

MODULE 7

Containment I

Session VII

Containment

Week 1

Meeting A

Concept of Containment

Materials

EV Concept of containment pp. 3-14
EV Handout – Alpha Poem

Goal – Members will describe levels of consciousness.

Goal – Members will understand different parts of memory.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you know something is conscious?
2. How do you know something is unconscious?
3. How would you increase your self-awareness?

Meeting B

Materials

MTSTA exercise 3

Journal Writing Worksheet 7

1. Write an alpha poem about a feeling you are having.

Ex. Write the word down the side of the page and then use the letters to write your poem.

Sometimes

Maybe

All I want to

or

Anger

Do is cry.

Doesn't have to be violent.

Containment - The Concept of Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is a term that can be used to cover the whole process of becoming more aware of emotions and other internal experiences. What you did with your obstacles in the beginning of the book was a form of self-regulation. Self-regulation also refers to managing what you encounter, as you become more aware. If you struggle to know what you are feeling at any given time, or have trouble with managing intense feelings, self-regulation skills can help you feel more in control of emotions without having to shut them out completely. Having greater control of your emotions will also allow you to increase awareness of pleasant feelings. After all, if you shut out uncomfortable feelings, the pleasant feelings get shut out also.

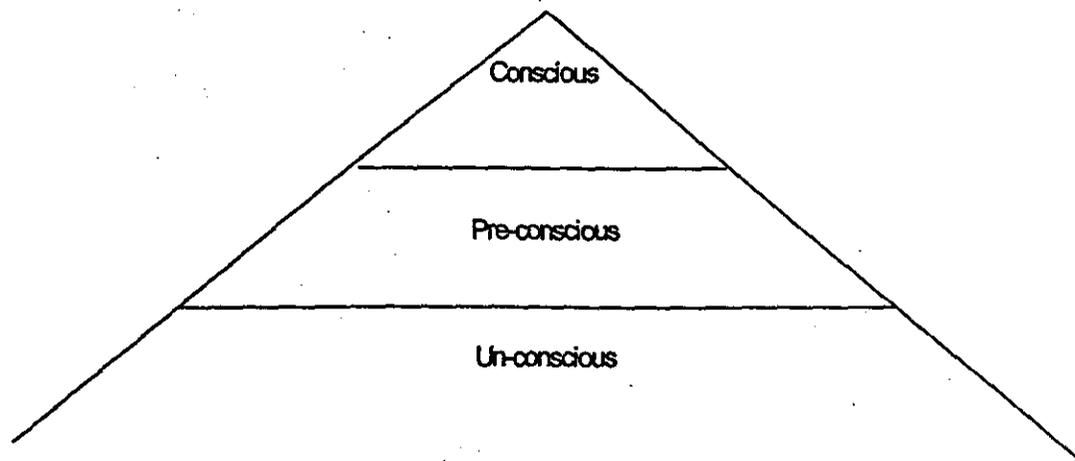
Self-regulation begins with awareness. You cannot regulate what you don't notice. Your mind is the center of your awareness, but your mind is complex. Sometimes you may not notice things that are important. Your mind may wander. Perhaps there are times when you cannot get something off your mind. You might obsess about something that worries you. You may try to focus your attention on a problem to no avail. Information may be elusive. To begin practicing self-regulation, you need to understand some of the ways your mind works.

The diagram on page 5 will serve as a model of you're the human mind so you can get an idea of what happens with traumatic experiences that may be kept out of awareness for extended periods of time. Keep in mind that this is only a **model** and represents experiences rather than the actual mental processes at work.

In this model, the **conscious** mind represents present awareness of the environment and one's self. The conscious mind is in touch with what is happening now. You may be consciously aware of the temperature of the room you are in or of the noises outside. The **pre-conscious**

represents things that can be remember at will or at least with a little effort, like phone numbers and addresses. The **unconscious** represents a place where information or awareness about yourself and your experiences is stored. This information is not necessarily consciously available to you. Those embarrassing slips of the tongue are often said to have come from the unconscious.

Model of the Mind



Memories, disowned feelings, and motivations may exist in the unconscious outside of present awareness. Yet, these aspects of self still affect and sometimes control behavior. When a person dissociates, some aspect of his or her experience may be stored away in the unconscious resulting in the sensation of time loss or amnesia. It's as if information has been stored in a memory bank and cannot be retrieved in the usual way. On the other hand, these memories that you can't get to may sometimes come up with no warning. So there is often a problem with having no memory or feeling (numbing) or having too much memory or feeling (flooding).

