

STEPS IN WORKING WITH ABUSE

All taken from Al's chapter on Abuse in *Moving Psychotherapy*

We are born with the genetic anticipation of safety and protection: abuse robs us of that birthright expectation of security and comfort in our personal lives.

There are three categories of abuse:

- Physical
- Sexual
- Psychological

Abuse (ab-use) is an ab-(normal)-use of a person, whereby a person is treated as a thing, an object, or a commodity and not as a living soul and ego.

The soul, or essential self, is the core of human being. It's the source of all the energies of a person—those energies that rise out of the genes, out of the unconscious . . . including the instincts. The soul is the source of our emotions, our impulses, our primeval behaviour and reactions to external events

The soul contains and embraces the polarities of power and vulnerability. POWER is the capacity to move, act and to transform, or make an effect upon the world. VULNERABILITY is the capacity to feel, respond, take in and be transformed by the world.

Around the soul we have the ego: "... the encircling band of consciousness, control and mastery surrounding the soul that enables people to function as individuals in charge of their own destinies. We are born with blank slates where our egos shall be written, and our egos are formed and influenced by our relationships and contacts with the significant individuals involved with our upbringing, especially our parents and care-givers.

What happens when there is abuse is that it dramatically damages the carefully constructed relationship and balance between the soul and the ego. All abuse fugitively pierces the ego, particularly in the case of childhood abuse when the ego isn't sufficiently formed to be a protection for the child. Since abuse *penetrates* the person it can register in the psyche as a violation or a rape, even when it's not sexual in nature. Al Pesso notes that different openings in the body can stand in for each other, so abuse in the form of shouting, which enters through the ear, can be experienced sexually by the person shouted at. This helps explain why people can have the sense of having been sexually abused

As the experience is thrust into the person by the abuser without consent, the ego defences are broken or burst, and the soul-stuff is left without boundaries, giving rise to omnipotent levels of feeling. . . . So abuse produces a flooding of feeling and reactivity (vulnerability and power) that is far beyond that person's capacity to cope with, especially when the abuse happened at a time when the ego isn't sufficiently well formed to be able to handle it.

Since these feelings haven't been mediated or ego-wrapped through interaction with any ego-constructing figures, they feel foreign, unknown, and aren't named by the person as their own feelings, thus responded to as if they came from the outside. Now that person, as well as being

penetrated by abuse coming from outside, is internally flooded with feelings that feel terrifying and overwhelming because they are not recognised. These feelings can be projected onto others or unconsciously retroflected back on the self in the most punishing ways.

Effects of being abused

The vulnerability of the abused person can produce aggression in other people. When someone is very vulnerable, others become *less vulnerable* and more powerful, and in terms of these polar opposites, the vulnerability of the abused can tend to pull out the opposite effect on people. That might explain why some vulnerable people seem to literally attract and seem to be capable of arousing responses in others to do and say terrible things to them. Therapists have to be on guard not to fall into that trap of reflexive opposite reactions.

Some people who've been abused become incredibly sensitive. Their extra sensitivity provides them with a deep capacity for feeling. They carry a wound that makes them extremely vulnerable, and the danger they've experienced teaches them to be very aware of what other people are feeling.

Other clients who've been abused work hard at mustering the strength and force that would hold off future abuse. This stance helps balance their psyche and is important to achieve. However, as Al Pessó says, it's not enough to develop a coping strategy of being strong – if the client is going to master the feelings of vulnerability, they need to experience their receptivity within benign, accepting limits—which leads to having good ego boundaries to surround their openness.

This is one of the things we're working with in PBSP when we're working with someone who's been abused in any way. Through a PBSP view there must be interaction from ego-making figures with the nuclear forces inside the person if there's to be peace between the soul and the ego. The truth of what has been lived through must be felt and experienced consciously, in interaction, and thereby made real.

