

## 8. Relationships as a Container

Feel free to stop the video when you need to pause.

Containing distressing feelings, impulses and memories can be approached in many different ways, perhaps even in countless ways. We may use relationships as a 'container' to support, 'contain' and 'hold' us in difficult times.

We are born into a relational context and depend on others for survival. Innate action-systems in the brain motivate us to connect and relate to other people all the way through life.

However, when one has been hurt by other people, not least when it comes to persons on which one depended as a child, it is not given to consider that relating to other people is a resource to turn to for support and 'containment' in difficult times.

At the same time, it is known that social support increases ones capacity to deal with stress in a healthy way. Feeling safe in a relationship helps to heal from trauma. Feeling safe in a relationship increases the mental and integrative capacity. Being able to share and talk about the difficulties with a trusted person helps us to cope with unhealthy feelings and impulses. As such, a safe and empowering relationship serves as a 'container'.

The metaphor of a 'container' has been used in relation to many types of relationships.

Sometimes a relationship is described as a '*container-contained*' relationship. The metaphor is in particular used in relation to the - in many ways - idealized image of the mother-infant relationship: The mother fulfills the needs of the small infant without adaptations. She 'contains' the infant, and the infant feels 'contained'.

Sometimes a relationship between adults is described as a '*container-container*' relationship with equal parts, such as a couple, friends and colleagues. Ideally, both parts pay interest to the other part, recognize any distress or concern, listen to the other part, share and discuss, explore together what is at front, and are responsive to the other part.

As the title of this presentation says, the metaphor of a '*container*' is also used to describe the relationship in itself. What two people bring into a relationship will describe the quality of the container.

The therapeutic relationship has the potential to serve as 'container' and be a healing empowering relationship.

*The model of a collaborative therapeutic relationship* is recommended in a trauma therapy: In order to be able to contain memories of the past, while at the same time being connected to the here and now, the art of balance is needed. As intruding affects and impulses related to past trauma are very powerful, the establishment of a safe foothold in the present requires much specific attention. If not, the past tends to take over. For the establishment of a safe foothold in the present it is recommended to stimulate sides or parts of you that have their function rooted in the present. We call them actions-systems of daily life. They are rooted in psychobiological systems in the brain. They include among others the basis for social

engagement and collaboration, reflective capacity, curiosity, exploration, creativity, humor, and play. This is why it is recommended to involve these capacities in a trauma treatment, not least when it comes to relational trauma.

Therefore, recommended therapeutic strategies are based on *collaboration* and *dialogue* between you and the therapist, including negotiation, exploration of the issues at hand, reflection, and discussion – to be connected to the present while working with trauma-related issues. It is recommended that these action-systems of daily life are front and center in the therapeutic relationship when healing from relational trauma, in order to balance parts stuck in trauma-time, that otherwise might overwhelm you when you relate to the therapist.

In the therapeutic relationship you may be allowed to express and explore feelings that otherwise are too painful or shameful to be shared with others or contain all by yourself. By doing this, you may get the experience that it is possible to cope with those overwhelming emotions and impulses.

To strengthen the containing function of the relationship you and your therapist are encouraged to spend time early in a treatment about agreements on therapy frame and boundaries, such as: How many sessions per week? Length of session? Agreements on contact between sessions? Pace of therapy? - and come to agreement on other issues related to you therapy, such as: Treatment plan? Focus in therapy? Crisis plan? Hospitalization? Etc.

When you establish a new relationship, e.g., therapeutic: What are your different thoughts and feelings about starting in this therapy? Use a piece of paper, make speech- or thought-balloons and write express for each thought and feeling. Acknowledge that all of them are you, give recognition to all parts. Reflect together with the therapist.

Building of regulatory skills in a relationship: Discuss and practice together with the therapist, be social while learning: Try out if a skill works for or not, use your creativity, let it be joyous. Evaluate together if the skill is effective. If not – explore together – why not?

Together with the therapist or another trusted person you may explore and practice your physical as well as emotional relational boundaries: Notice what physical distance is appropriate for you so that you feel comfortable in the relationship. Your window of tolerance is your guide. How close is too close? Discuss, what you can do 1) if you come too close to another person? Can you use your body language to say 1) “Keep a distance”: for example, turn away your face or body, fold your arms, look at the other with a negative gaze, look down and avoid eye-contact?), or when you want to say 2) ‘Come closer’: for example, you may look at the other with a positive glance, smile, give eye-contact, move towards the other person? Try out different possibilities.

