Trauma, Dissociation and Psychosis
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INTRA-TP

Clinical approaches to psychoses and dissociation

Dolores Mosquera

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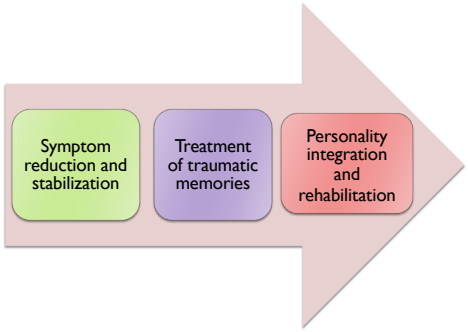
Phase-Oriented Model



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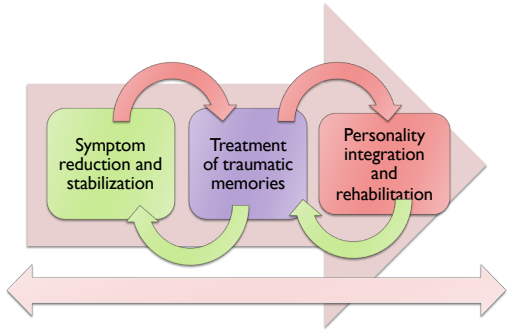
Phase-Oriented Model



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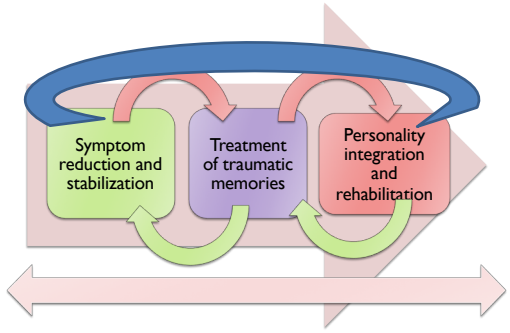
Phase-Oriented Model



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The basics

Assessment is crucial

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Psychosis –general basics

- Symptom reduction (as soon as possible)
  - Initially with medication
  - As well as providing a safe and calm environment
- One of the main differences in some cases is that psychotic symptoms can improve and even go away with treatment (compared to dissociative disorders).
- Depending on the response to medication we proceed.
  - When the patient improves, it is important to assess level of awareness of the disorder (and work with it if they are not aware to achieve adherence to treatment)
  - If symptoms persist, work with voices and delusions. This can be done in a similar way to the work done in dissociative disorders

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Psychosis. Three main areas

1. **Predominance of voices:**
   - Approach as dissociative voices, only simpler.
   - Normally there are less voices, often only one. We work with the conflict (mainly the fear of the voice and what it says).

2. **Predominance of delusions:**
   - Working with content
   - But not with *the origin*.

3. **Predominance of negative symptoms**:
   - Focused on enhancing resources, self-care, autonomy, skills, etc.

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The basics – The clinician´s attitude and therapeutic stance

Curious (cautiously)

Respect (for all the system)

Non judgmental

Avoid interpretation as much a possible

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The basics – Training - "Knowledge is power" It is important to have knowledge about:

- Emotions and emotional regulation
- Dissociation
- Dissociative symptoms
- Attachment and the effects of early traumatization
- Defenses
- Specific disorders and varieties in presentation
- The multiple meaning of symptoms
- Tools and techniques

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The basics – understanding and organizing the information clinically

Helping clients "connect the dots"

What might seem weird or senseless is often *full with meaning*

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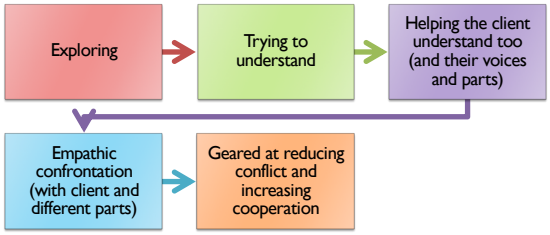
The basics – interventions



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How to begin the work? A guide to structure the work

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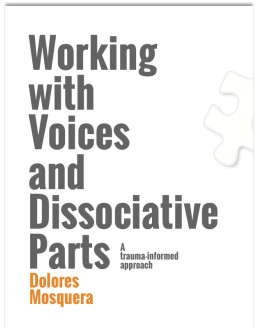
Based on the book:



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General Structure of the Therapeutic Work

Exploring the parts and voices (content, tone, message, age, moment of onset, etc.)	Encouraging clients to pay more attention to the parts and/or listen to the voices.	Exploring the triggers (what was happening when the part showed up or when the voice spoke).	Exploring and/or processing dissociative phobias.
Assessing the degree of differentiation and time orientation in client and parts.	Exploring and validating the function of the parts.	Identifying and validating resources, feelings and needs.	Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding. Offering suggestions when needed.
	Identifying and exploring missing pieces.	Reaching agreements, developing cooperation and teamwork.	