Use the following worksheets to become more familiar with different parts of your mind and other self-regulation skills.

Self-regulation Worksheet 1

Exercises: Understanding the different parts of your mind.

1. Name three things that you are aware of right now. (Conscious mind- ex. Warmth of the room)

2. How do you know you are aware of them? What evidence is there? (E.g., your five senses provide information)

3. Name three **non**-traumatic things that aren't usually in your awareness but that you can remember easily. (Pre-conscious mind, e.g., your phone number or address)

4. How do you go about becoming aware of those things; how do you bring them into your mind? (E.g., do you create images, or think about them?)

5. What kinds of things that are usually not in your mind, come into your mind outside of your control? (Unconscious mind, e.g. remembering the loss of a loved one or pet.)

6. What words do you use to describe where these things seem to come from?

7. Which of the items below makes life harder for you,

- things you are presently aware of;
- things you can recall; or
- things that come into your mind outside of your control?

8. Are there any changes you would like to make regarding the way your mind is working these days? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

Why do I shut things out?

Sometimes people who experience trauma will shut thoughts and feelings away in an effort to manage intensely painful experiences. This kind of coping through reduced awareness is sometimes called dissociation, numbing or avoidance. Dissociation, numbing, and avoidance or shutting things out, is not necessarily done on purpose, and a person may not even realize that it is happening. When people dissociate or numb out during trauma, the experience is stored in the brain in a different way from non-traumatic experiences. Information about thoughts, emotions, behavior or physical feelings is disconnected and stored in the brain in such a way that a person may not be able to retrieve it very easily. This information can be lost or unavailable for a short or a long time. Some people find that information from years of their life is unavailable to them. They can't remember. Other people find that they do all kinds of things to keep memories of the trauma from resurfacing. In other words, they remember the trauma, but they try to numb out and avoid thinking about it. What they don't realize is that not dealing with the trauma (once they are safe) increases the power that the trauma has over them.

Usually, coping through dissociation is quite rare. However, for people who have had traumatic experiences as children and little or no help coping with those experiences, dissociation, numbing and avoidance may have been the only ways to deal with the traumas and still remain sane. One of the problems with this method of coping is that the unconscious can, in a sense, "fill up" (not literally). Often, as adults, people who have used dissociation, numbing and avoidance as their main coping mechanisms find that at some point, they stop working, and thoughts and feelings that relate to the trauma start to crop up. This can lead to a general increase

in traumatic stress responses such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and visual images about the trauma.

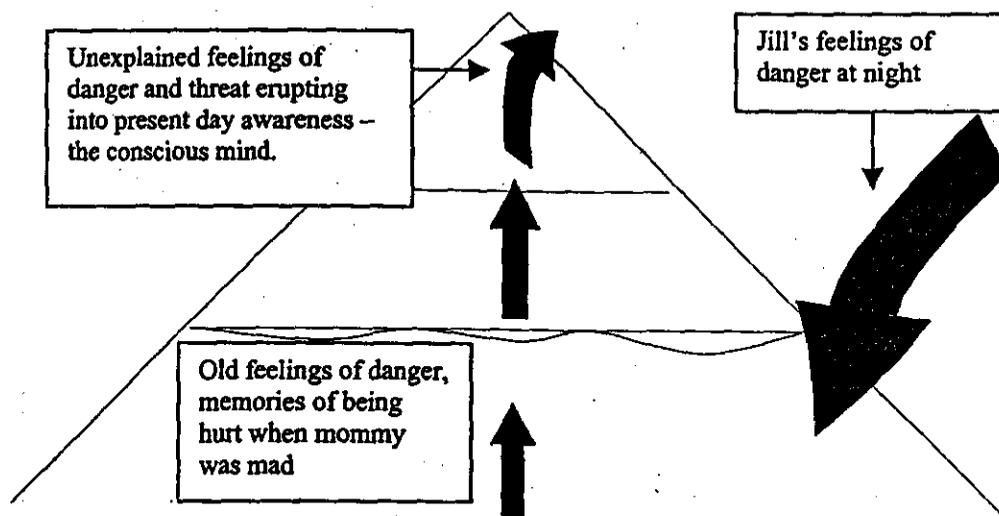
For example, if you feel threatened and react to the threat in the same way that you did as a child, chances are, the reaction will reinforce the feeling of threat.

