

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Self-care and relationship conflict

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Barker, Meg (2010). Self-care and relationship conflict. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 25(1) pp. 37-47.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 Taylor and Francis

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/14681990903479904>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## **Self-care and Relationship Conflict**

### **Abstract**

This paper considers the foundational role of self-care in illuminating and ameliorating relationship conflicts. Through a detailed consideration of the various ways in which self-care may help individuals to understand, and work with, conflict in their relationships, it presents a case for therapist encouragement of self-care practices alongside (and after) the therapeutic process. It also encourages reflective self-care as a practice for therapists themselves, including reflexive engagement with their own conflicts. The paper draws on traditional conflict management, relationship therapy and psychological understandings, as well as theories of conflict and self-care from existential philosophy, Buddhist mindfulness and social constructionism.

**Keywords:** Couple therapy; individual therapy; self-care; relationship conflict; existential therapy.

## **Self-care and Relationship Conflict**

### **Introduction**

In this paper I argue that self-care has a central role in dealing with relationship conflict, which could be useful for relationship therapists to engage with when working with individuals or relationships. I spell out various functions that I believe self-care can serve, using a personal example to illustrate ways in which self-care might illuminate, and even ameliorate, such conflicts. The paper begins with more basic suggestions, drawing upon relationship therapy and conflict management texts, followed by more existential possibilities that self-care can reveal about the nature of ourselves and our relations with others. The latter sections of the paper draw on ideas from existential therapy, Buddhist mindfulness and social constructionism, but they are hopefully of relevance to therapists from all perspectives, since there are clear links with systemic and psychodynamic approaches which are briefly mentioned. Following these theoretical considerations, I conclude with suggestions for ways in which psychotherapists might bring self-care into their client work around conflict.

### **Hell is other people: A phenomenological description of conflict**

When writing this paper I faced a dilemma. I wanted to begin with a description of relationship conflict with which I could illustrate my points. Of course my work as a relationship therapist offers many valuable examples, and clients have been kind enough to consent for me to use anonymised versions of their experiences in my writing. However, there was something uncomfortable to me about subjecting client narratives to the kind of critical scrutiny that the paper requires. It seemed to risk reinforcing the power imbalance that is already present between counsellor and client, researcher and researched (McLeod, 2003), as well as the 'us and them' thinking which positions clients as problems and therapists as beyond such difficulties (Johnstone, 2000). Several times clients have admitted to me that they imagine that my own relationships are without conflict, and indeed I found myself making similar assumptions about my own therapist during training.

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

I therefore decided to use a reflexive account of my own relationship conflict which resonated with those I have heard in the therapy room, rather than one from a client. It is also an amalgamation of several events, with different partners, in order to protect the anonymity of the other people involved. Hopefully this will provide a useful counter to some of the mythical therapist/client dichotomies mentioned, as well as encouraging us all to reflect on how we manage relationship conflict, and the place for self-care within this. I invite the reader to also consider their own moments of conflict to see whether the various points in the paper fit these as well. You might even want to produce the kind of rich description memory that I have used to focus in on common ways in which your own conflicts play out (see Langdridge, 2007; Brown, Reavey, Cromby, Harper & Johnson, 2009). Of course, the histories of the different people involved are always unique, bringing different meanings to such situations, as we will see. In a way producing and reflecting on, such accounts is part of the kind of self-care which I am advocating, and it is as vital for the therapist as it is for the client.

It's the weekend so we decide to go for a walk in the country. I'm ambivalent because I'm aware of work I need to do which is left over from the week, but I feel listless so I agree to the break in the hope that I will return more motivated. As we walk across the meadow in the sunshine however, the tension I feel is clenching tighter rather than being released. You notice that I don't seem relaxed and comment on it. I feel immediately defensive. I wonder if you're saying that I'm too highly strung? I remember a niggle that I'm left with from a conversation we had last week. Maybe it's partly your fault that I am stressed out. The topic could be one of many: inequality in domestic chores, feeling that you didn't appreciate the importance of something that happened to me, feeling constrained by you from doing something I wanted to do, or pushed by you into doing something I didn't want. Whatever the case, I bring it up and you bristle a little. *You* are fine. *You* are having a perfectly nice day. It is *me* who has the problem.