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Step 1. Exploring the parts

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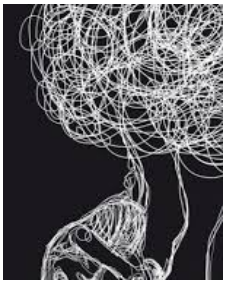
Step 1. Exploring the internal system of parts

- The first step is geared at getting an idea of the internal representation of the parts and how clients make sense of what happens inside.
  - Without forcing anything or getting into too many details in the more complex cases.



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Step 1. Exploring the voices

If clients indicate hearing voices: → Exploring the tone, content and messages that the voice/s or part/s are trying to get across will be necessary.

It can either be a repetitive message that apparently does not make sense, or a clear message geared at achieving a certain goal. → This goal will become clearer as we explore the function of the voice (step 6)

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Step 1. Exploring the voices

When exploring voices and parts we can also ask how old does the voice seem to be and any other details that might help us get an idea of this internal representation.

We may also explore the moment of onset and when voices appear or show up in the present moment (related to exploring triggers, step 3).

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Step 2. Encouraging clients to listen to the voices and/or pay more attention to the parts

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Step 2. Encouraging clients to listen to the voices and/or pay more attention to the parts

- To gather the information in the previous step, we also need to help clients become more curious and interested in their inner world.

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Step 2. Encouraging clients to listen to the voices and/or pay more attention to the parts

Promoting curiosity may be a relatively easy task with certain types of parts.

However, it becomes more complicated – and for that same reason, much more crucial– with challenging parts.

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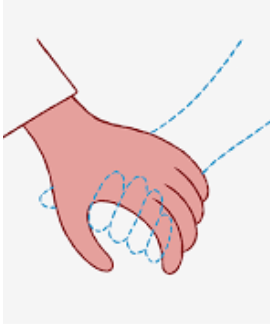
Step 2. Encouraging clients to listen to the voices and/or pay more attention to the parts

Helping clients understand that the voices and parts are actually trying to help will be one of the main ingredients towards developing curiosity.



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Step 3. Exploring triggers

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Step 3. Exploring triggers

- The third step towards the beginning of the work must include exploring when voices or parts show up.
  - This is related to the triggers and therefore, the function.

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Step 3. Exploring triggers

The best way to explore triggers is to explore **what was happening when the parts showed up.**

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Step 3. Exploring triggers

Most of the time parts and voices get triggered when the client feels bad, frightened, or concerned or needs something that seems unacceptable (comfort, closeness, etc.)

Also when something happens that reminds them of the past, especially those voices who are still stuck in trauma time.

There are some exceptions; for example, when clients have been punished for feeling good, parts will also get triggered when in pleasant or enjoyable situations.

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Step 4. Exploring and processing dissociative phobias

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Step 4. Exploring and processing dissociative phobias

- Phobias among parts are one of the main obstacles that prevent the natural flow of treatment.
- We should always check how the different parts and the Adult Self feel towards each other .

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Step 4. Exploring and processing dissociative phobias

For therapist trained in EMDR:

When emotions are dysfunctional, such as when one part is frightened of another part, or feels disgusted or ashamed, we can use the **processing phobias procedure,** a tool developed to reduce the phobia.

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Step 4. Exploring and processing dissociative phobias

Exploring the phobias is also a way to organize the work, since depending on the information we obtain on the phobias between parts, we will be able to identify whether it is necessary to start processing them before we continue with the next step.

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Step 5. Assessing the degree of differentiation and time orientation in client and parts

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Step 5. Assessing the degree of differentiation and time orientation in client and parts

- Distinguishing between internal and external elements is not easy for clients with complex traumatization.

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Step 5. Assessing the degree of differentiation and time orientation in client and parts

Sometimes problems with differentiation are related to boundaries

- Not knowing what they are supposed to tolerate from others and how far they can go with others
- They may also include having difficulties separating what others think or feel from how clients think and feel
- Or have difficulties distinguishing the messages they have internalized from what is real.

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Step 5. Assessing the degree of differentiation and time orientation in client and parts

A crucial issue with differentiation is related to separating *what is happening now* from *what was happening then.* → Parts and voices might be stuck in trauma time

Frequently not knowing the danger is over → Therefore, they continuously respond as if the danger was still happening

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Step 5. Assessing the degree of differentiation and time orientation in client and parts

Assessing time orientation in different moments of the work will be needed.