Jill struggles with memories of abuse as a child. She often has the feeling that she is in danger, especially at night. No matter what she does, she can't make herself feel safe. Usually, when she feels scared or threatened, Jill hides in her closet with the light off. She puts a blanket over her head and huddles as far into the corner as possible just like when she was little and mommy was mad at her. Sometimes she falls asleep there and wakes up extremely disoriented and frightened. Jill has trouble understanding why the closet feels safe sometimes and scary at other times. While in the closet, Jill usually disappears into her mind or worries about whether or not someone will find her and hurt her.

In this example, Jill engages in a behavior that actually increases her fear. The fact that she hid in closets as a child is significant. Hiding as an adult reinforces the feelings of apprehension she had as a child. However, at the same time that it makes her feel more threatened, vulnerable and disoriented, it also seems like a safe thing to do. Sometimes it makes her focus on the terror of being found and hurt. The adaptation (hiding) is a reaction to the traumatic stress response (feeling threatened) which increases the traumatic stress response (feeling vulnerable, helpless and disoriented). Jill's initial impulses to hide are creating more distress for her. Her hiding is an effort to shut down awareness. While that may have been the only way to manage as a child, it may not be the best way anymore. Shutting down awareness as an adult increases overall

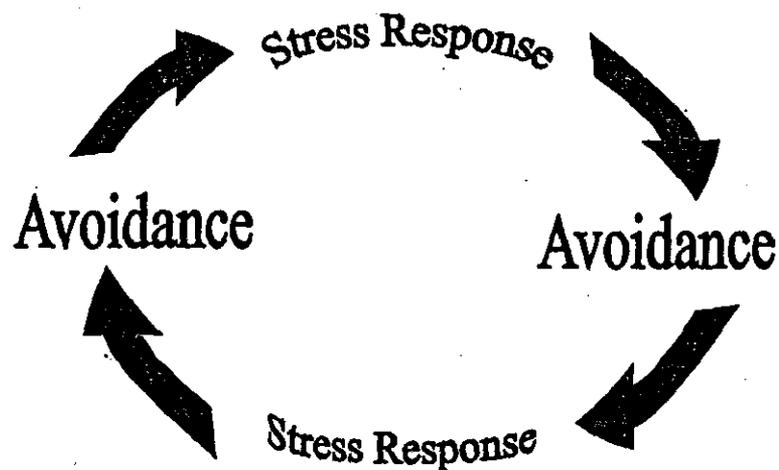
vulnerability in many ways. In the closet, Jill is more vulnerable to her own fears. In the outside world, hiding or reducing external awareness would make Jill more vulnerable to real, external threats as well as more vulnerable to our own internal processes. When survivors attempt to shut away awareness it often causes something else to come up or erupt. These “eruptions” are often experienced or understood as flashbacks or nightmares and frequently cause an increase in other disruptive experiences and posttraumatic responses. While a certain amount of dissociation is normal, the kind that relates to traumatic events is a way of creating a barrier between you and awareness of things that threaten or frighten you. This type of dissociation frequently interferes with daily life. Over time, dissociation stops working the same way it used to. When it begins to break down, you may find yourself experiencing thoughts and feelings related to the trauma, nightmares or other disruptive phenomena. Once this process has begun, or when you feel a need to improve your quality of life, it’s time to learn new ways of coping because dissociation is no longer going to work the old way.

The model below shows what can happen if dissociation increases and new material is shut away. Eruptions increase. These eruptions bring into present awareness the very things you may be dissociating to avoid. The result is a vicious cycle of dissociation to avoid the eruptions that dissociation causes. This cycle of traumatic stress responses can keep you from doing all kinds of things that you want and need to do.



Cycle of Traumatic Stress Responses

The “Cycle of Traumatic Stress Responses” shows how avoidance, dissociative coping and posttraumatic experiences lead to each other creating a sometimes constant feeling of being trapped in stress responses. A stress response can trigger avoidance in the form of denial, dissociation, bingeing, substance abuse, self-harm and other behaviors in an effort to get rid of feelings. These avoidance behaviors, in turn, can trigger stress responses inside because they are reminders of old efforts to deal with painful feelings. The stronger the response, the stronger the impulses to avoid. The effort spent avoiding leaves little energy to manage day-to-day life resulting in increased stress responses that increase the impulses to avoid. What a mess!