A hot tear trickles down my hot cheek and falls onto the hot, dry ground. I feel knotted up from stomach to throat and something is bubbling up inside and leaking out of my eyes. I do *not* want to cry. It seems to reinforce the distance between us: you cool and calm and loose, me sweaty and twisted and tense. My shoulders hurt from hunching up as I walk whilst your arms swing free. In my horror at your seeing, but being baffled by, my pain, I protect myself with more attacks. They boil up inside me and spit out at you like sparks. How can you not see how much I'm hurting? How could you respond in such a way when you knew it would exacerbate my pain?

We're in the middle of a cornfield. Green hills roll above us beneath a clear

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

blue sky. But the beauty of our surroundings only makes it worse. You go quiet and, in the silence, my head roars. Unable to force you into reaching me, I turn in on myself, berating myself for ruining the day, for hurting you with my pain, for damaging my chances of ever getting that work done. I wrench away from your kindly, but perplexed, touch. I'm in hell now and there is no way for you to help me. To be seen in this place is unbearable. Time contracts to a pinpoint and there is just us, in pain, in this field. It feels like this is all there has ever been and all that ever can be.

I've focused here on occasions when the conflict escalates to the worst point for me: a sense of alienation from the other person and anger at myself. Also I've focused on situations when I have felt most conflictual myself, rather than the times when I have been more like the other person in this scenario (drawn in to an extent, but not quite so embroiled in the pain and struggling), or where both people have been equally anguished by events. It is perhaps in these situations, when inner conflict is so intertwined with relationship conflict, that self-care has the most to offer.

### **Basics of self-care**

On a very basic level self-care can be useful because it ensures that people's needs are met, so they have more resources to bring to bear to resolve a conflict situation. Clearly we are more likely to respond in anger, and less likely to see the full situation, if we are tired, hungry and over-stretched than if we are well-rested with enough energy and time to meet this new challenge (Peurifoy, 2002). In the example above there was an underlying work strain which increased the pressure to have a non-stressful day (paradoxically something which, in my experience, means that there is much more likely to be conflict). Also, when someone in my life is suffering I am aware of having less to offer when I am too stretched. It is at times like those when I take short-cuts around the problem to try to resolve it quickly, or become resentful with them for not being able to shrug off whatever is bothering them so that I can enjoy myself in their company.

But self-care is not just about making sure that we get enough sleep and food, and that we are not under too much pressure. I believe that an important part of self-care is allowing ourselves some time alone. At times in my life when I have had very little solitude, situations like that described above are more common. Making time for such self-care is

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

a way of being kind to ourselves: treating ourselves in a pleasurable way, for example with a morning coffee and pastry in a café, a walk in the park, or a hot bath. The ability to be kind to ourselves in this way means that we are likely to be kinder to the others in our life (something which I will return to later). Also, such practices mean that we are calmer and more relaxed when facing a challenge. With clients who are struggling, whether with others or with themselves, I often find that when they allow themselves this kind of ‘me-time’ it is quite foundational to further progress.

Additionally, if we allow ourselves some time to think about what is going on in our lives there is the possibility for reflection on events and processing of emotions. This kind of practice can take the form of journal-writing, meditating, or talking to a friend, for example, (see Kline, 1999). Through it we may acknowledge things that are bothering us sooner and so gain a fuller appreciation of what is going on. In the above description I have hung on to a ‘niggle’ from the previous week without really looking at it so that it has grown and mutated by the weekend. In my experience, writing about such a niggle the following day over coffee generally allows me to acknowledge the tough emotions I am feeling, to reflect on why I am so bothered, and to see how it might be from the other person’s perspective. If it is something that needs to be talked about I am then more likely to pick a good time to have that conversation (not when I am hugely stressed), and to approach it in the kind of way suggested by relationship therapy texts (sticking with specifics, owning my feelings, saying clearly what I want, and listening to the response, Gottman & Silver, 2000).

