

Helping Clients Identify and Meet Their Needs: The Metaphor of the Attuned Self-Parent

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IF YOU LISTEN
TO YOUR BODY WHEN
IT WHISPERS, YOU WON'T
HAVE TO HEAR IT
SCREAM.



What is attunement?

- Cueing in to what you are feeling
- And using that information to identify and meet your needs
 - Physical and emotional needs (including the need for things like connection, purpose and meaning, etc.)

Feelings as signals arising from the body

- Hunger/satiety, fatigue, pain etc.
- But also complex sets - Fuzzy collections of experiences that we identify as emotions
 - loneliness, fear, guilt, shame, anger, sadness, boredom, despair, longing, etc.

Signals arising from the body

- Not (just) something that derails us
- Communication from the body

Signals arising from the body

- Rather than something to “tolerate,” signals are valuable/useful: **an ally**
- Relationship is a **dance** (fluid, dynamic, in sync)

Pre or early verbal

- Respond intuitively
- Barring an aberrant learning history, our actions are in sync
- (we are flexible and responsive)



Eat when hungry



Sleep when tired



Seek comfort when sad

ENTER LANGUAGE

Learning to label internal experiences

- Individuals in our environment observe public accompaniments to our private events (Skinner '45)
- RFT expands with derived relations
- Labels relate to other learning about what to do when one feels a particular way



“Are you tired?
You look like you might be tired”

Tired feels like...

rest

go to bed earlier

do less





“Are you sad?
You look like you might be sad”

Sad feels like...

acknowledge
seek support
build meaning



Labels also help us meet our interpersonal needs

- Communicate and connect to others



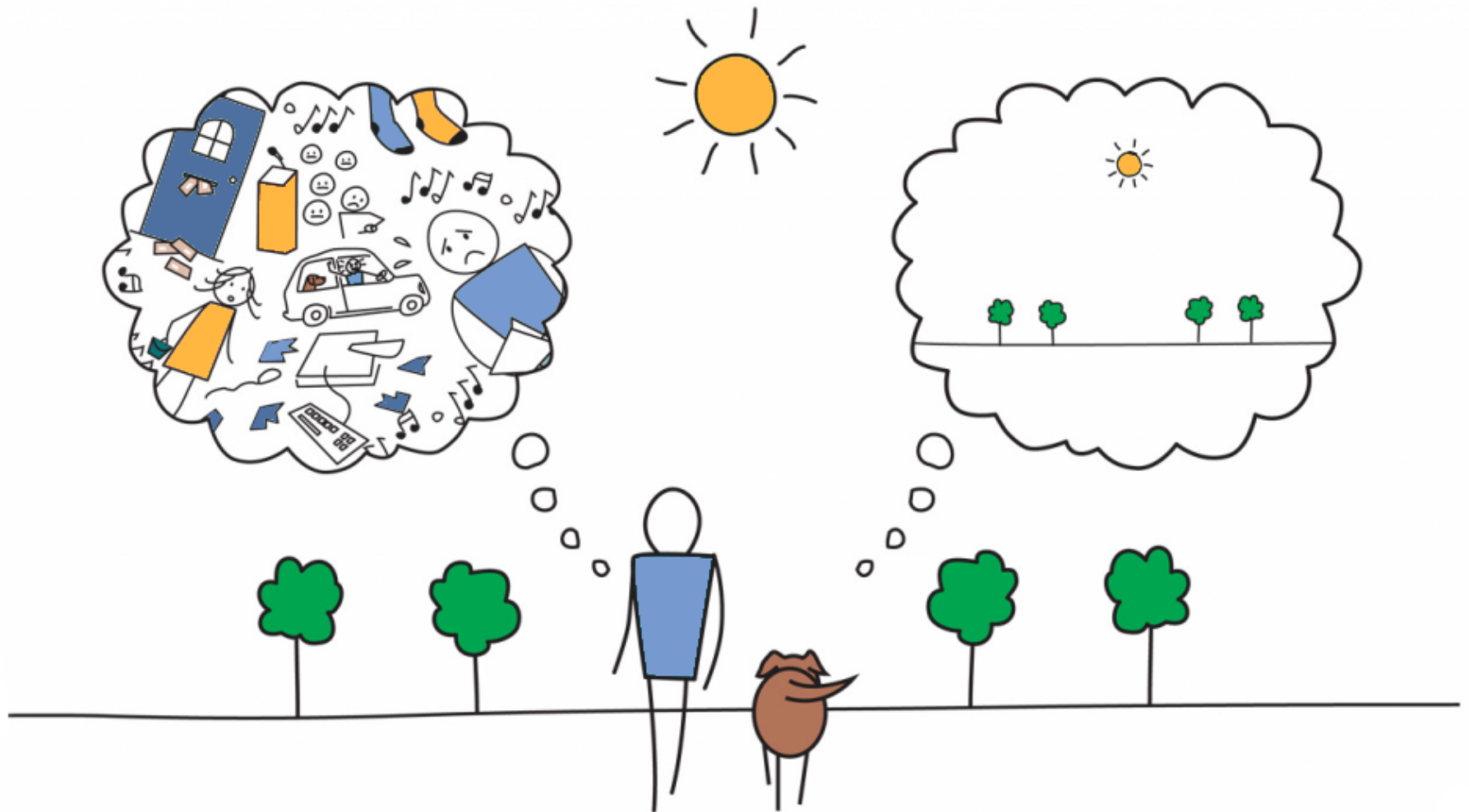
How we get out of sync (aberrant learning history)