PBSP attends to these problems by:

- Creating conditions that allow the ego to once again be in charge
- Creating a setting where the victim may bring all those repressed, powerful feelings and impulses to the surface of consciousness and behaviour
- Providing these powerful feelings and impulses with the necessary validating or limiting interactions with ego-creating Ideal Parents via the use of role-playing group members.

Two PBSP concepts which are essential to the treatment of abuse:

1. Shape-Countershape, where the powerful feelings of the clients are met with a validating countershape. In ordinary life there is touch and action from parents when they countershape what comes from the child. Following abuse there has been major damage to the ego from the over-arousal of soul energies, so if those energies and actions are to be internalized and thereby made safe by the ego, then touch and action will be necessary. These can be provided through the symbolic touch and action of the Ideal Figures.

2. **Ego-Wrapping** is understood as a blanket wraps a baby or a gift is carefully wrapped. Wrapping is the countershape around the shape – the skin of the self, the ego, which wraps around the soul. Every expression of the self—the shape—should be met with the touch and action—the countershape—of the parental figures who assist in constructing ego. In PBSP structures this is done in the symbolic stage of the hypothetical past where Ideal Parents provide benign, respectful and protective contact that would have kept out the abuse.

Eight things to pay attention to when working with a client who's been abused:

Control

Abuse denies the client choice and control, so the client's pilot has been overridden by it. We have to give the client control every step of the way: it's very important not to repeat in the therapy the message the client got in the past that the world is abusive.

Imposed touch and action contributed to the sexual abuse in the first place. So it's typical that those clients are feel averse to touch and action. As a therapist you need to take the time to help clients feel safe with the therapist and the group itself.

Exercises that help:

Controlled approach: "This gives clients practice in controlling another person in their field of sight and develops safety as well as mastery. "

Conscious voluntary movement (Decision—Plan—Implementation—Verification): clients learn to gain control over their own actions, not allowing any other motion than that pre-decided by their own conscious choice. Thus clients practice and learn that at any time, the emotions, pushing for action beneath the surface, can be held in check while they make their bodies follow their conscious control. Having learned more about control of conscious voluntary actions, clients are better prepared to consider allowing unconscious emotions bodily expression.

The Experience of Fear and Terror

"Fear and terror are experienced intensely during abuse and without ego-wrapping, it is felt as boundless, endless and omnipotent. Trembling in the legs indicates the possibility of an impulse to run; tension in the shoulders suggests an impulse to hide."

"Safety is the appropriate countershape or ego-wrapping for fear. Without safety, fear can be felt as endless. The expectation of safety releases the suppressed action and provides great relief when it is reached."

"Moments of nausea may be a reflexive, unconscious attempt to get the unpleasant overstated feelings out of the body."

"Another body symptom associated with fear is achiness in the shoulders. Asked to move in the way the achiness seems to make them want to move, they usually raise their shoulders. The appearance of that movement gives the impression of someone trying to pull their head into their

body in an attempt to shrink and hide inside themselves. Firm counter-pressure on the shoulders by contact figures assists them in fully accessing the fear that may be locked inside. This is often expressed in a high pitched sound. Therapist and group must be prepared for this. Ideal figure must hold client tightly—even a momentary break in contact can feel like a collapse of the ego.”

“When that fear is fully processed, the shoulder tension released, clients become relaxed. What was overwhelming fear becomes experience-able, expressible, nameable, finite, acceptable, conscious and has a place in the ego.”

Protection

“Frequently the abuser is a parent—one who should have been a protection-giver rather than a threat. . . . A healing, antidotal, protective experience can be supplied by ideal parent figures who are effectively played as a wall or shield between the victim and the abuser.”

They say, “if I had been back there then I would have seen what was going on and I would have not let him/her do that to you.” Or “if he comes any closer I will stop him and call the police.”

As vulnerability surfaces an unconscious reflexive response may occur in a hardness typically in the neck or calves.