You may practice limit-setting together with the therapist or another trusted person: practice limit-setting without being distressed and troubled by the response and reaction from the other, whether they are disappointed, etc. Dare to ask for something without worrying about being rejected, abandoned, liked, etc. Use roleplay?

You may practice the experience, of what happens if you say “no” to a request from another person? Do you feel scared, anxious, shameful, guilty, anger, powerless. Practice with use of role-plays

*Being contained:* It is important from time to time to feel ‘contained’ or ‘held’ by the therapist, as a first step to manage some difficulties in life with less avoidance. The therapist can offer to temporarily ‘hold’ distress that you are not yet able to contain all by yourself, and you are free to accept or not accept what is offered. Or you may ask the therapist to contain some difficult material that distresses you. Part of such strategy is to have an ongoing dialogue between you and your therapist, and reflection on the need to be ‘contained’. As with other containment strategies, a generally advice is that help from others to contain is temporary.

Hope is essential to keep up the courage. You may ask the therapist to carry hope in times when you do not feel you have the capacity to carry hope by yourself.

If you have ‘parts’ or dissociated self-states: The therapist can help you to contain the parts, by acknowledging the parts.

*Knowledge and psycho-education:* The more you understand of your reactions and difficulties, the better you can cope with them without being overwhelmed! This also applies to relational patterns in the present and their relationship with early relational experiences. You are encouraged to be curious, and do not hesitate to ask for the information you need. Psycho-education is considered to be a ‘cognitive component’ of containment.

*Attachment issues:* A safe therapeutic relationship provides a unique possibility for dealing with unresolved attachment issues related to early relational trauma, with continuous paying attention to balancing past and present within a window of tolerance. As ever, any dealing with past should be accompanied by being connected to the present, to avoid being overwhelmed by affects related to past history of attachment disruptions. The collaborative model helps you contain strong affects related to attachment issues.

As suggested, be curious: Get knowledge about attachment and attachment trauma, to understand yourself, that your reactions are normal in relation to your history. This relieves you from shame. It will help you be more within your window of tolerance, so you can cope with the strong affects in a healthy way.

You become stronger following exploration of your relational patterns in a safe relationship, and from getting knowledge and understanding of your relational patterns. Once it is contained in a safe relationship, you will learn gradually to be able to cope with more independently in a later stage.

By bringing your observing and curious parts at front in collaboration with the therapist, you may get the chance to notice any internal dilemmas or conflicts, such as: «want to be close / to be close is dangerous», «want to get better / I do not deserve to get better». Such inner conflicts are natural and normal consequences of early relational trauma, and they have a solution.

*Share positive affect and experiences:* In the therapeutic relationship – or in another safe relationship - you may practice to share positive experiences, as this helps down-regulate negative feelings. Thus, it helps you regulate emotions and impulses.

You may practice this with the use of playfulness, humor and be socially involved. Try to stay with the experience, take time to recognize and acknowledge the positive experiences, in order to take it in, so that it becomes familiar.

*Other strategies:* Concrete issues that you can explore and practice together with the therapist – or a trusted person:

- If you tend to use to withdraw or isolate yourself as a coping strategy, spend time together with persons that are safe and supportive
- Meet with safe, supportive and empowering people, or talk with them on the telephone or online, in case you tend to use much time on “passive” activities, such as watching TV, computer games, as coping strategies.
- Practice having dialogue with people in order to solve problems.
- If you are in an unhealthy or destructive relationship, have as goal to protect yourself from any damage
- Keep healthy distance to people who work against or limit your process of healing
- Stimulate contact with people who support your healing process
- Keep up with appointments in therapy if you tend to stay away from sessions
- Maintain a daily structure and for the plans you have for various activities. Communicate with people if you need to change plans involving other people.
- Make a plan for the day and share it with others.
- Ask others to help you stay connected to them.
- Doing some (positive) activity with safe others, talk about what you do

*Summing up:* A supportive, empowering and safe relationship helps you contain and cope with your past in a healthy way. You will have a better *awareness* and *understanding* of your reactions, and will be in a position to *reflect and talk* about them, without acting on unhealthy impulses. These are all important factors for healing.

That which was hurt in relationships can be healed in relationships!

| Thank you!

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