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## Subpersonalities and Psychosynthesis: Continuing the healing from childhood sexual abuse with techniques of mental imagery

Virginia Counselors Journal

Volume 26, June, 2000



This is a transcript of a one and one-half hour counseling session with "Sylvia", an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Through the use of a technique called active imagination, a process of psychosynthesis took place that included personifying into an array of subpersonalities her conflicting thoughts, feelings and concerns associated with a move of residence; a creative and productive dialogue between these internal complexes; the reduction of post traumatic stress disorder symptoms in her life; and the acquisition of a more satisfying job.

### Theoretical framework and approach

The theoretical framework of this session is a transpersonal method of counseling called Psychosynthesis, an approach which takes rich advantage of hypnotic techniques to facilitate psychological exploration, healing, development and transformation. Clients enter a state of deep relaxation in order to let go of or disidentify from the stress, roles and responsibilities they bring to the session, and to focus their awareness on the dynamic energies that exist within them. Through a technique of mental imagery called active imagination, they pull together into personifications called subpersonalities their scattered, relatively autonomous, and often unconscious patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving and are thus able to picture these internal dynamics in an objective, vivid, and creative way. With an attitude of curiosity and caring attention, by studying how these subpersonalities express themselves and interact with one another, in imagery, and also by engaging in dialogue with them directly, a process of integration of these energies slowly takes place. The result is an ever increasing sense of personal wellness and psychological wholeness.

Assagioli (1965), the founder of Psychosynthesis, defined subpersonalities as "the functions of an individual in whom various psychological traits are not integrated...One should become clearly aware of these subpersonalities because this evokes a measure of understanding of the meaning of psychosynthesis, and how it is possible to synthesize these subpersonalities into a larger organic whole without repressing any of the useful traits" (p 75).

Rainwater (1989) thought subpersonalities organized themselves around a need within the psyche. She thought the strength of each was the result of the circumstances out of which the need initially was born and believed that each human

being was a manifold mixture of very individual subpersonalities. Rueffler (1995) understood a subpersonality to be a dynamic structure which was once a complex of interconnected energies, thoughts, and behaviors but which, at a certain moment, coalesces into a distinct pattern set. It has its own characteristics, demands its own existence and the fulfillment of its wishes, wants, and needs through the personality (p 19). The kinds of subpersonalities that can exist within any one person can be infinitely variable, including an "inner child", "inner mother", "inner father", "monk", victim", "mystic", "fearful one", etc. (p. 25-26).

The existence of subpersonalities may initially be unconscious in clients. They may not be aware that they have so many different pattern sets within them. Once these patterns are identified through this imaginative process of personification, subpersonality structures are easily recognized and increasingly available to be reflected on, understood, and worked with in the healing process of psychosynthesis. While it is not within the scope of this article to discuss this issue in detail, a moment might be taken to briefly contrast the dynamics of subpersonalities and realities associated with the diagnosis of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (1994), states that "the essential feature of Dissociative Identity Disorder is the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states that recurrently take control of behavior. There is an inability to recall important personal information, the extent of which is too great to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness" (p. 484).

Dummer and Greene (1988) suggest that the difference between clients with subpersonalities and clients who suffer from DID and have "alters" is simply a matter of degree. Alters operate much more autonomously and are

harder to recognize because of an amnesic barrier. Clients with DID are unconscious of their alters as are clients with unconscious patterns called subpersonalities. The difference is that clients with DID ignore symptoms that point to the existence of alters and have learned to ignore the evidence that indicates they exist such as lost time, finding clothing they do not remember buying, being in locations they do not know how they arrived at, and being told they've said things they do not remember. Once a subpersonality is identified, however, clients can recognize they are captured in or acting out these patterns and can consciously work to understand and get the underlying need(s) met.

With this background, let us meet a sex abuse client and listen in on a psychosynthesis counseling session in which active imagination and mental imagery were used to help her work with some of the subpersonalities which exist as a consequence of her childhood abuse.

### Sylvia's background

Sylvia, an unmarried 46 year old health care professional, began working with the counselor in 1991. She was given multiple diagnoses: schizotypal personality disorder, avoidant personality disorder, depersonalization disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, dysthymic disorder, and sexual aversion disorder. The underlying cause of such fragmentation and distress was her experience of pervasive childhood physical and sexual abuse by her father, who impregnated her twice, as well as by uncles, cousins, neighbors and other men in her neighborhood throughout her childhood, until the age of 20.

