

WORKING AROUND DEVELOPMENTAL DEFENSES

IN SE SESSIONS

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Since a traumatic experience is essentially one of disintegration, it is understandable that it would bring out any pre-existing defenses. It becomes important then, for SE practitioners to learn how to spot these defenses and work around them. Otherwise, the SE process in general, and self-regulation in particular, will be hindered. The purpose of this note is *not* to teach people how to work developmentally. The purpose is rather, to give SE practitioners some ideas about how they might work around the developmental defenses that most often manifest in SE sessions. The following developmental information is drawn from the *Bodydynamic Somatic Developmental Psychology Model* and from observations of how these defenses hinder self-regulation in SE sessions.



The theory, according to the *Bodydynamic School of Somatic Developmental Psychology*, is that if the **stress in a given developmental stage occurs early on and/or is relatively massive**, resources are likely to be overwhelmed, and the related muscles will be *hypo*-responsive. This corresponds to **psychological resignation** in relation to that specific psychomotor task. If the **stress in a given developmental stage is later and/or less intense**, resources are challenged but not necessarily overwhelmed, and the related muscles will be *hyper*-responsive. This corresponds to **psychological rigidity, resistance, control, holding back, or fighting**, in relation to that psychomotor task.

The Developmental Stages

2 nd Trimester – 3 months	Existence
0 month – 1½ years	Need
8 months – 2 ½ years	Autonomy
2 years – 4 years	Will
3 years – 6 years	Love/ Sexuality
6 years – 8 years	Opinions
7 years – 12 years	Solidarity/Performance
13years – 19 years	Adolescence

The purpose here is not to detail the focus of each developmental period and the corresponding defenses that may emerge. Rather I will ***focus on only those developmental periods and defenses that most often come up in SE sessions***. For a more in depth discussion of each developmental period, see Embodying the Mind & Minding the Body.

The Will Structure: 2 - 4 Years Of Age

The theme in this stage is making choices and choosing direction -- to be powerful in feeling and in action. The early position will be characterized by an individual who is self-sacrificing. They give up her own sense of power and choice in order to please or serve others. In the late position the person is judgmental. They feel self-directed only when they are exercising power over others. They are critical of others. In the healthy position the individual is assertive. They are comfortable with their own power and feel comfortable with other people's power. It is the "late will defense," that is most likely to interfere with the SE process.

Characteristics Of The Late Will Defense

In this defense, the person can be seen to be holding back with their voluntary musculature. Sometimes it may seem as though they are holding on for dear life. They tend to have well-bound musculatures and there is often a lot of vertical and horizontal compression in their torsos. They are holding back their power, their anger, their strong emotions, their vulnerability, and their activation. As children, they learned to hold their power and anger back because it either led to them being hurt, others being hurt and/or to losing connection with the ones they loved.

But it is precisely their holding back and holding on, that gets in the way of the SE process. This "holding" prevents the involuntary processes from unfolding. Because they do not allow their anger, power, and aggression to come forth, the thwarted fight responses do not complete. In fact, all of the defensive responses (orienting, flight, and fight) may be inhibited from surfacing and completing themselves. What happens is that as soon as activation starts to

surface -- as soon as the process begins to move into the trauma vortex, they start holding back with their muscles making it difficult for self-regulation to unfold.

Their choice, their will and their direction are important to them. They do not like to be told what to do. They resist directly by not doing it. They like firm and powerful support. But they must feel that they are the ones making the choice at every point in the process.

They are always “doing” -- always using their will to get through life -- pushing and efforting all the time. But at the same time, they are holding back. They might not be conscious of these conflicting tendencies. They might not be aware that they are pushing from the inside on the one hand and holding back at the same time. But they are not just into “doing things.” It is also of utmost importance to them that they do things well. So they might feel ashamed if they start to sense that they are not doing things well.