If we become used to taking time for ourselves regularly then it may also be easier to ask for ‘time out’ during a conflict. Again, this is recommended by most relationship therapy and conflict management texts (e.g. Crowe & Ridley, 2000; Deutsch, Coleman & Marcus, 2006). When things are already heated, continued discussion will often escalate the situation, whereas taking time out separately to allow ourselves to cool down means that the matter can be returned to in a less volatile state of mind. Interestingly, many of the conflicts that sprang to mind when I was compiling the description above occurred in situations where it was difficult to separate off: when stuck together on a car journey, or

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

out for the day when it would be a clear acknowledgement that things were bad to suggest going off alone for half an hour. In comparison, couples I've worked with who have an easy 'excuse' for time out (going for a shower, for a run, or into the garden) seem to find this helpful. Another way forward is to be open about the fact that it is sometimes necessary to take time out, and to respect whoever suggests this. Even this practice does not make resolution easy however, because conflicts are very sticky experiences, being hard to extricate from once they have begun (perhaps for the reasons I will go on to explore).

Another thing that we may gain from a commitment to regular self-care in the manner suggested is an awareness of what we are bringing to a situation. It is obvious in conflicts that there is far more going on than the specific issue under discussion. Psychologists of aggression propose that circumstances escalate because each person is *interpreting* the behaviour of the other, and responding to their interpretation rather than the behaviour itself (Leather, Lawrence, Barnard & Cox, 1998). In the example above, my partner goes quiet and I interpret this (the roar in my head) as condemnation of me, while there may be many reasons why they have stopped talking (a deliberate attempt to give me some time, or their own sense of powerlessness in the situation, for example). We tend to interpret situations in the light of our own past experiences. Thus the situation of going out for the day is already loaded for me because my family used to talk of days being 'spoilt' or 'ruined' if someone had become upset at any point. Tears and silence also have specific meanings for me which may not be shared by others involved. Commitment to increased self-awareness through self-care can enable us to realise the lens through which we are viewing the current experience, the past stories which we are expecting to be played out, and the emotional sore spots we have which someone might inadvertently brush against (see BASRT, 2009, for a handout I created for couples in conflict which explores these ideas in more depth).

### **Self-care, fixing and fluidity**

These pragmatic issues lead on to a more complex aspect of self-care: The potential it affords for openness and fluidity rather than fixing. When we view someone's behaviour

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

through the lens of our past experience; respond to them as if they were somebody else; or assume that they will act out a narrative we have told ourselves about how our relationships tend to go, we are fixing that person. 'Fixing' in this context refers to making something firm and static, as a potter does when they 'fix' a pot in the kiln (Batchelor, 1997). When we fix a person (whether another or ourselves) we stop them from being fluid and able to change psychic shape and adapt, and see them as just one rigid thing. With such rigidity comes a brittleness, as exemplified in my description above. It is easy for me to shatter under those conditions.

It is this kind of fixing which is agreed by many psychologists, philosophers, and historians to be a key root of conflict. In 2001 a BBC2 documentary called *5 Steps to Tyranny* attempted to uncover how genocides and atrocities occurred through an examination of famous psychological studies and historical events (such as the troubles in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s). The studies themselves had mostly been designed in an attempt to understand the human capacity for evil acts following the holocaust. What these 1960s and 70s American experiments suggest is that humans are *generally* capable of terrible cruelty under certain situations (they are not specific, for example, to one cultural group such as the Nazis, as was originally assumed). For example Milgram (1963) showed that people would hurt another if given orders to do so by an authority figure, particularly if the victim was dehumanized. Zimbardo's (1971) research similarly revealed how quickly cruelty emerged in a prison role-play where 'guards' were put in charge of 'prisoners'. Elliot (1968) demonstrated how groups of children would treat each other badly when arbitrary divisions were made between them and a hierarchy put in place (for example between those with blue eyes and those with brown eyes). The documentary concluded that the first step to tyranny was 'us and them' thinking. As soon as we perceive 'them' (the other group) as different to 'us' we have started down the road to treating them badly. A key element to 'us and them' thinking is fixing: assuming that 'they' are all the same, have certain characteristics, and cannot change.