Sylvia did not suffer from Dissociative Identity Disorder. Her awareness and emotions did, however, cycle through an array of subpersonality configurations which could be

triggered quite quickly. These reactive subpersonalities operated autonomously from one another, outside the control of her will or direction, but about which she was well aware. Just as she had been pervasively sexually victimized by males in her childhood community, as an adult she was victimized by the patterns that got set in place as a consequence and artifact of her abuse. When one was triggered, it would dominate her experience until she withdrew into solitude and recovered from her upsettedness. Through counseling she became aware of the need to understand, integrate and master these dynamics. Prior to the session, Sylvia was asked to write a brief description of each subpersonality with which she wanted to communicate in order to identify and make them clear. Below are her descriptions.

### Orientation to the inner world of Sylvia

The first identifiable subpersonality was Little Shirley, a stalwart, calm little 7 year old, dressed up like little orphan Annie in red--spirited and spunky. Little Shirley was the original figure another counselor had me image when I was very acutely depressed, in an almost psychotic breakdown, during my first week in therapy with Michael. Little Shirley was identified as an externalized inner child with which I could communicate. Since then she has always been present. She shows up in different imagery as a guide. When I visualize her she is always sitting on a couch (spatially the imagery always appears to be on the right side of my brain). She sits on a couch with the second major subpersonality, my Teenager, occasionally comforting the Teenager when she's upset, telling her to be calm. Little Shirley is a tough little cookie, like Shirley Temple, tough but inside a softy, independent but longing for family and connection, a clear thinker.

The second subpersonality was my Teenager. I always see her sitting on a couch, in

the corner, wrapped up in a completely enclosing cover/robe that looks like a blue gown. She has a thin face and a thin but well-formed body. If she opens her gown at all she frequently is bruised. She has bangs, brown hair, and a long ponytail like I did at that age. She is frequently morose, just sitting, waiting for rescue but I suspect actually waiting for her father/abuser/lover. She thinks no one likes her or loves her and is the repository of all my volatile emotions. She thinks she's no good, that she's a terrible person. At various times she has admitted she was pregnant by her father and was happy about that. Occasionally she'll get spunky and want to dance or move but quickly sinks back into lethargy. She is very capable of loving but still just thinks she's a piece of shit. She wants to live out loud, but frequently when she has this thought she sees blood flowing from her vaginal area that flashes in and makes her feel terrible.

The Golden One was first imaged after a terrible conversation in which I disclosed to a brother over the phone what I was doing in counseling. He basically rebuffed any sexual abuse ideas by saying he was crazy at times. He acknowledged that I could be crazy but he didn't believe me. I had a swirling attack of emotions at this conversation. My head actually felt like it was coming apart. I couldn't think of how to get out of it--die or, as Michael taught me, do a spontaneous mandala to try to put in concrete form what the emotion was and try to control the fee\*ling of fragmentation and lack of control.

What I imaged was a tornado and, miraculously, this golden image--built like Raquel Welch--came out of the tornado to comfort me. She has stayed in my imagery since then as a guide, comforter and, I suspect, mother nurturer in the last few years. When I am in touch with her in imagery, she is always calming, warm, available emotionally, and has a very warm presence. Curiously, she has no mouth but I can hear her thoughts and she speaks to me in imagery. She

wants me to be whole and less fragmented. She loves unquestioningly, just loves and encourages me. When I can image her, she's always a positive resource to my brain. I calm down and listen to her. Most of the time she presents like a golden garbed statuesque female, like Raquel, but occasionally I'll see her with angel wings. She occasionally will wrap all of the subpersonalities in her wings for comfort. Her main concern right now is making sure my Teenager feels loved, because primarily if she does feel loved I do not fragment.

Verbatim notes from a one and one-half hour counseling session on November 7, 1996

The counselor's role in this session was to help Sylvia remain focused in the hypnotic state, and to help her subpersonalities and her effectively interact and communicate with one another through mental imagery. The session was a fluid and organic process, a kind of inner family counseling, and represented an expertise born of 22 years' experience by the counselor with the model and methods of Psychosynthesis and with techniques of mental imagery.

