

Symbiotic Trauma and Symbiotic Entanglements -

Key concepts in
Multigenerational
Psychotraumatology

Munich, 26th of October 2012



Agenda

- ❖ Childhood - changes of perception
- ❖ Healthy human development
- ❖ What means „Symbiotic Trauma“?
- ❖ Trauma and Splitting
- ❖ Symbiotic Entanglements and their transgenerational effects
- ❖ Ways to step out of a Symbiotic Trauma

„Do you hear the children weeping“

„The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised or sexually abused.“
(Lloyd deMause, 1980, S. 12)

Phases of Childhood History (Lloyd deMause)

1. Infanticide (Antiquity - 4. cent. AD)

Killing of children and sexual abuse is fairly normal

2. Giving children away (4. - 13. cent.)

Because children have a „soul“, it is no longer allowed to kill them; so they were often given away and beaten, because they are „evil“

3. Ambivalent attitudes (14. - 17. cent.)

Parents project their needs on children; children have to be formed bodily, emotionally, mentally and morally.

Phases of Childhood History (Lloyd deMause)

4. Intrusion (18. - 19. cent.)

Children are no longer only frightening; Medicine reduces child mortality; punishment and threat to control the child's will

5. Socialisation (19. - middle of 20. cent.)

Children have to be educated to adopt them to social standards

6. Support (since middle of 20. cent.)

Parents invest energy and time to support their children empathetically and help them to develop in a healthy manner

Ideas about children until recently and still present

Children are greedy, uncontrolled, unsocial, evil, insensitive, feel no pain and don't have memories.

Therefore it is allowed to leave children alone, to let them cry, to make operations without anesthetics, to circumcise their genitals, to punish and to abuse them sexually.

How Children really are

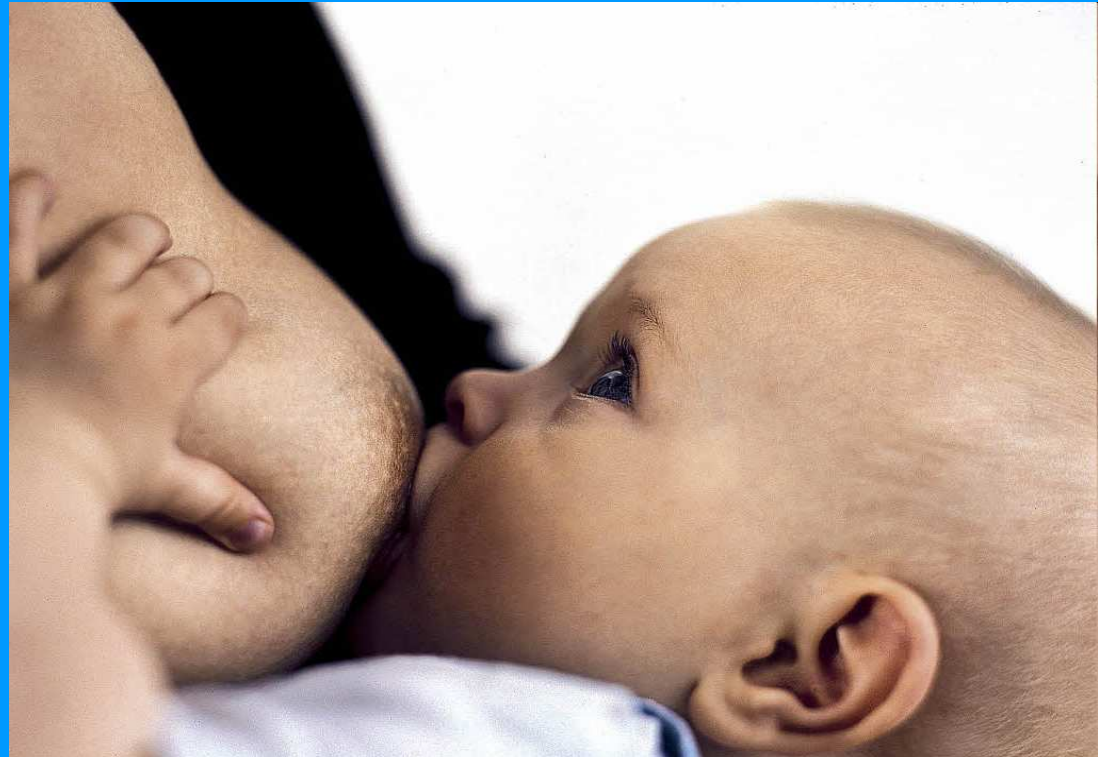
- ✧ Highly sensitive
- ✧ Need special protection
- ✧ Extremely depend on love
- ✧ Are social from the beginning
- ✧ Highly alert
- ✧ All important memories keep stored