This fits well with the model of human conflict proposed by Sartre (1943). His famous quote 'hell is other people' (1947, p.45), used above, comes from his contention (in his



## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

earlier work at least), that people are inevitably in conflict. This is because the mere presence of others draws us into objectification: Trying to fix the other and/or ourselves.

While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine: While I attempt to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me... Conflict is the original meaning of Being-for-Others. (Sartre, 1943, p.386)

We see this in my description above. All of the ‘niggles’ I consider as common triggers are about my resistance to such fixing. I felt constrained by the other person because I wanted to be free to embark on an endeavor that they didn’t like. Or I felt pressured into being someone they wanted me to be which didn’t fit my own desires. Even the issues of domestic chores and misunderstandings relate to objectification. I resist being fixed as the one who does the housework, I resent the lack of appreciation of the significance of an event for me, because it suggests that my partner is only seeing me as part of who I am and not seeing the whole of me.

However, according to Sartre, I am implicated in such fixing. It is not that people automatically resist being fixed, rather we are often drawn to it, particularly because the alternative possibility of accepting that we are free and are choosing this is frightening and challenging. I enjoy creating myself as the ‘desirable object’ or ‘capable superwoman’ or ‘kind nurturer’ for the other person. I like seeing that positive fixed image reflected in their eyes when they look at me. That is what makes it all the more horrific when I see a different image of myself in moments of conflict. I want the good image back! Similarly the other person is involved in fixing me and themselves. Part of their defensiveness may be a recognition that they *did* try to push me or constrain me even though they would always say that they wanted me to be free. Equally they may enjoy the fixed version of themselves that I usually see in them. My determination to make them into the ‘bad guy’ in this conflict contradicts this and is therefore threatening.

Buber (1937) called this mode of being ‘I-it’ relating. We relate to the other person as a fixed object; part of who they are rather than the whole. As the great sage E. Weatherwax so succinctly puts it: ‘sin, young man, is when you treat people as things, including

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

yourself, that's what sin is' (1998, p.210). The 'including yourself' part of this quote, and Sartre's contention that we are drawn to being fixed by the other, brings us back to the potentials afforded by self-care. In taking time to self reflect, we may recognize the fullness of what we are, and the fact that we are constantly creating ourselves, rather than being drawn into the fixed perceptions of ourselves that we are offered by individual others or wider society. In their memoirs Sartre (1964) and de Beauvoir (1958) both write of key moments in their lives when they saw that they were trying to fix themselves as the dutiful member of their family or society. This was 'bad faith' because this involved denying their freedom to determine themselves. Similarly in relationships I find myself fixing myself as the person I think the other wants me to be, but then resenting the sense of duty and obligation that comes with this. This is something de Beauvoir (1953) relates to gender, arguing that women are particularly encouraged to fix themselves as something for others.

There are strong resonances here with Foucault's ethics as presented in his book *The Care of the Self* (1986). In this he argues that, paradoxically, it is in turning our attention on ourselves that can lead us to a more ethical way of being with others. Many of my clients struggle with this, seeing self-care as somehow self-indulgent, self-absorbed or selfish. However, as we can see, attempting to sacrifice our freedom in order to be something for-others is actually more dangerous, because it leads to conflict when we realize that we cannot really fix ourselves as just one thing. Attending to ourselves, however, reveals that we are always involved in self-construction, and enables us to think critically and imaginatively about how we want to be with others (Infinito, 2003). Foucault's argument seems similar to Heidegger's (1927) injunction to authenticity. Both authors recognize that we cannot completely live outside the powerful societal forces and cultural taken-for-granted that surround us, but suggest that we can work with these in awareness, to shape ourselves and to continue doing so (rather like a potter at a wheel).