M=Michael, the counselor; S= Sylvia, the client. 5 minutes of deep relaxation began the session. Each time "Deep breath" is seen in the transcript below, M has asked S to take one.

M-Why do you want to have an internal dialogue with these subpersonalities?

S-Primarily because I'd like to check in with them and see how they're doing, settling in with my move. When I do the imagery work with you guiding it, it's more focused and productive than when I try to do it on my own at home. (Sylvia had recently moved to a new location from the home she had been living in for 9 years, in the same block as two sisters, which constantly put her at risk of seeing their father when he would visit them).

M-Take a deep breath...Let the imagery

come and tell me how your subpersonalities appear this time.

S-The way I see them, Little Shirley is in the middle of a big couch. The Teenager is in the corner, to Little Shirley's right. The Golden One is standing behind the couch.

M-Deep breath...Let the imagery become clear and tell me what emotional atmosphere seems to surround these figures.

S-Little Shirley is just waiting. She's concerned and worried about the Teenager. She was holding the Teenager's hand, since she (the Teenager) is nervous or apprehensive. The Golden One is standing neutrally in the background.

M-Why do you think she is there?

S-She's there a lot. She's probably there in her comfort mode. If anybody gets upset she can hug them.

M-With which subpersonality would you like to dialogue first?

S-My Teenager is most important. The others are waiting for you to talk to her anyway.

M-They're waiting for to me to talk to her?

S-They're waiting for someone to talk to her. I assume it's you.

M-Aren't we here because *you* want to check with her?

S-Yes, but in my head there's a sense she'd rather talk to you than me.

M-Do you wish me to talk to her?

S-Yes.

M-About what?

S-Probably about the move, what she's feeling, why she's unhappy, why she doesn't want to talk to me too much. Little Shirley scooted to sit right next to her now.

M-Deep breath...We can do this 2 ways. I can dialogue with your subpersonalities or you can.

S-Before I go into a self-critical "I should do it mode", why don't you? If it doesn't work, I will.

M-Deep breath...What are you feeling?

S-She just looked up. She's not saying

anything.

M-What's her mood?

S-Hard to keep her in the picture here. She's tense.

M-Ask her why she is tense?

S-Teenager, why are you tense? What I heard was "I don't know what you're asking and I don't think you like me." She's talking to me not you.

M-Respond to the question of whether or not you like her.

S-Sometimes I like you, sometimes I don't like you. I don't know what Little Shirley would say. I think I love you. I think I feel sorry for you. I think I'm still mad at you.

M-What does she do in imagery?

S-She's just looking down.

M-With what mood?

S-She's sort of unhappy or dejected. Little Shirley looks pissed.

M-At what?

S-She thinks I should tell the teenager I love her outright, instead of being ambivalent here.

M-Ask Little Shirley why she's pissed?

S-Little Shirley, Why are you pissed? What I heard was, "She's already been hurt enough. You don't need to dislike her."

M-Deep breath...What do Little Shirley's words evoke in you?

S-(Shakes her head) Emotionally?

M-Yes.

S-I'm not sure anything.

M-Focus, Sylvia. What is your purpose here?

S-I thought it was to clarify if my Teenager was OK with my move. So far it seems like a "Put my Teenager down" mode.

M-Deep breath...What do you need to ask, say, or do to clarify whether or not she is OK with your move?

S-Just ask her.

M-OK, do it.

S-I hear this voice in my head, like an adult Sylvia, yelling at her and asking how she

could let people do such things to her?

M-Do you want to pursue that?

S-I don't know why it's popped up again. We've done that before.

M-That yelling part of you--why would she be yelling?

S-Because she's blaming my Teenager for stuff that happened and she shouldn't have let it happen and it reflects back to the adult me. It causes the adult me trouble.

M-Deep breath...What's the Golden One doing?

S-She wasn't in the picture. I can make her stand or kneel behind the couch, looking.

M-At what?

S-She's sort of focusing her attention on my Teenager. Leaning on the back of the couch, not exactly studying her, but watching.

M-What seems to be her function in this imagery session?

S-First thing that popped into my head--she's there sort of like a referee but ready to rescue my Teenager if she gets too upset.

