



THE CONTAINING DOUBLE

What is Containment?

Containment is both a psychological concept and a reality-based principle that provides safety for people working on histories of trauma in all educational and therapeutic settings. As a psychological construct, containment describes the process of expanding or contracting conscious awareness to provide a safe space for unprocessed memories to be held in the here and now, so that trauma memories can be identified, explored, and safely expressed. It is often referred to as creating a "holding space". What this means is that the trauma memories, which are stored in the emotional, nonverbal right brain are held in conscious awareness long enough to be made into the narrative memory of the left brain. As a reality-based principle, containment is a personal experience of being able to consciously remember what happened during previous traumatic times and make sense of it in the present, thus, integrating traumatic experiences into a commonsense narrative that connects past and present.

The containing double is a variation of the double method of psychodrama. This adaptation of the double was developed through research and practice by Kate Hudgins and others in the USA over the last ten years, to ensure safe practice with survivors of trauma and people who dissociate.

The double was developed from the 1930s by Dr. J. L. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama. It is an auxiliary (helper) who stands alongside the protagonist (client), taking the same body posture as the protagonist (to get in touch with how that person feels and receive clues from the non-verbal aspects of their posture). The double speaks as the protagonist using "I", saying how they feel, think, what they might want to say but have difficulty saying. Sometimes the double might therefore bring things to the surface which the protagonist is not aware of: the technique is intended to provide empathic support and expand the protagonist's awareness and ability to express him/herself.

The containing double (CD) is adapted to ensure the protagonist is not overwhelmed by emotions or defences and is able to continue functioning even when doing deep healing work on traumatic experiences: the aim is to prevent re-traumatisation. The containing double ONLY makes supportive statements.

To introduce the containing double the therapist may say to the protagonist: "The containing double is the role inside you that knows your strengths, no matter what level of distress you are experiencing. It is that part of you that knows all your body sensations, thoughts, feelings and whatever else you are experiencing. This role can put words to whatever you are experiencing and let people know what is going on for you. If what your containing double says is wrong please make sure to say what is right for you."

It is unconditional in its support and stability. It contains unprocessed trauma material by building a holding space with flexible psychological boundaries so that internal experiences can be narratively labelled and expressed.

The containing double (CD) has three tasks always speaking as "I": the CD identifies three segments that assist in containment: a reflecting statement, a statement to provide containment and a here-and-now statement to anchor the client in the reality of the moment.



1) Make empathic statements: these are statements that accurately reflect the protagonist's actual current state of awareness (including feelings, thoughts, defences) without amplifying, exaggerating or developing these, preferably using the protagonist's actual words. This is to establish a warm, empathic bond of support with the protagonist, so they know there is someone who will be there for them, supporting them through the work. These reflections may be on content, process, intensity: what the protagonist is experiencing at the moment.

For example : when a protagonist starts to dissociate, the CD may say, "Oh I can feel myself floating to the ceiling and I'm scared"

2) Make positive containing statements: holding statements that enable the protagonist to keep in awareness the content and process, their ability to contain, cope and breathe. The containing statement reminds the protagonist of strengths and abilities, re-affirming internal self support and stability. These containing statements affirm the ability of the protagonist, therapeutic team, and the group to manage experience.

Continuing the example: "Yes I am scared, AND I can take a breath and remember I can go as slowly as I need to in my feelings today. I have the choice."

3) Make "here and now" statements: anchoring the protagonist in present reality of time and place. These statements will positively recall sensory data of where the protagonist is now: the room, the people, the time of day and that the protagonist is now adult, safe and present even when they may wish to dissociate.

Continuing the example: "And as I breathe, I feel my feet on the floor and look around and see the other people here with me as I am telling my story."

These steps are not intended as a role formula as they need to be adapted to the particular needs of the moment and so are helpful in a number of settings and situations.

References:

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