So what is the alternative to fixing ourselves and others, and treating them as 'things'? I believe that there are two key aspects to this:

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

1. Recognising that we, and others, are more than just one thing,
2. Recognising that we, and others, are in process rather than static.

Through self-care we come to acknowledge this in relation to ourselves. Perhaps we meditate and observe that we are unable to answer the question ‘who am I?’: there is no emotion, or thought, or part of the body, that presents a satisfactory core of the self. Perhaps we flick back through our journal and observe an unfolding work in progress rather than one fixed voice: we see that we are rooted in a past and thrust into the future (Heidegger, 1927) rather than stuck in the present. This understanding of the self is captured well in the following quote from Spinelli (2005).

The ‘self’ that emerges at any given intentional moment is phenomenologically ‘real’, singular and relatively coherent insofar as it is able to experience or ‘story’ a temporal narrative incorporating (selective) past experience, current mood and future expectations or goals. But, at the same time, this ‘self’ is also revealed as an impermanent construct that, at best, is a partial expression of an infinity of potential interpretationally constructed selves. (p.83)

Whilst we may experience ourselves as fixed, such reflections reveal us to be both plural (Rowan & Cooper, 1999) and like an ongoing, flowing river, which we can not understand if we take a bowl of water from it and simply look at that (Bazanno, 2009). If we can learn to see ourselves in these ways then, I contend, we are forced to recognize that the same is also true for others. This way, during future conflicts, we may be more able to remember that this is not all that this other person is, and it is not how they always are.

I think that a big part of the problem is that we long to be fixed as a positive thing by others (however volatile and impossible such permanent fixing may be), and we dread being fixed as a negative thing. We see this towards the end of my description where time seems to contract and I feel utterly trapped in the moment where I am being what I least want my partner to see. Welwood (2006) elaborates this, suggesting the people live in fear that others will see a lack or flaw which *they* know is in them. De Botton (2004) makes a similar point suggesting that our current culture is particularly insistent that we

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

present a positive face to the world and hide any problematic aspects of ourselves. In Sartre's *No Exit* (1947) Garcin implores Estelle to be the one person who does not see him as a coward, for that will mean that he truly isn't one. Perhaps we all nurture a hope that 'the one' person will come along who will prove that we are not what we most dread being. But intimacy with another makes it impossible to hide what we least want them to see. It is Buber (1937) who proposes a possible resolution to this: I-thou relating where we fully accept one another in all that we are, including our difference to each other.

Cooper (2003) applies Buber's notion of I-thou relating to the self, suggesting that we should see ourselves as plural and encourage communication between different 'selves'. In my description above I am horrified by being the self I am least comfortable with (crying, self-loathing and desperate). I want to obliterate that part of me so that it can never be revealed. An alternative, through self-care, would be to build a bridge of communication with that self. In such I-I relating (Cooper, 2003) my various 'configurations of self' can listen and strive to empathise with each other. When I recognise all of my selves, and communicate between them, I need not fear the gaze of the other because I know that it cannot really fix me. I cannot be petrified or engulfed by it (Laing, 1962) because it only sees part of the whole. Just as we must not 'us and them' a group, but recognise that it is made up of different individuals with different motivations and meanings, so fixing ourselves is a denial of the complexity of who we are. I am all of these things and more, and I will inevitably move on and flow into something different.

The notion of accepting the whole of the self is clear in Buddhist philosophy. Batchelor (1997) writes that:

Awareness is a process of deepening self-acceptance...whatever it observes, it embraces...And this may entail a descent into what is forbidden, repressed, denied. We might have to accept not only a potential sage hidden within but also a potential murderer, rapist or thief (p.59)

Elsewhere he explores such recognition of all aspects of oneself in *Living with the Devil* (2004): An idea which has resonances with Jungian concepts of the shadow (Jung, 1928):