These individuals tend to be “people pleasers.” So they tend to express their anger and aggression in sarcastic and indirect ways – sometimes even using humor. Having them make statements that reflect their habitual and conflicted inner states might get the ball rolling. For example, you could have them say something like: *“I am smiling at you, but I would really like to kick you.”* Or, *I am smiling at you, but I really hate you.”*

Individuals with this defense cannot relax and their ability to sense pleasure in their bodies is limited. Because of the inability to relax and sense pleasure in their bodies -- because they are caught up in the muscular struggle inside, the healing vortex or the counter vortex might not have the opportunity to develop and deepen. Pushing or efforting at the voluntary level can override the involuntary impulses from the limbic and reptilian brain structures. Or it can push the involuntary processes into overdrive and lend instability and volatility to the whole process.

These individuals often fear that they will fall apart if they let go of the conflicted and simultaneous impulses of pushing and holding back. Or they might fear that if they let go and come out with their power, anger, will, choice, and direction that they will destroy themselves or others or that they will lose the connection with the one’s that they love.

How To Work Around the Late Will Defense

Educate the Client

Talk with them about this defense and what it looks like – how it manifest. They will often recognize the defense (in themselves) if you present it in an objective manner – educating them first generally, about how and why defenses form in the first place. Then describe some the characteristics of this particular defense (such as those listed above) as an example of one of several possible defenses that might develop. Last, help them understand how this defense in particular can get in the way of the SE process. Remember they don't like sensing that they are doing something poorly or that they are doing something wrong. So the more you are able to educate them in this more "objective" manner (rather than in a manner that sounds as if you are accusing them of working against you), the more likely they are to slowly let go of the defense and allow the SE process to unfold.

Have Them Sense Their Holding Back, Their Holding On, Their Pushing

You can have them sense their holding back and pushing by having them exaggerate these actions through their bodies. This helps them to track the emergence of these defenses during the SE process and sort of "nip it in the bud." As they start to recognize this holding back and pushing in their bodies, you can even have them say things like: "*Now, I am pushing.*" "*Now, I am holding back or holding on.*" Then they can begin to track it themselves so that it does not manifest as a struggle with you.

A more direct way to go about this is to actually have them grab you around the wrist with one hand or both hands and squeeze as they say: "*I am holding on.*" "*I am holding back.*" This gives them a direct sense (in their bodies) of what their defenses are. When they let go, have them sense that as well. Because the muscles have been taken to an extreme state of contraction, when they let go they can actually sense the release – thereby heightening their awareness of what "letting go" feels like. That way, they can begin to track themselves in this way too. You can even have them say, "*I am letting go now.*"

You can have them sense their “inner pushing” more directly as well. You can have them push against your hands. You might have them say, “*Now I’m pushing*” as they do this and then, “*now I’m not pushing,*” when they stop. When the client pushes against you or some object and they sense what that is like in their body, they often will report how “familiar” that feeling is. With this new awareness, they can start to recognize, in the moment, when they are pushing and efforting like this. Because they can recognize it, and chose to stop pushing and efforting, it is less likely that this behavior will thwart the unfolding of the SE process.

Encourage Them To Let Go A Little Bit At A Time

Remember that there is often a great deal of fear (even outright terror) that prompts the holding on/holding back in the first place. So encourage them to let go “just a little bit” and help them to track what occurs. This allows them to feel safe enough to experiment with a small amount of activation. Then gradually, you can encourage them to let go a little more at a time. You can start this process by saying things like: “*I wonder what would happen if you let go just a little bit.*” Another way to encourage this “letting go,” is to make it more “acceptable” for them to do so. You might for example, them say something like: “*I give myself permission to enjoy this pleasurable relaxation.*” Or, “*it’s OK to let go and enjoy this pleasurable relaxation.*”

Help Them To Sense That Their Power & Aggression Will Not Destroy Themselves Or Others

You might have to work with them in a way that helps them sense that their power, their aggression, their anger, cannot destroy themselves or others (including you) in the process of completing the thwarted fight response in an SE process. One way to do this is to simply point out that you are still there (even though they allowed their anger, their power, and their aggression to come forward. You can also simply point out – bring to their awareness – that *they* have not “fallen apart” – that they are still intact (even though they allowed their anger, power, aggression to be come forth). Help them to embody that realization.