- E.g. Overcontrolled environment, confused perspective, neglect
 - Responses mismatched to needs
 - Lack of language for emotions or knowledge re: what signals mean
 - Lack of knowledge re: adaptive responses
- E.g. Accidental discovery of a maladaptive response

How we get out of sync
(Just language will do it)



MindFull vs Mindful

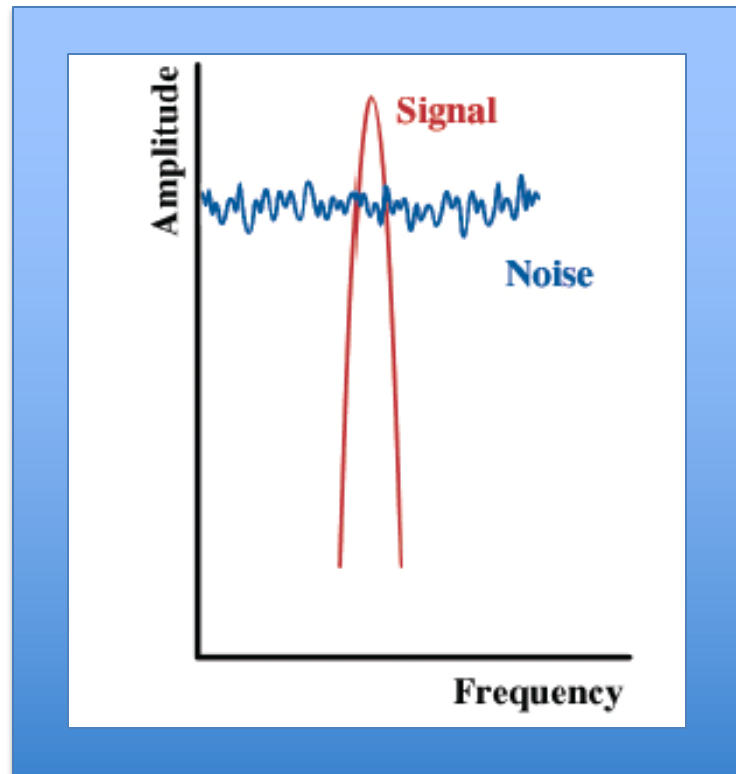


what the hell is that?



oh,
just my mind

Signal to noise



Judgment/Evaluation (comparative relations)

- Judge signals as bad or wrong (need to avoid/ escape, suppress, impulsive reactivity)
- Fuse with rules re: what one "should" or "shouldn't" feel



Mis-attunement

- Behavioral excesses or deficits
 - Doing something too much or too little
 - E.g. eating, sleeping, resting, working, asking for help, seeking support or comfort
- Behavior that is rigid or situationally insensitive
 - Always, must, just

- Feels of struggle, suffering, lifeless

Attunement

(psychological flexibility)

- Open and aware
- Observing experiences as they arise in the here and now
- Using that information to meet our physical and emotional needs
- Informed by (and informing) our personal values

Context matters

- The effective response is contextually determined
 - Example of fatigue
 - Rest vs. Move
 - Example of loneliness
 - In the absence of relationships
 - In the presence of relationships

Responding to signals

- There are not always action implications.
 - Sometimes feelings just want to be heard, acknowledged.
- Taking action is not so the feeling will go away (though it might).

