

Trauma and PTSD: The Theory of Structural Dissociation and Defensive Mechanisms

Trauma impacts people in profound and complex ways, which requires a particular therapeutic approach. The theory of structural dissociation offers a framework for understanding how trauma can lead to a psychological split, creating distinct parts within an individual that respond differently to traumatic experiences.

The left hemisphere of the brain, associated with daily functioning and routine activities, enables people to continue on with their lives even after a traumatic event. Conversely, the right hemisphere holds non-verbal memories of the trauma and is always on the alert for potential threats. Viewing the left hemisphere as the “going on with normal life” part, and the right hemisphere as the “traumatized” part, can aid clients in relating to their trauma.

Chronic trauma, often resulting from prolonged exposure to threats, leads to further psychological splitting. The “going on with normal life” part coexists with the “traumatized” part, which further divides into subparts driven by distinct responses such as fight, flight, fear, total submission, and cries for help. These subparts can disrupt daily life, leading to complex PTSD or dissociative disorders.

Understanding such parts as defensive approaches provides insight into their functions and impacts. The “going on with normal life” part focuses on survival, often avoiding discussions of trauma for fear of being overwhelmed. The “cry for help” part displays intense distress, aiming to elicit sympathy and assistance. The “submit” part, usually the least problematic, shows feelings of hopelessness and a need to appease, while the “fear” part serves as a warning system. The “flight” part engages in escape behaviors, and the “fight” part aims to establish control, sometimes through aggressive behaviors.

Key Points

- The theory of structural dissociation provides a framework for understanding the psychological split caused by trauma, dividing the brain into parts that respond differently to traumatic experiences.
- Chronic trauma leads to further psychological splitting, resulting in subparts driven by distinct responses that can disrupt daily life.
- Recognizing these parts as defensive approaches offers insights into their functions and impacts, aiding in the therapeutic process.