

Self, Other and the We

Cathie O'Brien uses *Whole Brain Training* (which includes practical and experiential activities) with young people who have suffered interpersonal trauma – in an intervention based on Gestalt therapy theory that focuses on sensation, the adaptive function, and the whole system

Whole Brain Training is both psychoeducational and experiential, but for the purpose of this article I will only concentrate on the experiential aspects of Self, Other and The We, as this theme threads throughout the whole training. The article describes, at a much deeper level, the contact boundary work and whole-service approach I wrote about in my last article, called *Disorganised and in Care*,¹ and is very adaptable to young people, parents and professionals, as well as both mainstream schools and specialist schools who work with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD).

Whole Brain Training uses Gestalt therapy theory as a framework – in particular the Gestalt Cycle of Awareness.¹ It involves the whole staff team and young people learning together, developing a common language and experience. I particularly concentrate on the sensation stage of the cycle, using all manner of sensory games and creative experiences. The staff team is very important, providing the ground for experience, safety, consistency and containment. This means that the young people can engage without worrying about managing the environment, and that all can learn and gain experience in a fun way. The staff team becomes an emotion-regulating collective, allowing the young people to relax and settle into the experience. The simplified Gestalt Cycle of Awareness¹ is used at every session, and as the young people become more adept at recognising and interpreting their sensations, they are more able to recognise emotional feelings and how they creatively adjust (adaptive function) in relation to them.

The main focus is to enable the whole system to be able to understand the interaction between thoughts, feelings and the nervous system and how to be in

relationship between self and other with frightened and frightening young people. I keep the language around this very simple in order to develop a common language and join rather than alienate young people, families and professionals.

The training is delivered in true Gestalt style, where individuals learn through experience rather than by rote, engaging the whole brain. This is really important where there are blocks to learning, and especially important for young people who have suffered interpersonal trauma, who may be kinaesthetic or visual spatial learners, where non-verbal communication is particularly important.

Self (sensation)

In Gestalt therapy, we call this 'phenomenology'; this is closely linked to mindfulness, yoga and Buddhist practice, in particular being in the present moment, without judgment, and with moment-to-moment awareness of physical sensation – moving between internal and external stimuli. This stage of the brain training is very important and can be fun. It needs to be graded to the group's individual abilities and the members' tolerance for this kind of activity – again bringing this into awareness. Awareness is the key, rather than achievements; becoming aware of sensations, what they mean, and tolerance of these sensations, is the only goal. It is important to be aware of how this type of exercise may affect individuals differently and to note anyone who may become dissociated or hyper- or hypovigilant, as this is the opposite of awareness, and they might lack tolerance for this kind of activity. There are many resources with ideas for sensory games, and these can include colouring, finger paints, bubbles, play dough, tasting, smelly materials, different textures, messy play, cooking etc. It is useful to develop sensory games over a number of sessions, helping the group to map out these sensations and how they adapt to them on the cycle of awareness. For instance, we could use play dough as a sensory experience. I would encourage the young people to be aware of their first sensations, which might be feelings of anticipation, excitement, smell or touch. I would follow this with curiosity about how and where they experience these sensations. So

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rather than just naming them, which prevents curiosity, to pretend there is no final name to the experience, encouraging further exploration of the sensation. This has to be graded to the individual's tolerance for this kind of activity, with no overinvestment on my part. It is more often than not a fast-moving, non-verbal process, with the young people enjoying touching, feeling, smelling and playing, with just a moment, even seconds, spent on describing the physical sensation or how they felt. Each week builds upon this, and the young people take in far more than adults are aware of. They regularly surprise me. Play and fun are important for young people who struggle to regulate emotion, and are less intrusive than phenomenological enquiry, which, generally, can feel very intrusive to them.

Other (the adaptive function)

While developing awareness from a sensory perspective, it is important to build in how we *adapt* to our sensory experiences. As I said above, if someone becomes dissociated or withdrawn, this could be their adaptive function, so helping young people to understand that this is how they adapt to the other/environment can be very empowering. Dissociation per se could be due to a number of factors, but what we don't want to do during these sessions is reinforce unhelpful adaptive functions because we haven't realised our impact on the young people.

To enhance this experience, I set up further exercises to increase their understanding of how they adjust to others. I do this through games, usually in pairs, where one of them may be blindfolded (or not) and they take it in turns to experience different sensory objects. Again, this is graded to their tolerance for this, and the focus is to notice how they adapt to their sensations in relation to the other. Most young people are very surprised at all the different ways in which they adapt. They may notice that they feel more excitable, uncomfortable, and how they may laugh, look away,

shake their legs etc, and I encourage them to be aware of what they want to do – often they want to move away. This awareness alone is very empowering and doesn't need any lectures on how to manage their behaviour.