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

the darker sides of ourselves which we repress. Going back to the psychological studies of Milgram, Zimbardo, and Elliot, we can see the monstrous capacity in everyone. Perhaps if we recognize it in ourselves we can live with seeing it in someone else, even someone we love. We are also less likely to ‘project’ the monstrous in ourselves onto them, insisting that one of us must be the ‘bad guy’ in the conflict and since we cannot bear seeing ourselves in that way, it must be them. As Samuels (2001) suggests, cultivating various ways of being in interaction<sup>1</sup> rather than limiting ourselves to one is a great bonus in terms of adapting to the situation, and helps us to avoid becoming stuck in one relational dynamic (something systemic therapists would agree is the root of much conflict, Crowe & Ridley, 2000). We can allow various selves to emerge in interaction because we no longer fear that we are limited to them, even if the other person does see them and believes that to be all that we are. This is a challenge, of course, to our constant desire to fall back into the comfort of fixity (Sartre, 1943). As Batchelor (2004) puts it:

In freeing oneself from the limiting and ensnaring effects of ‘me’ and ‘mine’, such emptiness confronts one with the turbulent and intimidating needs of others against which one seeks to immunize oneself with the reassuring conviction of being a static, isolated self. In meeting another’s gaze, you come to recognize a trembling concentration of contingencies as inconceivably complex and singular as your own. The experience of emptiness...open the way to an empathetic connection with others (p.137)

This ‘emptiness’ is similar to Sartre’s (1943) ‘nothingness’: The realisation that human beings are not a fixed essence. If we can see this, and treat ourselves in an ‘I-I’ way, perhaps we can then treat others in an ‘I-thou’ manner (Buber, 1937). This goes beyond simply being empathic towards them, rather it involves recognising them in all their complexity, difference and humanness. In such a way, self-care and other care are interlinked; practicing one leads to the other. However, all authors agree that we are inevitably drawn away from I-thou relating, authenticity, or enlightenment (whatever words we use to describe it). It is something to continually aspire to rather than something we can become once-and-for-all, and berating ourselves for not being this way

---

<sup>1</sup> For example: warrior, terrorist, exhibitionist, leader, activist, parent, follower, child, martyr, victim, trickster, healer, analyst, negotiator, bridge-builder, diplomat, philosopher, mystic, ostrich.

is yet another way of fixing ourselves and forgetting that we are plural and in constant flow.

### **Conclusions: Applying self-care to psychotherapy with conflicts**

Encouraging self-care in psychotherapy is also a risky business. It is easy for clients to assume that we are speaking of the culturally dominant notion of finding our ‘true’ selves when we speak of self-care, self-exploration or self-awareness. Indeed the notion that there is a core self which can be accessed is present in much humanistic, psychoanalytic and cognitive-behavioural therapy (Barker, Vossler & Langdridge, forthcoming, 2010), although some therapists and writers in all of these approaches have also critiqued the notion. As Foucault (1986) points out, attempts to understand the ‘deep self’ through self-scrutiny, and to perfect the self through constant monitoring, are opposite to the aims presented above. They involve viewing ourselves as fixed rather than fluid, and are likely to mire us within ourselves rather than ensuring that we engage ethically with others.

The search for any kind of core self turns people in on themselves so that they become less aware of the power structures and dominant discourses around them which tell them how they should be, meaning that their freedom is limited and they are less likely to launch any kind of outward-focused critique. Instead of this individualistic mode, the self-care that should be cultivated through therapy is an endless process of self-creation which recognises that there is no end point, but rather that we can engage in something like Heidegger’s (1927) circle; seeing such exploration as a spiral structure whereby each time around it reaches a deeper level (Polt, 1999). Such a metaphor can also lift the frustration many clients feel on recognising that they are addressing similar problems in life yet again, as can a sense from the therapist that they are dealing with a universal human struggle when facing conflict with others, or themselves.