M-A referee between whom?

S-Between an adult me I don't actually see there and my Teenager. Not exactly like a referee, but ready to yell at my adult if she can't be more understanding.

M-So Little Shirley and the Golden One are both there as internal supports for the Teenager. Both have the same mission?

S-Right.

M-Knowing that, how does that affect the Teenager?

S-Why did your brain go to that question?

M-Does the question seem peculiar?

S-I wouldn't have logically gone to that, what was the question?

M-How does the support of Little Shirley, and the Golden One, affect the Teenager?

S-I can't tell. Little Shirley is holding her hand but she's still all alone.

M-You mean the Teenager still feels Little Shirley is all alone?

S-Right.

M-Deep breath...Once more, Sylvia, what needs to happen here?

S-I think my adult me needs to stop judging the Teenager.

M-So is that the adult you, or is it the Judger subpersonality inside?

S-I don't know...for sure it's a judger. I don't know how to separate them out because, as I told you before, I don't know who the adult me is. Does that sound coherent?

M-As far as I know, we need to align your subpersonalities with the move and get them to collaborate or cooperate with a new beginning.

S-I think that's probably true.

M-If that were to occur, how would that affect your actual life or functioning?

S-Probably wouldn't be such a drain of energy, worrying about abandoning my father, what my sisters think, all the little spinning shitty family stuff that goes on in my head. In imagery a few minutes ago, Little Shirley's suitcase appeared. She doesn't have a problem moving.

M-And the Golden One?

S-She doesn't have a suitcase. She doesn't own anything, but she's OK moving. I haven't asked her but I assume she is. Golden One, are you OK moving? I heard "Yes, you should have done it a long time ago." Now she's sitting in the breakfast nook in my new house.

M-Deep breath...What remains to be done right now?

S-I guess to find out from my Teenager how she feels about moving.

M-Ask her.

S-I already got part of an answer and didn't like it. "I'm OK with moving, I just don't want you to hate me for loving my father."

M-Your response?

S-I don't think I have one.

M-Your emotion or feeling, then?

S-A little piece feels like crying but I don't know if it's my Teenager or not. It looks like she's crying.

Teenager--I want you to move, it's just hard to accept all the shit with the father, and it's

hard not to place blame somewhere.

M-Deep breath...

S-My Teenager asked why I had to blame her, and I don't have a good answer. Other little phrases come up--"because if I don't blame her, then I have to acknowledge my father is a piece of shit...and a terrible man". I also heard, "then I'd have to be angry at him."

M-Well, there's more work to be done. Work resolving self-blame and directing anger appropriately. But for now...what do we have?

S-I just told my Teenager I want her to come along, to grow up and be happy. That's it (cries).

M-Deep breath...Feel the feeling.

S-I feel angry at me because I'm stupid.

M-For wanting the Teenager to grow up and be happy?

S-And because I still have all this ambivalence toward my father.

M-So now we're down to the nub of it, Sylvia. Why did your move?

S -To get away from my father and be a little more free of all of the garbage in my head.

M-So you moved with the best intentions for all of your subpersonalities?

S-That's true.

M-Isn't this an act both of independence and self-love?

S-Are self-love and self-protection the same thing? I don't like the internal part that would rather be dead than hurt or blame my father. Is that irrational?

M-Isn't your move an act both of independence and self-love?

S-Little Shirley stood up and said, "say yes, Sylvia." OK, it probably is.

M-Is what? Own it. Claim it.

S-My move is probably an act of independence and self-love. My move is an act of independence, self-love, and self-protection. Is that OK?

M-It's true. You used to have PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms whenever you saw your father or his truck in the driveway of

a sister or even on the road.

S-I still do.

M-Sylvia, let's end this with some sort of imagery that seems real, describes the gang somehow together on this.

S-I already had that. My adult, who looks like a Doctor, is hugging the Teenager, acknowledging she's glad she's coming and saying it's OK she's still ambivalent. The Golden One is sitting next to the Teenager--a yellow circle between the Teenager and the couch, like a golden blanket around the Teenager. Little Shirley is on her knees, kneeling next the Teenager with her arms around her, hugging her.

M-And you're feeling what at the end?

