



"No man is an island"-a brief review of the attachment and trauma congress in London. 15-16-17th November

RELATIONSHIPS, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE DEVELOPING SELF

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Allow me to first share with you a personal story, before diving into this brief review. About a year ago, I went to a congress on eating disorders and trauma. After a warm welcome, the psychiatrist responsible for the unit, told the audience that she was both excited and curious about the upcoming day. "Mainly because ...", she said, "only a small

number of patients on her unit had witnessed trauma".

This common misconception - defining trauma solely as a consequence of one or more discrete events in the life of a person - is still a strongly held belief amongst a significant number of mental health professionals. However, what is often described by our clients as being the worst part, is

not necessarily what did happen, but what did not happen: the pain of not being seen, the deafening silence of not being heard. The lack of being cared for, protected or loved.

How can we work with this often “unseen” population that suffered not only horrible events, but also horrible relationships that left them bereft, deprived them of their sense of Self and the ability to connect? How do we help our clients solve the paradox of healing: to teach them to relate again to another human being, after this trust has been deeply damaged?

To help us with these important questions, the organizers from ISC put together a wonderful program with several of the world’s most renowned speakers in the field. The result was a “multi-perspective” (Onno Van der Hart) view on the consequence of severe, interpersonal wounding on the Self.

During the first day, Marco Iacoboni, introduced us to his own research and new findings on the topic of mirror neurons. Orit Badouk Epstein talked us through her clinical work with a client with complex trauma. A moving account of a client who suffered intensely from the enmeshment with her ‘scaregivers’ and showed us a “polyphonic” approach to the treatment of severe relational traumatization. Bruce Ecker explained to us, step by step, the transformational process of memory reconsolidation, using a videotaped session of a real client suffering from a “black hole of non-existence”. This client’s symptoms were relieved after integrating important early attachment disruptions with her mother who frequently denied having shared moments with her daughter, leaving her unseen and utterly alone. Daniel P Brown concluded the day with a thorough explanation of his research on disorganized attachment and, more specifically, on his 3 pillars of attachment-based treatment. Dan showed us the steps to create an internal ideal parent figure, to raise metacognition and to engage clients in more collaborative behavior. On the second day, Peter Fonagy gave a compelling lecture on the importance of interpersonal

relationships and the development of consciousness. Fonagy masterfully explained how epistemic mistrust lies at the core of suffering and also shared some very helpful statements about the different types of shame. Stephen Porges gave us a brief introduction to Polyvagal theory and discussed a fascinating, auditory intervention using filtered music to reboot the Social Engagement System: the newest – myelinated - branch of the vagus nerve that can down-regulate our clients fight/flight and freeze responses and make them re-connect again. Alessandro Carmelita and Marina Cirio proposed a whole new way of working with attachment. Building on the work of decades of attachment research, these speakers from Italy proposed an interesting approach of working with a real physical mirror in therapy. What I found especially moving was the reaction of the client in the last part of the video: “It feels as if I have known you for a long time”. An interesting example of what Peter Fonagy would describe as the powerful experience of the awareness of the awareness of the other? Finally, Marilyn Glenville showed us the importance of nutrition in the treatment of complex trauma. By carefully supplementing and changing eating behaviors, symptoms can lessen and further damage from stressors on the body can be greatly reduced.

On the last day Ruth Lanius not only showed us a list of fascinating, neuroscientific research, she also taught us how to manage complex clinical situations in the treatment of trauma, centered around five crucial dimensions: time, thought, body, emotion and self. Ruth finally made the important remark that treatments should be tailored to the individual: what works, for whom and when? Onno van der Hart presented his work about working with severe attachment trauma in complex dissociation. He explained masterfully how to relate with the client and her/ his different parts of self and how to develop a collaborative relationship between them. I very much liked the idea of looking for caregiving qualities that already exist in certain parts of the client’s self system. The last speaker of the congress, Pat Odgen, shared an intriguing video session of a couple in therapy, using moment-

by-moment mindfulness of the 'somatic dialogue': the wordless story told through the exchange of non-conscious body signals.

To conclude: the Attachment and Trauma Congress in London was well worth the trip. Besides the quality line-up of speakers, I very much appreciated the panel discussions at the end of each day. It was enriching to see how all of these different minds could easily find common ground in their approaches to provide good care and treatment for severely traumatized clients. And finally, there was the opportunity to make informal connections with other colleagues from around the globe (often combined with too much coffee) that made it even more worthwhile. Thanks to ISC for this beautiful congress and thank you to my colleagues for this wonderful learning experience.

PS: Did I make you curious? Good. This means that your social engagement system is online. More information about the speakers, topics or ISC-International in general can be found on this website: <https://uk.international-isc.com/> 