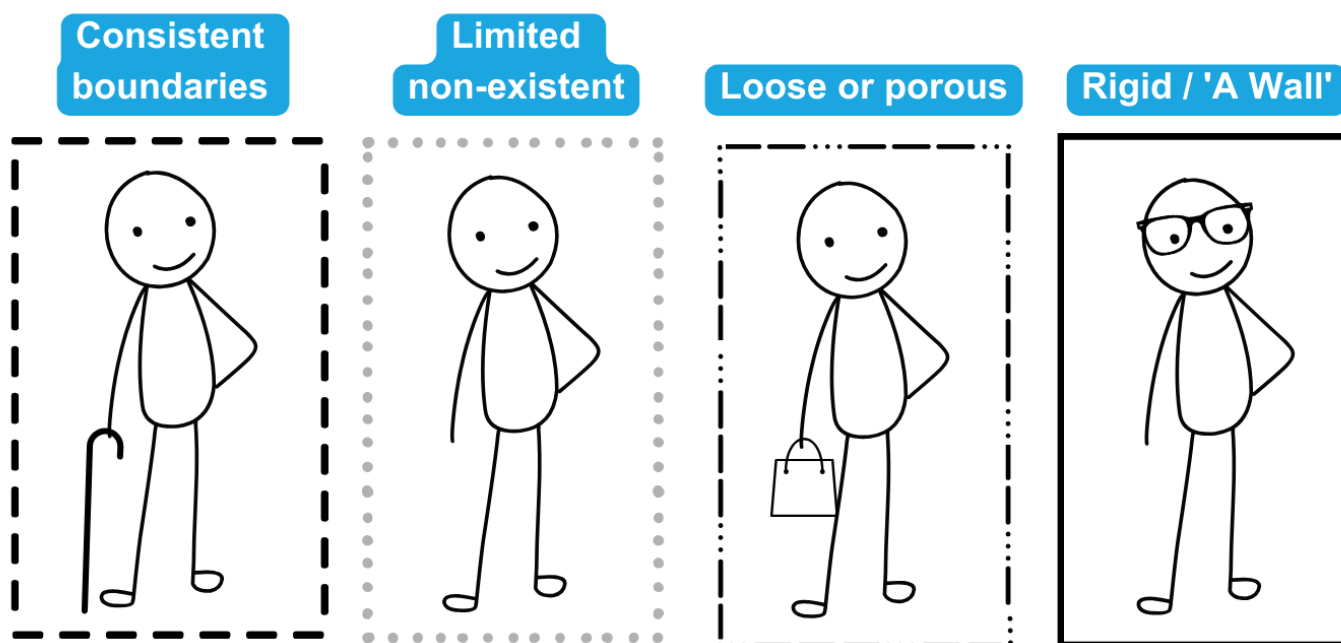


Artist: Mahlie Jewell, BPD Advocate and Lived Experience Researcher



Consistent boundaries

- Boundary setting is a skill that can be learned:
 - From modelling in therapeutic relationships
 - Psychoeducation about recognising and holding boundaries
 - Assertiveness training



References

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- Kohut, H.(1971). The analysis of the self. New York: International University Press.
- Mckay, M & Fanning, P. (2016) Self Esteem, 4th Ed.m A proven program of cognitive techniques for assessing, improving and maintaining your self-esteem. New Harbinger Publications.