Fortunately, Self-regulation skills can help you to tolerate (sit with) and control intense feeling states that have led to avoidance or dissociation in the past. You can learn to feel and control the intensity of your emotions to reduce avoidance, which helps reduce the frequency and intensity of traumatic stress experiences. This handbook will teach you the relationship between

dissociation, numbing, avoidance, and traumatic stress and help you to replace old, currently problematic coping (e.g., dissociation, avoidance etc.) with conscious, more effective methods of coping (e.g. imagery, artwork, self- talk etc.).

The self-regulation recipe you will learn involves the following steps:

Experience - notice how you feel; notice pleasurable feelings as well as uncomfortable feelings, observe without judging; don't numb out and try not to make uncomfortable feelings worse; take note of what's going on inside.

Express - say something; tell yourself what you are noticing; write; draw your feelings; tell someone else who can listen supportively.

Contain - consciously postpone dealing with the overwhelming portion of what you're experiencing; hold only what you can stand for a length of time; then put it aside; you will be storing these things in your pre-conscious instead of your unconscious.

Retrieve – later, when you are able (with a friend, in therapy, or with a journal), bring back a small portion of what was stored and repeat the process of experiencing and expressing with that small piece.

The steps mentioned above will be discussed at length throughout this book. None of the steps are easy, but each is important. The next chapter begins the work of identifying interventions and how they work. Hopefully, any questions that may have come up while reading through the initial pages will be answered as you progress through each section. Aspects of the self-regulation recipe will be addressed in each chapter, so watch for those connections. Each skill chapter is broken up into the following sections: objectives, concepts, skills, and

interventions. There will be plenty of space for working in this book and helpful hints along the way. Pace yourself!

Protective Container



People who have experienced personal trauma can often become overwhelmed by feelings or thoughts that can lead to non-productive and harmful behavior. If this has been an issue for you, learning to develop and to use containment images and techniques can improve your level of functioning and sense of well-being. Containment is a self-management tool that allows you to store overwhelming information, images, or feelings for exploration at a later time, without causing distress to you in the present. The concept of containment is different from advice such as "Pull yourself together and get on with your life" or "Just put the trauma behind you and don't think about it anymore."

Creating an image of a container to hold recurrent, intrusive material provides you with a method of self-control that can protect you from retraumatization. When you gain more control and become more emotionally stable, you can decide to examine some of these overwhelming thoughts, memories, feelings, or impulses. Then you can remove them, one at a time, from the container or containers you have created for their safe protection.

This art experience helps you create an image of a container to temporarily store intrusive thoughts and overwhelming feelings.

Estimated Completion Time 45 - 60 minutes

Art Materials

- one sheet of 18" x 24" white drawing paper
- colored pencils, oil pastels, or acrylic paints (brushes, palette, and water)

Getting Started

1. Identify one intrusive thought, overwhelming feeling, or unhealthy impulse that you would like to temporarily contain.

2. Spend a few minutes considering the necessary features of a container designed to safely hold this thought, feeling, or impulsive behavior. Think about its form, location, and function. The more personalized your image, the more effective this technique will be. You may design a simple or elaborate container. The following describes some containers and their characteristics:

- a chained trunk located under the sea, to confine traumatic flashbacks
- a locked room located at the end of a long corridor, for storage of overwhelming feelings
- a video cassette located on a shelf in a remote study, to provide for later viewing of traumatic events
- a filing cabinet located in a vault, for organizing information related to the trauma
- a protective bubble located on a cloud, to hold unpleasant body sensations

Your container should have some way to be securely closed, and a way to be reopened, over which you have complete control.

Artmaking Guidelines

1. Draw a picture of your container.
2. Consider the location that would best suit your container. Add these surroundings to your picture.
3. Study your drawing. Add any features necessary to make your container more effective.

Written Reflections

1. Describe your container in writing. Be as specific as possible about its physical characteristics and location.

2. Explain why the various features of your container are significant to you.

3. Outline the steps you must take to place overwhelming material into your container. For instance, you could close your eyes and imagine the following:

- a symbolic object to represent the unsafe feeling, thought, or sensation
- wrapping this object up; perhaps labelling it
- placing this package in the container
- closing the container securely

Note Practice these steps to build your confidence in using this technique. You can visualize your container when you are alone or in public to temporarily contain overwhelming feelings and thoughts. You may find that you require different types of containers for various feelings, memories, or sensations. This art experience can be used again each time you wish to modify a container or create a new one.