Help Them To Create The Space For Their Power

Part of the fear of letting their power come forth can be the result of them sensing in their body that there is not enough space for it. So if you sense that they are using their muscular to hold back their anger and aggression, you might have them activate and sense their *latissimus dorsi* and their posterior deltoid muscles. This may serve to give them the space and support they need to come forth with their power. Sensing the *latissimus dorsi* in particular may also serve to bring into their conscious awareness the “holding back” that is occurring. Or, depending on where the client is in their process, sensing the *latissimus dorsi* may bring forth other muscular impulses connected to the fight response (e.g., biting, or fist clenching) thereby allowing for further completion of the fight response.

The Autonomy Structure: 8 months to 2 ½ years

The theme of this stage is organizing the impulse toward activity. If the child is frustrated early or strongly in this developmental stage (early position) there is a tendency to lose the impulse toward activity. The child will grow up with an inner passivity to starting activities, and with little or no pleasure in them. As an adult, they will often passively resist direction and change.

If the frustration was milder or later (late position) the child will use the impulse to do things as a defense against feelings of helplessness or engulfment. This child will actively change activity, or change topics in conversation, in order to fend off unwanted feelings. The use of impulse as a defense is often seen in highly overactive people who hold several jobs, are members of many clubs, and have many friends, but who lack centered, contactful relationships. In the healthy position the individual is emotionally autonomous. They are able to notice their impulses and feelings, own them, and act upon them.

Characteristics Of The Autonomy Defense (Early & Late)

As children, their experience as separate and unique individuals was not supported. Either there was a lack of supporting presence (on the part of their

caretaker) or their experiences and impulses were taken over in some way. They were smothered by their caretaker. It may have been that the child did not get the help they needed, so that they had to do it themselves. More likely is that the help they did get, led to them experiencing the loss of their autonomy – the loss of their own unique experiences that emerges from following their own impulses. Whatever the case, they simply did not get the support they needed to stay with and deepen their experiences

The autonomy defense might show up in SE sessions in a number of ways. One way in which it shows up is in the form of the client going from one thing to another -- one sensation to another or one image to another, one movement to another, one emotion to another, or one thought to another. They may also go from one element of SIBAM to another in rapid succession without deepening into any element of SIBAM and the felt sense.

The more interest you show in an experience that they report, the more they might "flee" from it. Sometimes they are fleeing the "overbearing mother." But it may also simply be that they have not developed the ability to focus and deepen into an impulse.

In the "will defense" (discussed above), resistance is more active. If you tell them to do something, they will outright refuse to do it. They will fight with you. The autonomy defenses are more passive. The client will simply move to another sensation or movement quickly and simply ignore you. They might even show some delight in evading you. The defense can manifest verbally or non-verbally. They might go from describing one thought after another. But often they will simply change from one activity after another without describing it or reporting it to you in any way.

This constant "activity changing" can lead to their process and impulse not deepening into a gradual and involuntary process. Rather it stays at a voluntary level. But it can also lead to them becoming flooded and overwhelmed quickly. This occurs because the activation accumulates with each impulse and there is not enough time given to discharge before another piece is added.

But there are still other ways in which the autonomy defense might surface in an SE session. Sometimes the client will ask for your suggestions and then respond by blocking them. They will at times tell you about an experience they had and then pose a question. But as soon as you begin to respond – giving them the advice that they have requested, they start to repeat their experience

again as though you had not heard it or as though you had not heard it correctly. These are often the clients who don't "feel seen."

They might also begin to argue with you about assumptions, your suggestions, or your advice. They might begin to feel invaded, even though they asked for the advice. They might even "change their story," implying that what they said first, wasn't exactly what happened. For this reason, autonomy structures are often accused of lying. The client might even perceive your help as inappropriate – as "not useful." These clients often seem unable to get the help they need.

Working Around The Autonomy Defense

Educate The Client

Talk with them about this defense and what it looks like – how it manifests. Again, they will often recognize the defense (in themselves) if you present it in an objective manner – educating them first generally, about how and why defenses form in the first place. Then describe some of the characteristics of the autonomy defense as an example of one of several possible defenses that might develop.

Last, help them understand how this defense in particular can get in the way of the SE process – that the "activity changing" can prevent the involuntary processes from unfolding. Help them to understand also that this "activity changing," can lead to a "flooding" of sorts – that they might be overwhelmed -- that this kind of "flooding" can re-traumatize their physiology. Explain to them why this occurs -- because the activation accumulates with each impulse and there is not enough time given to discharge that activation before another piece (and hence more activation) is added. Help them to understand that their inability to ask for and accept help from you -- especially physical help, might also lead to "flooding."