As well as attending to themes of conflict, relation and self *in* therapy, therapists might also talk with clients about practices of self-care which they might employ in their wider lives. Towards the end of therapy most clients raise the issue of what they can do to continue the kinds of explorations they have been making in the therapy room. I believe it

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

is very important, and potentially empowering, for them to find their own ways of doing such work; of creating a space for self-care (Smail, 1987). Some may find it useful to engage with mindfulness practices, which are becoming increasingly popular at the present time (Barker, Vossler & Langdrige, forthcoming, 2010). Others may find that they can create such practices in their writing, artistic or physical pursuits, or in creating mutual space with a specific friend. It may be useful to consider with them phenomenological, or mindful, ways of being with their feelings at such times: particularly anger, since this is a key emotion in conflict. Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) outlines how we can sit with our anger, for example, spaciouly allowing it to be rather than attempting to deny it, or immediately acting upon it.

It is also important that self-care practices balance what I have referred to as ‘kind’ and ‘reflective’ self-care (polyamory.org.uk, 2009). Kind self-care practices are the kind of nurturing and self-soothing activities which build a sense of our being a person worth treating kindly, including all our different parts. This might include pampering activities like hot baths, small treats, and time out doing something one enjoys. Reflective self-care refers to the person taking time to focus on the way they are being and/or the conflict itself. This would include journal writing and meditation. Balancing the two kinds of self-care is important because kindness without reflection will not help us to consider ethical responses to our situation, whereas reflection without kindness, will not build compassion for ourselves and others.

When it comes to conflict itself, whether we are working directly with a couple, family or group, or with an individual who is going back to a conflict situation<sup>2</sup>, we can explore in therapy ways in which clients may be fixing themselves and the others, and perhaps work on de-sedimenting these (Spinelli, 2005). Self-care may also be useful in identifying boundaries between selves and others, rather than being drawn into the kind of Sartrean dynamics described above. Rosenberg (2003) points out the ‘emotional slavery’ in a

---

<sup>2</sup> I have focused on people in relationships with one other person in this paper, but I have also written about how these ideas might apply to multiple or polyamorous relationships on polyamory.org.uk (2009)

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

culture where we are assumed to be responsible for other people's emotions, and argues that nonviolent communication can only happen in a context of recognizing what it is ours and what is not. Strasser and Randolph (2004) say that many conflicts escalate because people really want to be *heard* and aren't being. Hearing in this context would involve encouraging clients to attend to all that someone is saying, trying to tune out their own scripts and ideas. It would also involve recognising that the other person is ever-changing, and the role of the past, and the hopes for the future, in how they are being now.

Widening this out, Gergen (1999) reports on the 'public conversations project' in Massachusetts where a group of family therapists organised small group meetings for activists on both sides of the abortion debate. These began with a buffet dinner in which participants were asked to share aspects of their lives *other than* their views about abortion. Later, when they were asked to talk about the issue in hand, and each given a few minutes of uninterrupted space to talk about their how they got involved, what the heart of the matter was for them, and the uncertainties and mixed feelings that they had. By getting people to talk to each other initially and then to open up about their personal histories and *why* the issue was so important to them, the project helped them to see each other as whole individual human beings, with past experiences and future dreams, rather than fixing them as 'the enemy'. Such strategies have even been brought into international disputes with positive results (Gergen, 1999), and Heckert (forthcoming, 2010) expands on how relationship ethics of listening, caring and becoming are valuable on a wider political scale.

I would argue that the foundation for all such projects needs to be self-care, for it is only through learning to listen to ourselves, to appreciate the complexity of the process we are involved with, and to live with all the different aspects of who we are, that we can be with others in a similarly open and compassionate manner.

## References

BASRT (2009). *Conflict in relationships*. Accessed from



## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

[www.basrt.org.uk/relationship\\_difficulties.asp](http://www.basrt.org.uk/relationship_difficulties.asp) on 18/6/09.