Another useful exercise is moving, in pairs, between closeness and distance, playing around with the sensations created by this movement, what it feels like and when the sensations change ie if stood face to face, to the side, back to back or further away; again paying attention to the self-sensations and adjustments in relation to the other and the whole environment.

The We (the whole system)

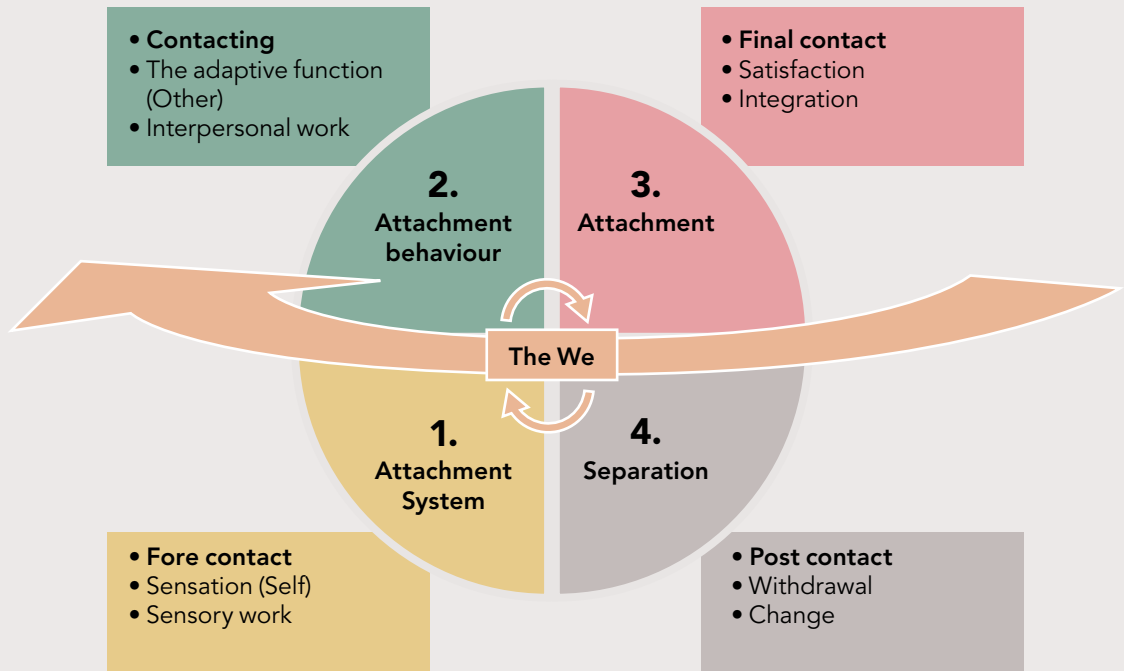
'The We' can help towards the integration of the young person's whole brain, firstly through psychoeducational work, learning about their whole brain and the different roles they play,² and, secondly, through the whole system becoming 'The Other', which can enable emotion regulation when 'The We' sing from the same hymn sheet; it can allow reflection on parallel processes and splits within the systems – which may mirror splits within the child's psychological state; and aid development of joint safeguarding strategies.

When working with adults, I build on the self/other sessions shown above and teach them about Bowlby's control systems theory,³ and that the young person's central nervous system is like a central heating system and that their thermostat is broken – not able to adjust easily to the temperature/environment. That they need to become the thermostat, turning it up or down in relation to the young person's hyper- or hypovigilant states. Here, I use Siegel's window of tolerance⁴ as a teaching aid. I teach adults to use their bodies as the thermostat, not just verbal communication, either raising or lowering their energy or gauging the other's tolerance for closeness and distance. Some people probably wonder what this is all about – 'just feel the closeness/attachment,' – but here I am describing extremely vulnerable young people who can do serious harm to themselves or to others, often gaining a criminal record or being vulnerable to exploitation, as they struggle to manage the relationship dance between their families and the professionals in their lives, often re-enacting old traumas that are out of awareness.

If a young person is trying to control me, I remain in 'I'. I feel my sense of difference and I own my actions and decisions. For example, a young person may try to get me to do something in a very threatening manner. I might say, while remaining in my body and grounded through my feet, 'I have chosen to help you because I like helping you and want to help you, but I don't have to help you, I do it because I want to.' There is a kind of matching of energy, which Stern⁵ describes as affect attunement, an emotional resonance that is beyond participating in another's subjective state, such as empathy, mirroring, imitation and echoing, as it involves changing the other by providing something the other did not have before, or, if it was present, by consolidating it.