Ask your client to exaggerate the tension in the neck. The head will typically press backward. Install a contact or containing figure to place their hands around the base of the head so when the head presses backward with the tension is met with accepting and responding hands.

“This kind of intervention is provided to accommodate the counter-force which the clients call up, in the attempt to balance the too-vulnerable feelings. **It is important that when this hard reaction to their soft feelings surface, it is not met with limits.** ‘Limits’ is that special intervention which stops an action from being completed.

In this case a more subtle amount of resistance is offered—with just the right amount of energy applied that allows clients to continue to move in whatever direction they wish. **Clients typically welcome the resistance and then—with more pressure—are able to overcome it. This establishes for the client that their strength and force is effective. Role figures say, “you are strong, you can have an effect on me.”**

“The validation of that hard, counterforce strength has the paradoxical effect of giving clients the license and safety to go deeper into their more frightening, vulnerable feelings.”

The Experience of Pain, Hurt and Sadness

The emotional anguish of abuse often shows up in the body: tension or hardness in the stomach, tension in the throat, and pressure in the chest. Ask clients to tighten muscles around the distressed areas and to release and explore what emotions, feeling, sounds or actions arise. Often they begin to cry. **“The intensification of effort facilitates the expression of the pain that is locked in.”** A purging crying releasing grief and the loss of innocence, safety and more occurs.

Mixed in this can be other feelings: “. . . these areas are also the ones affected when there is unconscious sexual energy just below the threshold of expression. **For incest victims, the combination of sadness and repressed sexual feelings is not unusual.**” **Be careful about disclosure of this interpretation.**

“To facilitate the expression of those deep feelings, the customary approach is to have the hands of ideal figures firmly placed against all turbulent and shaking surfaces of client’s body”. Deep crying e expressed without solid contact can lead to a conclusion that inner feelings are too strong for the body to handle. Figures say, “We are not overcome by your feelings.” or “We can handle how sad you are.”

Revenge

“Whatever the form of the attack or abuse, the therapist can expect and anticipate that these clients have unconscious impulses to avenge themselves using the same method of attack. “it seems the unconscious contains a kind of ‘eye for an eye’ attitude” in the unconscious.

“Fortunately, the body gives some clue as to the appropriate moment for this intervention. The body sensations that are most closely associated with sadistic aggression are tension in the calf muscles (similar to the hardness when clients attempt to overcome their too vulnerable feelings.) Cramps in the calves—often in the night—can indicate this. These can be enacted by stamping through the heel on a strong pillow. (See to it the situation is safe—use a robust pillow so heels are not damaged).

If client seems to feel guilty for having violent feelings, Ideal Parents limit and contain the movement saying, “We understand that you have these feelings, but we will not let you do literal harm,”

Other clients may understand the symbolic nature of the exercise and do not need this intervention.

It can help to tell clients that such inner responses are natural and often felt. “. . . when those impulses finally do surface to consciousness and are expressed in the symbolic setting, they find it brings great satisfaction and relief, for, even if only in fantasy, ‘revenge is sweet.’”

In more recent times, work in the antidote can be introduced before the trauma occurs, establishing a ‘new memory’ of protection and safety. Nevertheless, it is arguably important to have the above intervention as a resource.

The Expression of Eroticism and Receptivity

“One of the most unexpected findings in our work with victims is that any kind of abuse **produces a reflexive increase in vulnerability that includes an erotic element. . . . some degree of reflexive body impulses, not immediately available to consciousness, that imply a readiness to receive penetration.** It is as if some archaic portion of the soul is highly responsive to and receptive of aggression. This level of vulnerability feels like a kind of **infinite and omnipotent openness. . . .**By the abuse they have been denied their rights to mastery over their own feelings and body.”

“The guilt felt when this stimulated state becomes conscious is enormous—victims blame themselves for their own predicament.” These erotic feelings seem proof that what happened was their fault. Self-deprecation and punishment can follow.