Take Inventory

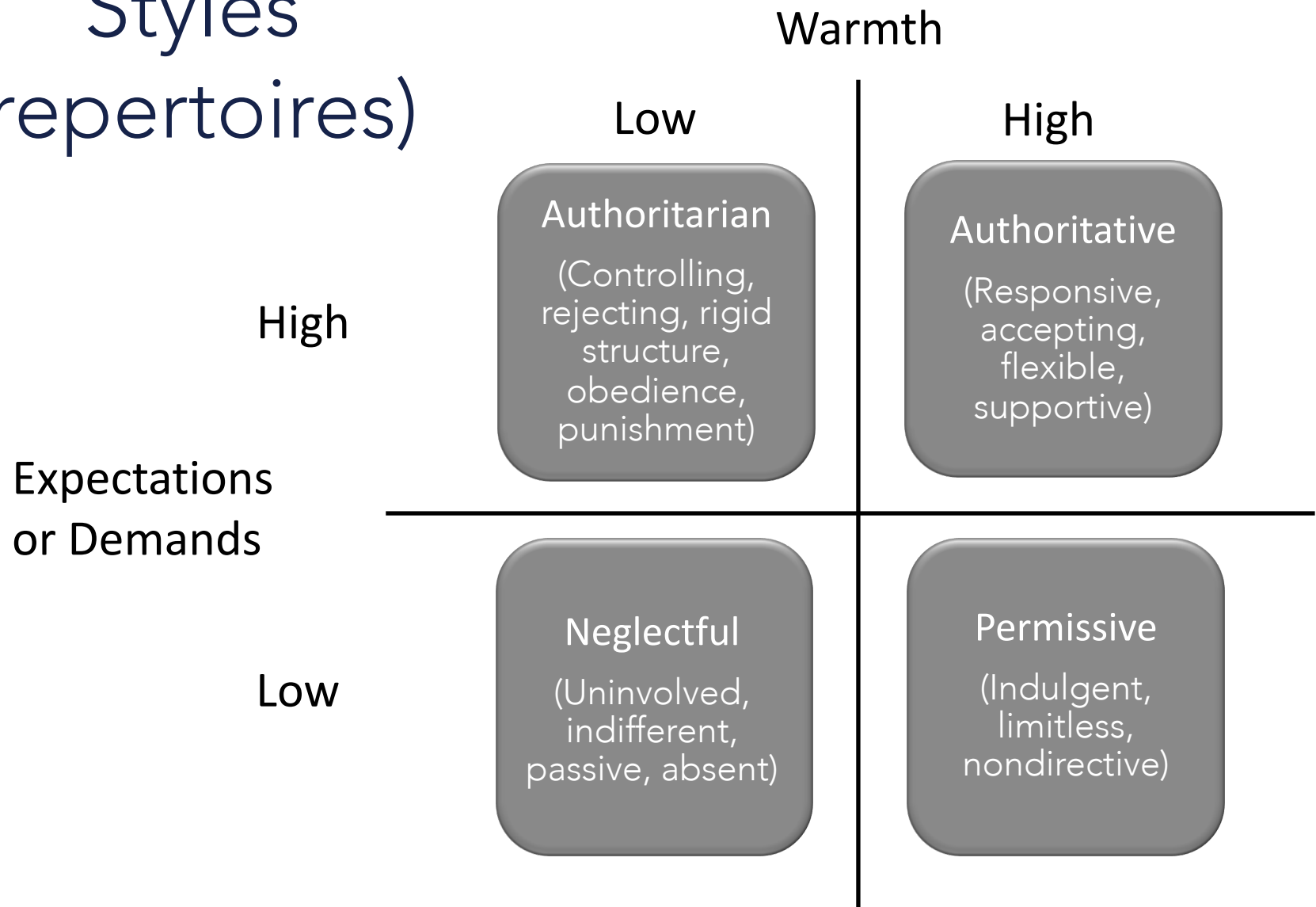
EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE



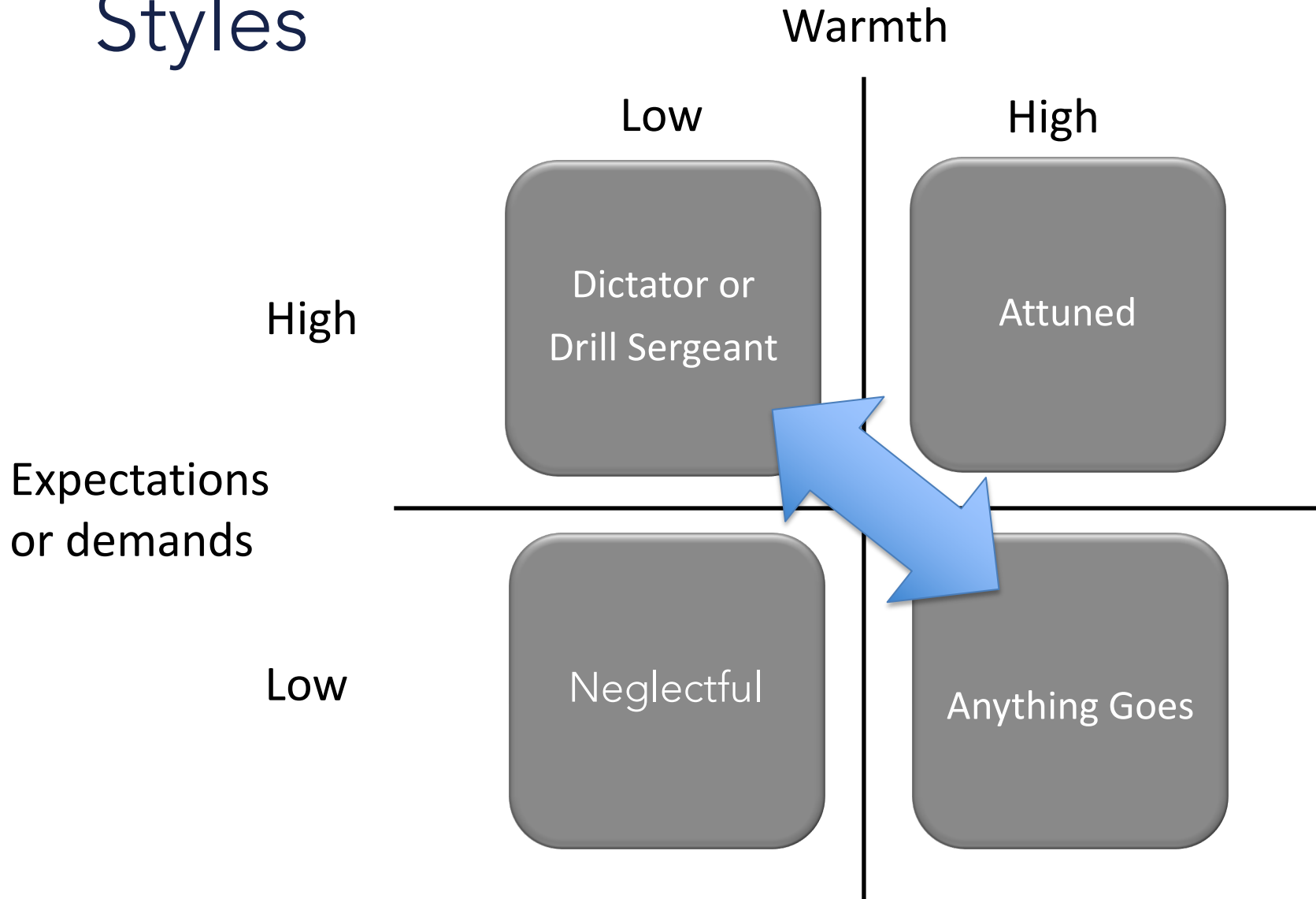
Learning to self-parent

- When we are younger, our caregivers have a major role in meeting our needs
- As we mature, we assume increasing responsibility for ourselves and our actions
- We essentially “parent” ourselves
- Adopting a general strategy (or approach) to managing ourselves and our behavior

Parenting Styles (repertoires)



Parenting Styles



A clinical example

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Intervention

- It seems to me this situation is like a neglected or abused child... not only neglecting your needs but berating yourself for having them.
- Rather than eat when you are hungry, and rest when you are tired, or find comfort when you are sad.. You tell yourself that you are pathetic, lazy, a waste of space...Not only neglecting your needs but berating yourself for having them.
- You know, when we are younger, our caregivers have a significant role in managing our behavior and meeting our needs... as we mature, this becomes our job. We become our own (self)parent....
- Imagine saying that to yourself as a child...
- I guess my question is... what kind of parent do you want to be...?
- What would it be like to choose to be a kind, responsive self-parent...
- In each moment...choosing kindness (not permissiveness), but kindness...

Therapist (T): You have been doing exactly what society says will lead to a good life: “Work hard, really hard. Be the best. Be perfect. Your needs don’t matter... In fact, if you need to rest that just means you are lazy, weak... pathetic...” And I hear you saying that in many ways, this has been working... You make the marks. You lose weight, you feel like you look the part... (pause) It makes sense that you keep doing it... (pause) It’s an incredibly human thing to do.

Client (C): Everyone complimented me when I first started losing weight... (pause)

T: and yet...

C: (knowing sigh)

T: ...Sometimes you wish that you could die... (pause)

C: It’s tedious, you know... Everything must be counted. Accounted for. And nothing is ever good enough really. I used to be able to stop at eight miles... now I have to do sixteen or I feel terrible about myself...