Explain to them that they might be inclined to follow their process without letting you in – to shut you out as a therapist. They might feel the need to be in control. Help them to understand that this does not serve them. They have to listen to you and your suggestions in order for you to help them. Otherwise they will get lost and overwhelmed. This is especially true when re-negotiating deep states of shock. If you don't educate them about this, they will likely get into a

developmental transference with you and end up blaming you (for not helping them – for allowing them to get overwhelmed).

Keep in mind that as long as the client is resourced, there may not be a problem with them simply tracking their own process and not letting you in. But some clients with autonomy issues are not resourced and they cannot follow their own process without help from you. You need their cooperation to help them! So you will have to educate them along these lines.

Some clients come in with a long history of following their process, tracking their process, managing their activation, which, over time, has become who they are. They think that it has worked for them in one way or another so they will continue to do it even though you might be able to clearly see that they are hurting themselves. For example, when the activation is high, they might continually “leave” and move into a dissociated state of bliss. Or they may repeatedly cathart as a temporary way of feeling better. Or they may repeatedly over-coupled themselves into a constriction pattern and end up in physical pain.

Clients like this might have a hard time switching over to the new paradigm of SE and tracking themselves in a different way. They might even interpret the new process as something being imposed upon them from the outside. So again, you might have to educate them about their process and help them to understand that what they have been doing may actually be hurting them. Suggesting that they read Waking the Tiger may be helpful because they can then, on their own, figure out that what they have been doing may not be helpful in the end.

Once clients who are jumping all over the place start to focus they might begin to feel a great emptiness and this can be frightening. They can have an experience similar to the freeze or immobility responses. That is precisely one of the reasons they have a difficult time stopping and focusing in the first place. They might fear falling becoming immobilized if they stop or that they will feel a great emptiness. This might make them feel extremely vulnerable. Educating them about these states in advance then can be helpful so that they feel more prepared. Uncoupling the fear and immobility and uncoupling the fear from the emptiness -- titrating around that so that it is more manageable might also be beneficial.

In summary, the general idea is to help them become aware of what they are doing and how the patterns of behavior get in the way of their healing in the SE mode. If you can help them to see their patterns, they can begin to track it by

themselves and inhibit the impulse to jump around. Or, at least they can have it in their adult awareness so that, if they don't notice it, and you point it out in a session, they do not resist you. And educating them beforehand about what might happen when they stop jumping around might help make their response more manageable.

Honor Their Experiences & Explorations, & Validate Them

It is important to honor their experiences but don't probe too much. Deep probing may be experienced by them as the "intruding mother" taking over their autonomy. So avoid describing their experience or leading them towards experiences. Ask them questions about what they are experiencing. For example, rather than saying "*I see that you are relaxed*", ask them: "*Are you relaxed?*" Or say: "*I am imagining that you are relaxed*". You can point out what they might not be aware of. But do so by in the form of suggestions and questions. "*What do you experience in your neck?*" "*Is your neck tight?*" Or, *I imagine that your neck is tight. What is your experience* (rather than: "*Notice that your neck is tight.*") The latter might be experienced by them as your defining their experience and robbing them of their autonomy.

Slow it Down & Be Careful Not to Mirror Too Much

In short -- not too many questions too fast. They need time to explore their experience and they might need your support in the form of mirroring. But do not overwhelm them by mirroring them too much.

Be Particularly Clear In Your Communication

If the client is repeatedly asking for advice, and then blocking your response in some way, repeating their story as if you hadn't heard them, or arguing with you about your response you might proceed in the following manner: 1) repeat what they have said so that they get a sense that you have heard them correctly; 2) offer your suggestions in a way that makes it perfectly clear that they are merely suggestions; 3) Make it clear that you realize that you cannot know their experience; 4) Keep in mind that they might be merely sharing their experience and that they already have an idea of how to proceed. They

may be merely testing you with respect to their autonomy. If you get that sense, ask them what they think they might do about it before offering your thoughts and suggestions.