As well as helping clients be oriented to the safety of the present moment when they lose dual attention.

This is especially important when there are parts that never had dual attention and still need to learn that they are safe now –or at least start to consider the possibility that this may be the case

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Step 6. Exploring and validating the function of the part/s.

Step 6. Exploring and validating the function of the part/s

Parts are there for a reason

Finding out **what they are really trying to achieve** is a core aspect of treatment.

Step 6. Exploring and validating the function of the part/s

- Each part has its reasons for doing what they are doing and we must always validate these reasons
  - Whether or not they are adaptive in the present
- Remember that they were initially created to perform a certain role
  - And they have helped clients survive what they had to go through in their earlier years.

Step 6. Exploring and validating the function of the part/s

- Why is it important to understand the function and give parts a more adaptive role?
  - What was adaptive in a given situation in the past does not necessarily continue to be adaptive in the present.
  - In fact, much of the time it even becomes dysfunctional and makes the person as a whole feel worse.
- Clients may initially have a hard time believing that parts are trying to help, since some of them – particularly hostile parts– make them feel really bad.

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Step 6. Exploring and validating the function of the part/s

- By respectfully asking questions about the parts and modeling healthy curiosity towards them:
  - Clients can become curious themselves
- And begin to understand how the function of each part was adaptive in the past
  - That parts have tried to help (and keep trying to help) the client survive in one way or another.

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Step 6. Exploring and validating the function of the part/s

- Clients tend to get upset about the voices or the actions of parts,
  - The internal conflict and the phobias do not allow them to appreciate how important these parts have been for survival.
- This is why it is very important to validate the responses from parts.
  - And help clients understand the function they had and still have.

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

- Clients with different parts and voices, often have mixed and even opposite feelings.
- The same goes for their needs; one part may have needs that could be in direct conflict with the needs from another part.

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

- Identifying and validating feelings and needs is a crucial part of the work
  - It can help all of the different voices and parts to feel heard and understood, which tends to be a missing experience for these clients.

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

- The key in this type of validation is to make sure *we accept all the different emotions and needs* and help both clients and the system of parts to understand them and accept them as well .

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

- To internalize a new way of responding to their feelings and needs, parts need to experience a completely new attitude
  - Which is done through modeling, so it can end up sinking in.

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

Exploring the needs of the different parts of the system can help us:

- Identify some of the resources that need to be developed
- As well as those that already exist, even though they may not be seen as such by the client.

When clients are able to understand the adaptive function of the part:

- We can begin to see its capacity to help and identify existing resources within the system
- Once these resources are identified, they can be reinforced; even shared with other parts that need them.

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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

- The process described in the previous slide can be quite straightforward with those parts that are more simple and easy going
  - And more complicated with parts that are in conflict or where the phobia is very high.
- Sometimes, clients spend so much energy dealing with the system that they miss relevant resources owned by some parts.
  - Once we are able to engage the client's curiosity, we can explore each part's resources and explain how these can be useful for the rest of the system.

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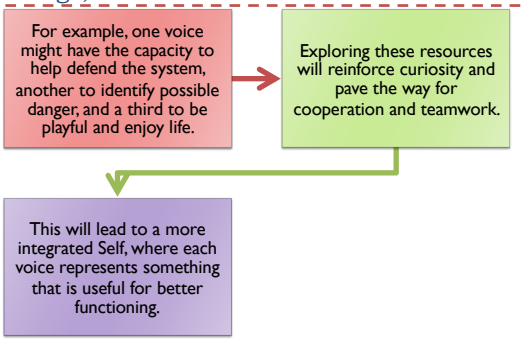
Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.



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Step 7. Identifying and validating resources, feelings, and needs.

If the therapist is trained in EMDR Therapy, resources can also be installed when needed, as a way to reinforce any relevant *insight* that the client and the system of parts achieve as a result of the work.