T: The demands are unrelenting... (pause) And never in kindness. Never very nice to yourself.

C: (makes a face; communicating distrust in being kind to oneself)

T: In some ways, managing yourself and your behavior is like parenting...you are deciding what limits to set for yourself...how you will treat yourself, how you will respond to your needs. There are lots of different ways to parent... (takes out paper and creates the four quadrants of the intersection between high and low demands and warmth and gives overview of parenting styles) It seems that you are like an authoritarian self-parent...beating yourself into submission... I wonder if you can imagine treating a younger version of yourself, or a young person you know, in this way... Like: “I don’t care if you are tired or hungry. Run. Keep Running. Why are you so lazy... You are a waste of space...”

C: (quietly reflective, long pause)

T: What if there is another way? Like, could you imagine...being another kind of parent to yourself... as a choice?

C: I have no idea how to do that...and I am afraid that I would just eat whatever...and...

T: I hear you, it’s scary...and completely different than the way in which you have been operating. It brings up fear. A lot of fear. And thoughts that you can’t be controlled without the harsh rules and clamping down...

- Flexible perspective taking – essential for self-compassion

- Putting the individual in a frame of coordination with a child cues a behavioral repertoire of warmth, kindness, compassion; caretaker cues response-ability



Me

Protect

Care for

Love



- The psychological functions of somatic-affective signals are also transformed
 - Appetitive; useful, an ally
 - Guests in your home
 - Messengers; the body, a dance partner

Other clinical examples

- Excessive productivity / over devotion to work
- Always putting others first
- Overconsumption (of Netflix, food, alcohol etc.)
- Endless procrastination

What kind of self-parent are you?

- What is your general strategy (or approach) to managing yourself or your own behavior?
- You might consider different domains
 - Eating? Exercise? Work or Play?

In what way have you been
...A neglectful self-parent?
...A rigid or punitive self-parent?
...A permissive parent?

- How do you (self)parent when it comes to painful emotions?
 - Do you neglect or ignore your feelings?
 - Are you rejecting, rigid or punitive?
 - Are you permissive or without boundaries when upset?

- How do you talk to yourself about unsavory behaviors or perceived mistakes?
- Are you punishing and punitive?
Permissive? Neglectful (of the problem)?
Or compassionate and kind?

I don't love myself, I don't deserve it and other objections

- This is about behaving (not believing)
- It's a choice to be kind, compassionate, attuned self-parent
 - Because it matters to you
 - Or because of what it gives access to what matters to you
- The side effects of choosing

- Also increases self-knowledge (I come to know myself more deeply),
- Safety and self-trust (I can trust myself to take care of me)

Choosing

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

Shaping elements of attunement

- Noticing / this-here-now
- Labeling internal experience (e.g., naming, observing changes in “volume”)
- Identifying situation and historical context in which feelings arise
- Generating hypotheses about unmet needs
- Facilitating willingness to experiment with behaviors to meet those needs

Therapist Skills Practice...

- Practice identifying an unmet need.
 - What is the feeling and the (historical and situational) context in which it emerges. What does this say about what the client needs?
- Practice providing a self-parenting frame
 - Orienting to the parenting “styles” (as a general approach to managing oneself and one’s own behavior) and situating the client’s behavior within this framework
- Practice using metaphor to alter the psychological functions of somatic-affective signals and meeting needs (e.g. feelings as guests, messengers) (e.g., the body as an ally or a dance partner) (e.g., the client as a parent/caretaker)
- Practice creating a context for “choosing” to be a kind, responsive self-parent

I persistently ask

- What does this tell you about what you need? What do you think you need or needed (in that moment)?
- What does this feeling tell you about what is important to you (or what you care about)?

Values

- Attunement helps individuals identify what they care about or what is personally meaningful.
- Caring for one's physical and emotional needs, makes it possible to engage in valued life domains.

Contact with the Present Moment


Not aware of internal experiences as they occur; not connected to body.

Experiential Avoidance

Avoidance or escape from feelings; intolerance, suppression.

Values

Not connected to felt experience, it is difficult to know what matters.



Psychological Inflexibility

Defusion

Fusion with rules (re: what should and should not feel). Judgments or evaluations (e.g., Feelings are out of control, irrelevant, a nuisance, a bother, derail you)

Committed Action

Behavioral excesses or deficits. Actions are rigid or impulsive, and not dynamically matched to needs, including the need for meaning or purpose.

Observer Self

Not knowing what you are feeling moment to moment or what you need.

Thank you!

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