- Barker, M., Vossler, A., & Langdrige, D. (Eds.) (forthcoming, 2010). *Understanding counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.
- Batchelor, S. (1997). *Buddhism without beliefs*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Batchelor, S. (2004). *Living with the devil*. New York: Riverhead books.
- Bazzano, M. (2009). Brave new worlding. *Existential Analysis*, 20 (1).
- BBC2 (2001). *Five steps to tyranny*. Directed by E. McIntyre.
- Brown, S. D., Reavey, P., Cromby, J., Harper, D. & Johnson, K. (2009). On psychology and embodiment: some methodological experiments. In: J. Latimer, and M. Schillmeier (Eds.) *Un/knowing bodies*. Pp. 199-215. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Buber, M. (1937, 2004). *I and thou*. Translated by R. Gregor-Smith. London: Routledge.
- Cooper, M. (2003). "I-I" and "I-Me": Transposing Buber's interpersonal attitudes to the intrapersonal plane. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 16 (2), 131-153.
- Crowe, M. & Ridley, J. (2000). *Therapy with couples: A behavioural-systems approach to couple relationship and sexual problems*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1953/1997). *The second sex*. London: Vintage.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1958, 1963). *Memoirs of a dutiful daughter*. Translated by James Kirkup. London: Penguin.
- de Botton, A. (2004). *Status anxiety*. London: Penguin.
- Deutsch, M., Coleman, P. T., & Marcus, E. C. (2006). *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- Elliot, J. (1968). Blue eyes, brown eyes study. Accessed from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/> on 17/6/09.
- Foucault, M. (1986). *The care of the self*. New York: Random House.
- Gergen, K. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage.
- Gottman, J., & Silver, N. (2000). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. London: Orion.
- Hanh, T. N. (2001). *Anger*. London: Rider.
- Heckert, J. (forthcoming, 2010). Listening, caring, becoming: Anarchism and an ethics of relationships. In B. Franks & M. Wilson (Eds.) *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy*.

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

- Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heidegger, M. (1927, 1965). *Being and time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie and E. S. Robinson. New York: Harper and Row.
- Infinito, J. (2003). Jane Elliot meets Foucault: the formation of ethical identities in the classroom. *Journal of Moral Education*, 32 (1), 67-76.
- Johnstone, L. (2000). *Users and abusers of psychiatry*. London: Routledge.
- Jung, C. G. (1928). *Instinct and the unconscious*. Collected works, v. 8. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kline, N. (1999). *Time to think*. London: Ward Lock.
- Langdrige, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Laing, R. D. (1962). *The divided self*. London: Penguin.
- Leather, P., Lawrence, C., Barnard, C., & Cox, T. (1998). *Work-related violence: Assessment and intervention*. London: Routledge.
- McLeod, J. (2003). *Introduction to Counselling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Milgram, S. (1963). [Behavioral Study of Obedience](#). *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67, 371–378.
- Peurifoy, R. (2002) *Anger: Taming the beast*. Kodansha America.
- Polt, R. (1999). *Heidegger: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Polyamory.org.uk (2009). Accessed from [www.polyamory.org.uk](http://www.polyamory.org.uk), on 3/8/09.
- Rosenberg, M. B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life*. Encinitas, California: PuddleDancer Press.
- Rowan, J., & Cooper, M. (Eds.) (1999). *The plural self: Multiplicity in everyday life*. London: Sage.
- Samuels, A. (2001). *Politics on the couch: Citizenship and the internal life*. London: Karnac.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943, 2005). *Being and nothingness*. Translated by H. E. Barnes. London: Verso.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1947). *No exit*. Translated by S. Gilbert. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1964, 1981). *The words*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Vintage Books.

## Self-care and Relationship Conflict

- Smail, D. (1987). *Taking care: An alternative to therapy*. London: Constable.
- Spinelli, E. (2005). *The interpreted world: An introduction to phenomenological psychology*. London: Sage.
- Strasser, Freddie and Randolph, Paul (2004). *Mediation: A psychological insight into conflict resolution*. London: Continuum.
- Weatherwax, E. (1998). Sin. In T. Pratchett (Auth) *Carpe jugulum*, p.210.
- Welwood, J. (2006). *Perfect love, imperfect relationships*. Boston: Trumpeter.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (1971). The power and pathology of imprisonment. Congressional Record. (Serial No. 15, October 25, 1971). Hearings before Subcommittee No. 3, of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Ninety-Second Congress, First Session on Corrections, Part II, Prisons, Prison Reform and Prisoner's Rights: California. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.