

The Selves behind the Self:

Trauma and Dissociation

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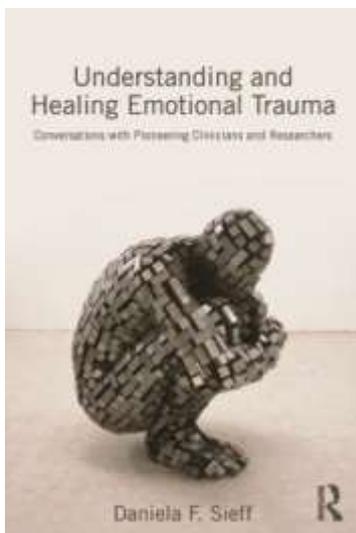
Chapter Summary

Under normal circumstances, we take experiences that we deem to be significant to ourselves. As a result we feel they are our experiences, and weave them into our life story. However, if we are chronically abused or neglected during childhood, or if we suffer overwhelming pain, we may be unable to integrate our experiences. As a result we become dissociated: our personality divides into two or more parts, each of which has its own feelings, reality, purpose and identity.

Some of these parts are fixed in the painful experiences. The traumatic past is their enduring reality and it frames their present. They are metaphorically called 'emotional parts of the personality'. Their purpose is to find safety, and they are typically guided by the mammalian defence system (freeze, fight, flight or collapse), or by the attachment system (which seeks protection from others).

Other parts are distanced from the painful experiences. The traumatic past has little, or perhaps no, place in their reality. They are metaphorically called 'apparently normal parts of the personality'. Their purpose is to navigate daily life. Because it is hard to do this when emotional parts are activated, apparently normal parts try to shut out emotional parts. They are rarely completely successful – the emotional parts, and the traumatic memories they encompass, intrude on daily life through highly charged flashbacks, nightmares and inner voices, behaviours, beliefs and bodily symptoms.

Healing requires the integration of trauma: apparently normal parts must realise that the traumatising events are part of their history, whereas emotional parts must realise that the traumatising events are over. Only then can the divided parts be integrated into a cohesive and coherent personality. It is a challenging process which requires patience, compassion and perseverance.



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