Figure 1

Integration of the Gestalt process of contact and withdrawal/self-regulation with the process of attachment and separation/relationship, showing interventions that can promote/support contact



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I am often intrigued by the physical sensation I feel as I use my body to communicate in this way, which is the powerful interaction between self/other/environment/field; I feel a kind of expanded self, an energy field that's vibrating or like the opposite side of two magnets being forced to touch. There is also an intention that I am not going to be forced to do something, which isn't a 'pit bull' determination, as I am not forcing them to do anything either; all are free – a kind of psychokinesis, affecting things outside of oneself just by thought alone, which apparently can only occur when one isn't trying, isn't ego involved and is light-hearted within one's self.⁶ There is no ego-driven fearful outcome, there is just intention. Equine therapists/leaders,⁷ as well as athletes and other performers, really understand and embody this concept. The young person is generally accepting of this interaction with me and shows this by letting go of their desired outcome or getting on with what they were trying to force me to do, themselves – they have been seen and this is a felt sense.

This is translated into 'The We,' where all those involved with a young person who is putting themselves at serious risk develop the Self/Other work described above. The young people were the first to call this process 'The We'. They would jokingly

call it the 'The Bloody We', because the professionals in their lives talked as one, rather than abdicating responsibility and telling the child to go and ask someone else. Everyone took responsibility for decisions and would say 'we' have agreed this or that. It is really important that organisations who work with interpersonal trauma develop this Self/Other work, and provide a consistent, containing and predictable environment, as well as an environment that has focus without being overinvested in the outcome – being while doing. In Gestalt therapy and organisational consultancy, this is described as the process of presence.⁸ This isn't presence in terms of charisma, which involves high energy; it is quite the opposite. It is having responsibility for the self, holding a porous boundary in relation to the other, and being fully engaged with the situation.⁸ It is considered as minute adjustments between self, other and the situation, 'and through these shifts in focus, we synthesise our experience of inner and outer, id and ego, facticity and transcendence, in the service of the other; it is intensely relational and dialogic'.⁸

Developing awareness of these minute adjustments in relation to frightened and frightening young people is really important, especially in terms of their development. In my last article,¹ I described the

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use of a hoola hoop to help professionals find their middle ground/mode⁹ and remain 'aware' of self and other, connection and separation. This prepares the ground for moments of contact – which need to be carefully considered, as contact from a collusive, merged, out-of-awareness, 'we are great buddies' state can be very anxiety provoking for young people who have suffered interpersonal trauma, activating the attachment behaviour system. So this disciplined awareness rather than spontaneity, where 'I' am grounded and solid, working between Self and Other, id and ego, in the middle mode, is key to helping young people grow and develop, regulates emotion, leads to integration of thoughts, feelings and the sensorimotor system, and can help to prevent safeguarding issues.

It is really important to note that the voice of the child is paramount and that 'the We' is not a controlling behavioural strategy. Its intention is to decrease anxiety in young people, families and professionals, developing their capacity for healthy relationships,

safety and enhanced teamwork, so that staff can let go of any need for a forced outcome – they feel safe because they are part of a reflective and compassionate team.

Conclusion

Whole Brain Training – Self, Other and The We – enables young people to regulate emotion, and, through working with and bringing into awareness their sensations and adaptive function, can enable them to name emotions and develop self-support/regulation. The We supports this process. This is a physiological change and therefore difficult to measure, but there will often be a decrease in self-harming behaviours, and this is useful to log, in order to measure change and patterns over a period of time. It helps professionals to understand the non-verbal and qualitative aspects of therapeutic work, but also shows how a whole service/system can become a therapeutic community and effect change within each other as well as the young people in their care. The services/systems have the potential to become an emotion-regulating collective for all.

It feels that society as a whole has become so involved with higher brain functioning that we are in danger of living and working without heart/intuition, becoming frightened and frightening professionals and organisations. This is what creates trauma and disorganised patterns of relationship. Perhaps our young people are our teachers; they are certainly mine – forcing us to get back in touch with our true nature, which may have been overdomesticated,¹⁰ reminding us to reconnect with what was so natural, at one time, and did not need any manner of teaching or training – which is the embodiment/integration of the whole brain.

Cathie O'Brien is an independent psychotherapist, supervisor and organisational consultant, working in both the public and private sectors. She has over 30 years' experience working with children and families, across all the statutory services, previously having worked in CAMHS, as a team lead, specialising in working with children in care, from residential, fostering and adoption through to children's secure units. She has developed an independent service called Home and Away Psychological Therapies Service and is currently working with Lord Wilson School Academy in Southampton and The Assure Health Care Group in Hampshire. She can be contacted at cathieobrien@HAPTS.co.uk

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