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# Healing Complex Trauma, Part I: The Path to Self-Awareness

January 19, 2016 • By [Jeremy McAllister, MA, LPCI](#), GoodTherapy.org Topic Expert Contributor



**Editor's note:** *This article represents the first of two parts. The second part, which appears [here](#), moves from awareness to attuned self-compassion, then from compassion to integration.*

*"Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself (I am large, I contain*

*multitudes)." —Walt Whitman, Song of Myself*

Those who [seek therapy](#) for complex trauma often do so unknowingly. They may first notice [depression](#) or [anxiety](#), numbness, spaciness, lack of motivation, or a failure to connect or thrive. They might simply feel stuck, uncomfortable, or confused, either as an individual or in relationship.

Complex [trauma](#) refers to the way we organize our "Self" in the wake of ongoing or repeated exposure to interpersonal disconnections (sometimes overt abuse, oppression, or neglect; sometimes simple, unintended, unavoidable misattunements). At its base, complex trauma represents an ability to exist in pieces—an adaptive preservation of Self at any cost. While initially adaptive, this separation from parts of Self sometimes brings confusion in all relationships—internal versus external, Self versus Other, "what should be" versus "what is," present versus past or future.

We stop cooperating with our "selves."

Internally, we move from equality to hierarchy, subjugating the very parts we want to protect.

We adapt to each imperfect system (i.e., [family of origin](#)) by internalizing the system rulebook and policing ourselves to enforce the system rules. To maintain relationship with caregivers and preserve Self long enough to survive childhood, we contain parts that do not "fit" the system. We disintegrate. Self organizes against Self, and we become walking dualities: the containing versus the contained, the rigid head versus the chaotic body. It happens automatically to all of us, with extreme reactions happening in extreme adaptations.

## Extreme Adaptation:

This is the complexity of complex trauma: “missing experience” creates an inability to heal, yearning for unmet needs while protecting against them. Just as we internally separated parts that seek connection from parts that seek safety, we push externally against whatever we need most in life because there is no agreement.

At some level, we wait for the elusive experiential safety that will release us and reverse the process, bringing everything together.

## From Disconnection to Autopilot

When ongoing threat remains familiar—when it lives within our homes, permeates the atmosphere, and becomes just another layer of everyday experience—we adapt to it. Assuming we come into the world with particular needs and dispositions, in the tunnel of childhood we often temper parts of Self. We fold and contain in order to fit.

Even as infants, we track and respond to nonverbal cues of caregivers. We see their responses to various [emotions](#), and we learn to contain whatever [triggers](#)

them to fight, flee, or disappear. Often, this includes either particular emotions or emotions in general. We

adapt to their system and separate from our bodies to avoid exiled, “unwanted” parts of Self. In this, we also separate from sensory information, becoming insulated against new input and trapped in the adaptation.

In order to adapt to the system, we become the system. We absorb and recreate our caregivers internally. If caregivers judged us, we judge ourselves. If they dismissed or diminished us, we do the same. If they did not know how to see us, we do not know how to see ourselves; we struggle to notice or articulate internal events. We often go into life not knowing how to regulate our bodies (or how to notice basic signals such as hunger). And while the dis-integration proves successfully adaptive, there remains a subtle knowing: a felt experience of disconnection, a subtle background noise, a gentle reminder that some part of us yearns to be remembered and reunited once safety is established.

These are our fragmented lives: parts of Self, surviving independently by turning against other parts Self, enforcing an embargo on that which would heal.

## From Autopilot to Self-Awareness

## FROM AUTOPILOT TO SELF-AWARENESS

This is just a lens, a way to begin observing our own internal conflicts, differentiating one side from another: one part judging, one part receiving that judgment and feeling it.

This automated containment system protects us from punishment (fight) or [abandonment](#) (flight) of others within our original family system(s).

Internal conflicts can look like this:

- "I want to be seen" might be met internally with "You're too needy. You're flawed. If you let others see, they will leave you."
- "I want to be big" might be met with "You'll become a target. Stay small to stay safe."
- "I want to express my energy" might be met with "You're too exuberant. You show too much. Stay still or they'll leave you."
- "I feel angry" might be met with "[Anger](#) is not allowed. If you show it, they will leave."
- "I feel [sad](#)" might be met with "You're weak. If you show it, they will hurt you."
- "I want to be taken care of" might become "Nobody will take care of you. You are alone. Do it yourself."
- "I want to experience safety with others" might become "Nobody feels safe with you. You will be alone forever. If you want people nearby, you have to keep a safe distance to avoid triggering them."

Sometimes the parts we try hardest to contain become most visible to others. We try to hide emotion, and it becomes bigger and louder. This is how we polarize. The containing side attempts to diminish because the other side is amplifying, because it is trapped and simply wants attention. The contained side amplifies because the containing part is attempting to diminish. And so goes the dance.

We land, sometimes, on either side of the conflict. Sometimes we're the contained part, feeling our own unmet needs on top of feeling trapped. Other times we are that containing part, wanting to survive and meet needs, knowing that if the contained part escapes we will face punishment or abandonment. No matter where our consciousness lands, the other side becomes the villain.

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