Trauma Through an IFS (Internal Family Systems) Lens
Amy Grabowski, MA, LCPC

Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing event(s) that
overwhelms one’s ability to cope
causes feelings of helplessness
impinges on one’s sense of control
diminishes one’s sense of self
blunts one’s ability to feel the full range of emotions
reduces one’s capacity to integrate the situation into
one’s current reality

What is Trauma/trauma?

- 61% of men & 51% of women have at least 1 traumatic event in their lives
- 8% of US population – more women than men - will develop PTSD
- 4 types of symptoms of PTSD:
  - 1) Intrusive – dissociation/flashbacks/nighmares
  - 2) Avoidance – substance abuse/social withdrawal
  - 3) Mood/Cognitive – depression/shame/amnesia of event
  - 4) Arousal/Reacti - exaggerated startle response

awakeningintake@gmail.com
Trauma Through an IFS (Internal Family Systems) Lens
Amy Grabowski, MA, LCPC

**Trauma? Or trauma?**

- Big “T” Trauma is serious, life threatening, sudden, unexpected: “Stick of Dynamite that blows a rock apart”
- Commonly associated with PTSD
  - Physical Abuse
  - Sexual Abuse/Assault
  - Survive – or witness to:
    - Violence
    - Serious Injury
    - War
    - Natural Disasters

**Trauma? Or trauma?**

- Little “t” trauma is highly stressful, constant, ego-threatening: “Chip, chip, chip of a chisel on a rock over time”
- Doesn’t meet criteria for PTSD – but does cause significant emotional damage:
  - Ongoing/unending arguing, conflict or criticism
  - Enduring bullying or emotional abuse
  - Experiencing humiliation/shame
  - Not being able to please significant person

**Effect of Trauma/trauma**

- Evidence shows that repeated exposure to little “t” traumas can cause more emotional harm than exposure to a single big “T” traumatic event.
- However little “t” trauma is often minimized and not addressed:
  - Creates adverse coping mechanisms
  - Bottled up emotions
  - Blunting of affect and/or body sensations
3 Changes in the brain
1) Threat perception systems are heightened
2) Filter systems are harmed
3) Self-sensing systems are blunted
   - Brain becomes “fear driven”
   - Hyperfocused and hypervigilant
   - Feelings and body sensations are blunted
   - Loss of Sense of Self
(Source: Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD)

Memories & Emotions stored in Limbic System
- Bessel Van Der Kolk: “You cannot think your way to the amygdala!”
- Thinking actually hinders Healing
- Healing must be both emotional and physical
- BVDK, “You cannot change irrational responses from your body except by becoming deeply involved in noticing your internal world.”

Founded in 1980’s by Dr Richard Schwartz
- Fastest growing evidence-based therapy model in US and Europe
- IFS is very optimistic and strengths based
   - Client has all the resources they need within
   - Once Sense of Self is recovered Parts can regain healthy roles
   - All Parts want to regain their healthy role within the system
Basis of IFS therapy is helping clients recover their Sense of Self

Everyone has at their Core a Self containing many crucial leadership qualities:
- Centered, calm, compassion, courage, confidence, curious, clarity, creativity, current, capacity for objectivity, and connection to self, to others, and to higher power / bigger picture

Multiplicity of the mind – it is the nature of the human mind to be divided into sub-personalities Parts: Internal Family

Each Part has:
- positive role in system,
- positive intention for client
- and, when taken care of, will settle into its rightful place in a harmonious relationship with the other Parts
The Parts can be compared to an orchestra & the Self as the conductor. Three groups of Parts: each Part exists on a continuum from Healthy/Balanced to Dysfunctional/Extreme.

- Managers (Mentors – Bullies)
- Firefighters (Advocates – Troublemakers)
- Exiles (Kids – Outcasts)

But if Sense of Self is blunted, missing, or sacrificed b/c of Trauma/trauma, it feels more like Junior High Band when the teacher doesn’t show up! Parts become chaotic and extreme – and lose harmony and cooperation. Without a Sense of Self, clients feel lost, directionless, chaotic, empty, disconnected, alone.

Amy = 38 y.o. never married, cis-female
“trauma” = parents divorce, unpleasant critical father, previous bullying and rejection
avoids situations that are “out of comfort zone”
in therapy for anxiety attacks, depression, and “lost” Sense of Self

In this video clip, Client identifies three different “Parts”: critical angry, rebellious, depressed
See Transcript of dialog
Amy/Client is in Bold
Therapist = AG
Recover Sense of Self and Establish Self-Leadership

- Finding the ‘Wise One Within’ is very empowering & reassuring
- All the necessary resources are within
- These resources can be tapped into at any time
- Clients must practice this over and over and over…..

Get “Parts” back into Harmony within the System

- All Parts want:
  - To be heard: they have important messages for client
  - To be appreciated for what they are trying to do – not necessarily for how they are doing it
  - To be taken care of – in their own way

When heard, appreciated & taken care of, Parts calm down & fall back into their positive roles in the system.
In this video clip, Client identifies a Part she calls the Nasty Librarian.

Client uncovers the “Librarian’s” positive intention = protector of hurt/fear Part

I ask Client to “separate from” the Part and breathe into “Self” – using Curiosity and Compassion

See Transcript of dialog

Amy/Client is in Bold

Therapist = AG

Therapy Steps to Recovery

Heal Memories and Emotions – both emotionally and physically

IFS language:

Healing is called “An Unburdening”

Unburdening is a Long Process, not a 1-time therapy session
Video Clip #3

- Client is in “Self-Energy” and heals a Young Scared Part
- See Transcript of dialog
  - Amy/Client is in Bold
  - Therapist = AG

Therapy Steps to Recovery

In addition we help Parts Learn to:
- Regulate emotional responses
- Tolerate uncomfortable feelings
- Learn functional/effective coping skills
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy can be very helpful for this part of recovery
### Therapy Steps to Recovery

- Body Centered Therapy: help client reconnect to body and process emotions/sensations
- Somatic Experiencing
- Yoga-informed therapy
- Dance/Movement therapy
- Mindfulness/meditation

### Thank you!

- Questions? Comments, suggestions, feedback…

  Amy Grabowski, MA, LCPC
  The Awakening Center
  3523 N Lincoln, Chicago, IL 60657
  (773) 929-6262
  www.awakeningcenter.net
  awakeningintake@gmail.com