S-Gumby and Pokey (cartoon characters who visit in her imagery) are on the couch, like little toys. If I'd stop blaming my Teenager for things about which she had no control, I'd be a much happier person. So I'm annoyed at me. Instead of feeling compassion, I feel confusion, but some part has decided to forgive her, to include her in.

M-Deep breath...What's the global value of this imagery work, do you think?

S-It's going to sound weird. I do have a tendency to see my subpersonalities and only see the negative stuff I lay on them rather than the positive stuff that binds them. I probably do love my Teenager. There's more cohesiveness among my subpersonalities now than when I don't talk to them. My annoyance is misdirected toward me rather than toward my father. So, through imagery, I see how much more integrated I actually am than when I'm only thinking about all this. What's in your head, Michael?

M-You're taking the time to go within, to access and acknowledge the points of separation inside you, to let them dialogue honestly and come to consensus. Nothing is hidden, so nothing is likely to blow up inside you as you make the transition to your new home. Homework: draw this final image and write a concluding poem that constellates the value of the work.

Conclusion

In this session, a technique called active imagination was used to help the client connect with an array of conflicting attitudes, perceptions, and emotions personified in the clearly identified subpersonalities of Little Shirley, the Teenager, and the Golden One, and an unseen but heard adult Sylvia subpersonality. The process of psychosynthesis was directed toward “the disintegration of the harmful elements or complexes”--the judgmental adult Sylvia subpersonality; the pissed and protective Little Shirley; the nervous, apprehensive, unhappy, and dejected Teenager--and “the control and utilization of the energies thus set free”--toward independence, self-love and self-protection (Assagioli, p. 23). As a result of the session, according to Sylvia, there was more cohesiveness among her subpersonalities and an awareness that she was much more integrated at the end than when she began. The session showed how creative, powerful, and inspiring the work with imagination was for this adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Of what practical use was the session? Without ambivalence or internal conflict, Sylvia moved into the new home she had built. Her PTSD symptoms diminished as a function of distance from and lack of contact with her family members. And, shortly after her move, she interviewed for and got a more satisfying job than the one she had previously held.

An American Quilt by "Sylvia", 11/12/96

Pick up the threads,  
The fragments of a life,  
Feel the need to know that the damage is not  
fixed, not immutable,  
Like the shattered fragments of a mirror,  
Fixed in my mind previously as the true picture of  
my life.  
This is the same idea but with a different feel.  
I picture an old-fashioned American quilt.  
The different fragments are separate and distinct,

But held up by common threads.

My life is like this quilt.  
At the end of my life,  
When all is said and done,  
I'd like to look back and say, yes, it was hard,  
All the pieces of myself were scattered,  
But with the help and love of my higher self,  
friends, counselor and mentor,  
Important pieces of me have been found and  
identified,  
And with slow, careful planning and work,  
Meshed to form a whole that is able to live,  
To function, have a purpose,  
And be secure that I belong.

Like the squares on a quilt are my pieces--  
My Teenager, so sad, so morose, so needing  
attention and love.  
Willing to bear the guilt for all others' sins.  
She's at the heart of the quilt--volatile, emotional,  
The most damaged piece, the most needy,  
But central to the whole, the part to value the most  
Because she is the repository of my emotional  
self,  
My ability to love and share myself.

My cute little Shirley, the guide, directing the  
pieces,  
Placing the pattern here and there into the right  
places,  
Guiding the work, pointing the way like a little  
general in charge.  
She has a clearer image in her young head of right  
and wrong.  
She has a clarity in her when she views the past,  
present and future,  
And she had the original need to guide toward  
wholeness.

My Golden One, hovering like an angel spirit over  
all,  
Knowing that wholeness is to me what a quilt  
represents:  
Warmth, life, peace, comfort and healing love.



I, now, as the adult, represent the frame for the quilt,  
Aware that by my perseverance, work, and the need to survive,  
I will have to accomplish the reintegration of me--  
all my parts,  
Just like the seamstress pulls together the pieces of the quilt.

I hope I am up to the task, as difficult and long as the journey is,  
Has been, and will continue to be.  
I hope that in the end, looking back,  
I can wrap myself in the comfort of my own quilt,  
And with all my pieces together,  
Realize the sense of wholeness and completeness  
I seek  
Has been found.

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