Bodily this shows up in **trembling in the upper thighs** and sometimes pain and **tension in the lower back.**

Any kind of abuse can result in omnipotent vulnerability and openness— and out of control receptivity occurs in men as well as women. And the treatment of abuse should be the same for men and women, whether or not the attack included sexual elements. “It is as if the force of the violence created a ‘magical sexual receptivity’ in the victim via the psychological ‘hole’ that was torn in their personal boundaries or in the psychic structure of their ego.” **AI thinks the trauma has an effect on endocrine secretions that support sexual receptivity.**

“ . . the paradoxical and unthinkable impulse to open themselves to receive the attack. . . It is only when the legs are tightly held together by ideal limiting figures that the full force of those receptive bodily impulses can become felt, conscious, visible and controllable.”

Especially when a family member the individual has “the unconscious notion that one has not only a magical sexual receptivity but an omnipotent one as well. It is as if the repeated attacks demonstrate to the victim that they ‘draw’ the attacker to them and that the attacker cannot resist attacking them. They may feel that they have become irresistible in their attractiveness as victims. For the attack is attention, even if negative, and is a highly prized form of recognition with much emotional heat attached to it on the side of both the aggressor and the victim.”

CLEAR, COMPREHENSIVE TEACHING IS NECESSARY TO ASSIST CLIENTS TO CEATE A COGNITIVE FRAME OF REFERENCE THAT MAKES SENSE.

Clients must not feel judged or reproached for their paradoxical erotic responses. Male clear that this reflexive openness is not a conscious choice, but rather an unconscious reaction created by the attack. . . a process has been triggered within them by the attack which overcame their—until then—balanced ego controls of vulnerability and receptivity.”

The intervention here is the ‘limits’ of holding legs together as client strives to open. Women do this accommodating typically.

The result is often dramatic. “It is as if the magical sexual receptivity is asked to make its appearance or the omnipotent receptivity is invited to express itself.” The limiting figures represent allies for the ego which in this intervention succeed in keeping the legs closed no matter how hard is the effort to open.”

“The screams that come out of the client at time are not screams of terror or pain but screams, right and piercing, like some mythological banshee”.

The therapist may stop the intervention at this point to check if the client does indeed wish to be let go. The answer is often, “No, don’t let me go! I just need to say this while I struggle”.

Therapist should be prepared for this great force coming out of even the smallest and most quiet of woman.

Accommodators say "It is all right to feel open and to want to be receptive, but we can put limits on it and help you handle your openness and vulnerability."

"Those limits and statements empower clients to say to themselves. " it is all right for me to have powerful receptive and vulnerable feelings, or even incestuous sexual wishes. It does not mean that I will submit to those impulses and have them carried out against my conscious wishes of choice and control."

"It is as if the client has allowed the seemingly 'possessed' element within themselves to make over the body."

The Impulse and Expression of Murder

1. Revenge as above
2. "Because their self-esteem as well as ego membrane has been so damaged by the assault, and because so many unacceptable and dirtying feelings are released by that wound, clients—in an attempt to stop that threat from ever happening again—come to the inmate conclusion that murder is the only solution.
3. "... an attempt of the soul, in the absence of ego ability to contain its unfettered vulnerability, to balance itself by releasing equivalent antithetical power in the form of unlimited aggression. A primordial penetrating force is set loose—directed, not so much sexually, but aggressively toward the attacker." Add number two and you get "I am not well or safe until the attacker is dead."

Body tension is global; rapid heartbeat, increased breathing, tension in arms, hands, jaw prefiguring fists or claws bared teeth. In legs which want to kick or stomp. "When clients are viewed in this state, the impression is one of destructive hatred." There is need for adequate limits. "Without them, a client might choose to remain frozen and emotionally paralysed rather than risk explosion." This takes at least six people.

The accommodators say "it is all right to want to kill your attacker but we won't let you literally do it."

"This kind of statement and intervention licenses the emotional impulse while simultaneously making it safe to express it with our danger or damage."