Work With Them to Develop Their Centering Resources and Boundaries

See the handout on *Resourcing* for a discussion of how to help the client develop their boundaries (concentrating on energetic boundaries and their skin boundaries). You can also help them to create more space for their autonomy by having them activate their medial deltoids. Having them sense their self-containment muscles can also be useful. Again, refer to your handout on *Resourcing*. Having them sense or activate these muscles might help the client to stay more focused and make it less likely that they will resort to their defense.

Have Them Repeat Statements That Reflect Their Inner Reality

Any statements that reflect their inner reality that you can have them say while sensing their body may be useful to get the process rolling. Here are some possibilities. "I'm in control." "I'm not in control." "If I allow you to help me, I will cease to exist." "If I listen to your suggestion I will no longer have my experience." "If I listen to you, I will no longer be me." Or, "Only I can do it, but I cannot do it alone." (This last statement is a corrective statement for this structure and it might be activating. But working with it in this way might heighten their awareness and keep thus keep the defense from getting in the way of the session.

Existence Structure: 2nd Trimester – 3 months (possibly from conception)

The theme of this stage is building a secure sense of being. During this period, according to the *Bodynamic Model*, the child is experiencing its basic sense of being and how he or she is received (particularly by the mother and family, but also by the world). This sense of being welcomed or not welcomed is

deeply imprinted and this imprint forms the basic self-concept from which the personality developments.

If there is massive stress or if the stress occurs very early in this developmental period, it is likely to manifest as withdrawal from life. This is referred to as the “mental existence structure” or sometimes the “schizoid structure.” If the stress is less intense and later in the developmental period, it is likely to manifest as a flight toward life. This is called the “emotional existence structure.” The healthy position is characterized by a secure sense of being, of belonging in the world. The person feels loved and accepted for simply being alive. It is the “mental existence structure,” or the “schizoid structure,” that is mostly likely to come up in an SE session.

Characteristics Of The Mental Existence Defense

Whether the traumatic stress occurs early or late, or whether there is ongoing stress throughout the pregnancy, it is experienced by the fetus as life threatening. The experience of the environment in the womb is one of not being wanted or loved, and that the world is not a welcoming, hospitable place. The result is that the child will have a basic insecurity about existence and a mistrust of reality as stable. These individuals, quite simply, sense the world, just as they sensed the womb, as an unwelcome place.

In the early position, the child pulls away from contact with the world, goes very mental, and hides most of its energy in the core (especially in the bones). The joints are twisted along the spine and in other places to break the energy flow. Behaviorally, the person has a resigned approach to living, not wanting to participate fully in the world as it is. She feels unsafe with high emotional charge, interpersonal contact, and liveliness. There is basically a “flight from the body,” in terror of the overwhelming threat of annihilation. They retreat into the relative safety and stillness of the mind.

Their primary fear in coming into the body is the deep fear of fragmentation. Like the will structure (discussed above), they will “hold on” or “hold back” which inhibits the involuntary processes from unfolding during an SE session. But they also have existential terror and rage which they have to renegotiate. This also might bring about the fear of annihilation and disintegration. It is the terror of fragmentation and annihilation that is most likely to interfere then, with the SE process.

Working Around The Mental Existence Defense

Because their primary fear in coming into the body is the fear of fragmentation, and because this fear manifest in session as a “holding on,” or “holding back, much of what is said above in the “*How To Work Around The Late Will Defense*,” applies here – namely educating the client, encouraging them to let go a little bit at a time, and having them sense their holding back and/or their holding on (See the fuller discussion above).

Another possibility is to guide them through a visualization of fragmentation into a million pieces and then reassembling into a whole body. This has to be done very carefully and gradually while you track the activation level.

The Late Need Defense:

The inability of the late need structure to sense satisfaction can present problems in finding healing states to pendulate shock states from traumatic states to less traumatic states. It can also lead to difficulty in the integration and the organization stages of the process as this structure is used to only registering the half of the glass that is empty. Simple education about these tendencies that are developmental will help the client to be mindful about not following them as they work with shock states to titrate and pendulate them and then integrate them into the rest of the body and the brain and let the reorganization last as long as possible.

The late need discussion is brief, to the point and has been elaborated more in class.