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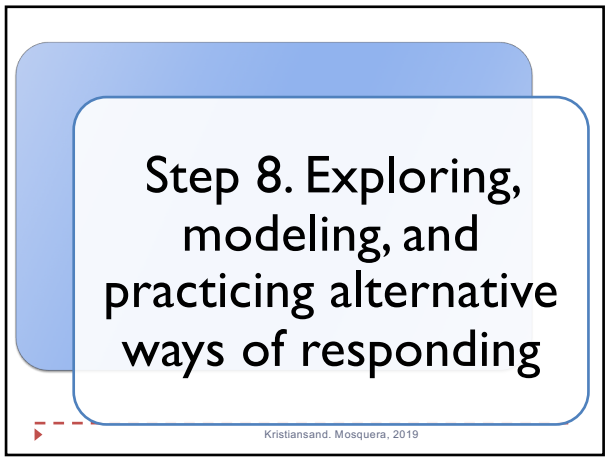
Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding
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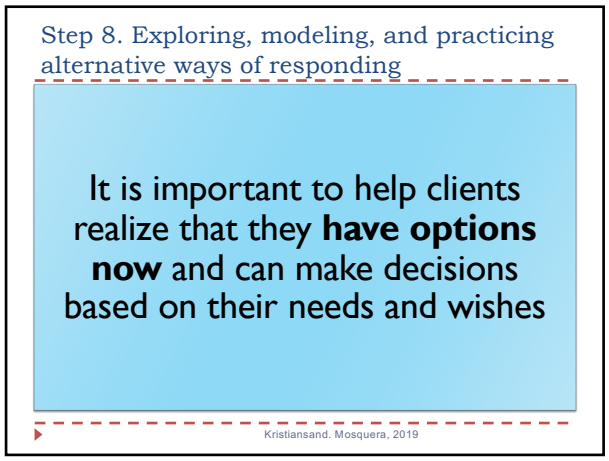
Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding
It is important to help clients realize that they **have options now** and can make decisions based on their needs and wishes
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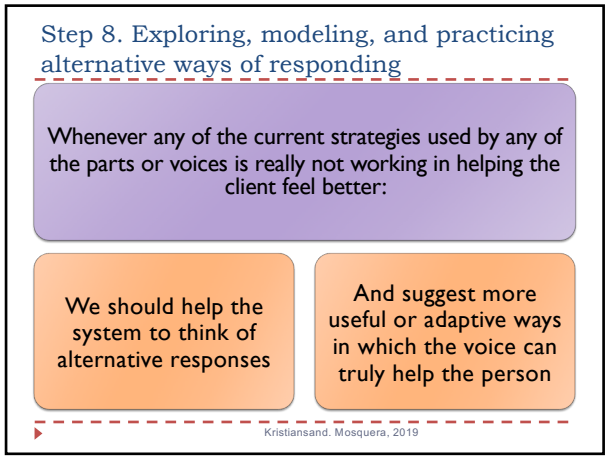
Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding
Whenever any of the current strategies used by any of the parts or voices is really not working in helping the client feel better:
We should help the system to think of alternative responses
And suggest more useful or adaptive ways in which the voice can truly help the person
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Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding

Most of the time, voices or parts are not aware of the effect their comments have on the rest of the system

Or of the fact that their behavior is not currently adaptive

Encouraging clients to communicate with them about comments or behaviors that are frightening or bothersome is a key aspect in the progress towards better functioning.

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Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding

- Sometimes the simple fact of checking in with the voice will have a positive effect
  - They are not used to having anyone check in with them .

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Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding

When clients are able to communicate what works and what does not work for them, voices and parts can modify their way of responding.

Initially this has to be done with the therapist´s help, using questions aimed at helping them realize this:

Does this part know how much this upsets you?

Is this voice aware of how frightened you become when he says those things?

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Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding

- Most of the time clients will say something like:
  - "*Of course it knows, it just doesn´t care*"
- But this is just an automatic reply
  - That reflects the way the system is used to functioning .
- In these cases, it is important to say something such as:
  - *I understand you see it this way, but could you please check if this voice really knows how upsetting this is?*

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Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding

Psychoeducation can be useful but won´t be enough with some of the parts.

The best way for the new attitude to really sink into the system of parts will take place through modeling (consistently).

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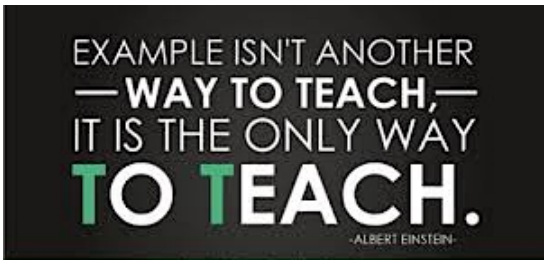
Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding



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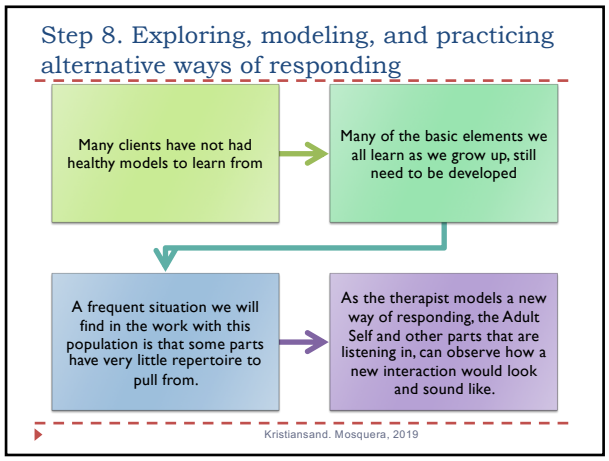
Step 8. Exploring, modeling, and practicing alternative ways of responding
Many clients have not had healthy models to learn from
Many of the basic elements we all learn as we grow up, still need to be developed
A frequent situation we will find in the work with this population is that some parts have very little repertoire to pull from.
As the therapist models a new way of responding, the Adult Self and other parts that are listening in, can observe how a new interaction would look and sound like.
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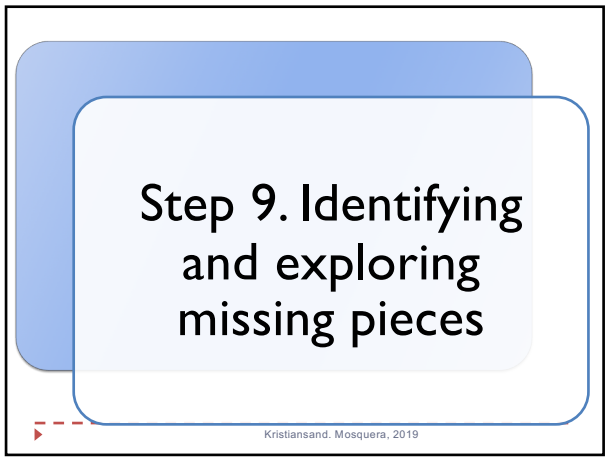
Step 9. Identifying and exploring missing pieces
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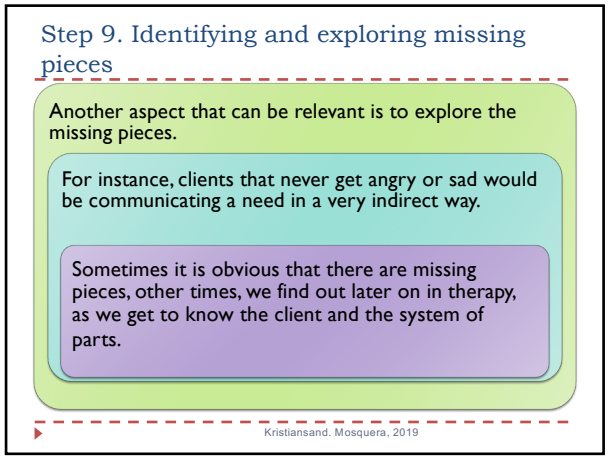
Step 9. Identifying and exploring missing pieces
Another aspect that can be relevant is to explore the missing pieces.
For instance, clients that never get angry or sad would be communicating a need in a very indirect way.
Sometimes it is obvious that there are missing pieces, other times, we find out later on in therapy, as we get to know the client and the system of parts.
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Step 9. Identifying and exploring missing pieces

When something does not fit it is important to point it out and check if there are any other parts or voices. This can be done in a general way:

"Is there any other part or aspect that is difficult for you to talk about?"

Or introduce it while using some of the exploration tools such as the meeting place

"Do you think we should leave any empty chairs for other parts that might me more difficult for you to look at?"

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Step 9. Identifying and exploring missing pieces

- Clients might also tell us about missing pieces when they draw their inner system:
  - Foggy areas or shades that do not allow to see what is underneath would be some of the frequent examples.
- Some clients might say things like:
  - "A lot of people are shouting underneath the fog" or "There is something dark that I can´t even look at, all the parts are hiding from it too".

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Step 9. Identifying and exploring missing pieces

Often clients do not speak about some parts or voices due to fear, or because they are so used to censuring those aspects that it´s unthinkable to even bring them up.

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Step 10. Reaching agreements, developing cooperation and teamwork

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- As a last step, the system must reach agreements or compromises that all voices can accept, for the benefit of the entire system/person.
- This step is one of the final steps but we can begin introducing this idea with the previous aspects.
- This is why it is so important to model ways in which the system of parts in general can work together, so they can eventually learn to cooperate in a joined way towards achieving these goals.

These steps are meant as a guide, not a rigid way of exploring

All of the previous steps are geared towards promoting understanding and empathy between client and voices.

Increased understanding leads to greater compassion and empathy, which in turn allow for cooperation.

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Thank you for your attention and time!

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