"Now they have learned that even this level of inner fury and penetrating-ness can be tapped safely. The ego is once again in charge."

The Increase of Guilt, Shame and the Desire for Punishment

Guilt, shame and self-punishment are processes used by the psyche to bring it more into balance when ego processes have failed.

Whenever there is an abundance of guilt, shame, and self-punishment one can assume that there are strong inner forces that are not yet under ego-control. **Guilt is used to control powerful inner forces in the absence of sufficient ego strength.**

Victims thrown out of balance and out of control by abuse, are ashamed and guilty about how open they are, and by the law of opposites become rigidly closed. Ashamed and guilty about how angry they are, **they become rigidly 'nice'.**"

Retroflective. Accident prone. Self-destructive. These enact the two forces the victim seeks to control. Both the enactor and the object of those drives are the self, rather than an external figure.

"The non-interactive solution of self-punishment leads to isolation and in an odd way, omnipotence. Since one's penetrating forces are not reality tested and limited by an outside force, one can assume that one is omnipotently penetrating. And when one's receptivity is not reality tested by an outside force, one can come to the conclusion that one is the most open person in the world, and the very model or paradigm of openness in the universe."

"While victim feels awful, shamed, guilty, and wishing to destroy themselves, there is a **significant secondary gain of specialness and uniqueness. This is unconscious and not given up easily. Verbal discussion is not satisfying to the unconscious fantasy—even threatens to take away the unconscious omnipotent fantasy.**

Limiting figures are required. When self-directed impulses are singled by balled fists the therapist can ask if there is a desire to attack the self. Limiting figures place their hands over the balled fist and keep it from landing saying "We won't let you hurt yourself" or "You don't deserve to be hurt."

Al says they can resist like a primitive God figure saying "Get out of my way, I will punch myself, I will kill myself, I will rape myself for I am the mightiest power in the universe and no one can control me." **Then impotent feelings seem to follow the omnipotent ones in a kind of balancing manoeuvre, yet that powerlessness secretly maintains the omnipotence as clients would be both punisher and punished.**

By being limited, such clients are reduced to the level of being only human and not elevated, but in pain. They feel relieved and saddened.

"In the limiting act they have found people outside of themselves caring enough to keep them from hurting themselves, and that feels good. Nonetheless, the omnipotent aspect may be somewhat frustrated and unhappy, for now it has to give up its solitary, unique posture as the total self joins the world of human beings.

The Desire to Express Love for the Abuser

Once many of the unlimited feelings are under control there may be tender feelings for the abuser, especially if the abuser was a family member.

The intervention here is the “loved aspect of the real figure”.

These feelings may rise too high and threaten to overwhelm. Then limiting figures hold the client—bursting with feeling—to provide reassurance and limits on their tendency to become too receptive and vulnerable in the presence of that figure and therefore enthralled once again to their power.

The limiting figures might encircle the client’s legs to keep in check the receptive impulses that might arise with the tenderness.” Accommodators say “We can help you handle how much you love him” or “We won’t let you burst with feeling”.

“This also helps create a more balanced figure of the aggressor, who no longer looms so large and forbidding.”

The Need for an Antidote Relationship

Once all of the extreme feelings have been dealt with and the balance between power and vulnerability established by countershaping and ego wrapping, the antidote scene of Ideal Figures within the age appropriate formative crucible with parents who are wholesome and in love is established as a ‘good end’.

“In abuse situations in families, the child often experiences a double loss. If abused by one parent the other parent does not come forward to protect.” The enactment of classically cast Ideal Parents with their typical characteristics provides the healing antidote. See section on Ideal Parents in the document.

Traumatic events are addressed by creating an ideal situation where the abuse and attack are avoided by powerful ideal others or institutions who take charge before the event occurs and ‘would never let it happen.’

These steps enable everything to do with the abuse to be understood, made conscious, named, given shape, given a place, given acceptance, and therefore made available for internalization within the ego.