**Human development
takes place between
the polarities of
symbiotic needs and
the desire for
autonomy.**



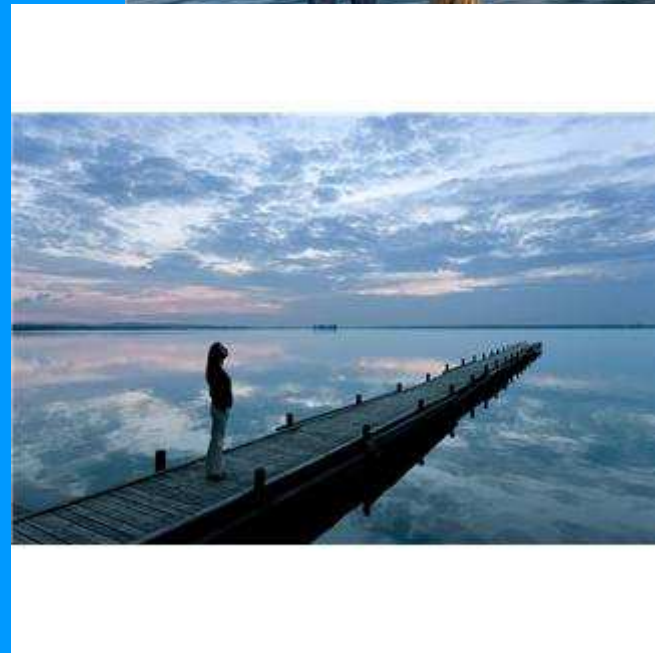
Symbiotic Neecessities

- ❖ Being nurtured
- ❖ Being kept warm
- ❖ Having body contact
- ❖ Being held
- ❖ Being seen
- ❖ Being understood
- ❖ Getting support
- ❖ Belonging to others
- ❖ Being welcomed



Desires for Autonomy

- ❖ to gain confidence in one's own perceptions, feelings and thoughts
- ❖ to rely on one's own ability to act
- ❖ to find inner support in oneself
- ❖ to do things oneself
- ❖ to act independently
- ❖ to be free
- ❖ to make one's own decisions
- ❖ ...



What makes a healthy development of the human psyche possible?

Symbiotic needs for warmth, protection, holding, love and belonging are fulfilled by a child's mother and father.

Desires for autonomy are supported by both parents.



The most powerful emotional
experience of every human being
is

the
symbiotic
relationship
with their
mother.



Symbiotically every child is doubly bonded to their mother:

passively: the emotional qualities of the mother are an unconscious imprint on the child's psyche

actively: the child adapts to their mother and tries to support her needs



Children love their mothers however they are.

For a child, his relationship to his mother can become a symbiotic trauma.

The child is helpless and incapable of establishing a safe, holding relationship with his mother who is traumatised (eg by loss of a baby, violence, wars, sexual abuse, not being loved by her parents).



Traumatised mothers can

- Be emotionally unavailable
- Disrespect boundaries
- Carry heavy emotional burdens
- Act unpredictably
- Be extremely emotionally needy
- Be violent

Their psychic structure is split.



A life experience becomes not only stressful but traumatic

if we face a mortal risk, and are incapable of dealing with it with the help of our stress programs. Our stress programs make the situation even worse. Therefore we end up in a state of helplessness and agony and we have to stop the stress programs.



The Trauma-emergency-mechanism consists of:

Immobilization

Freezing

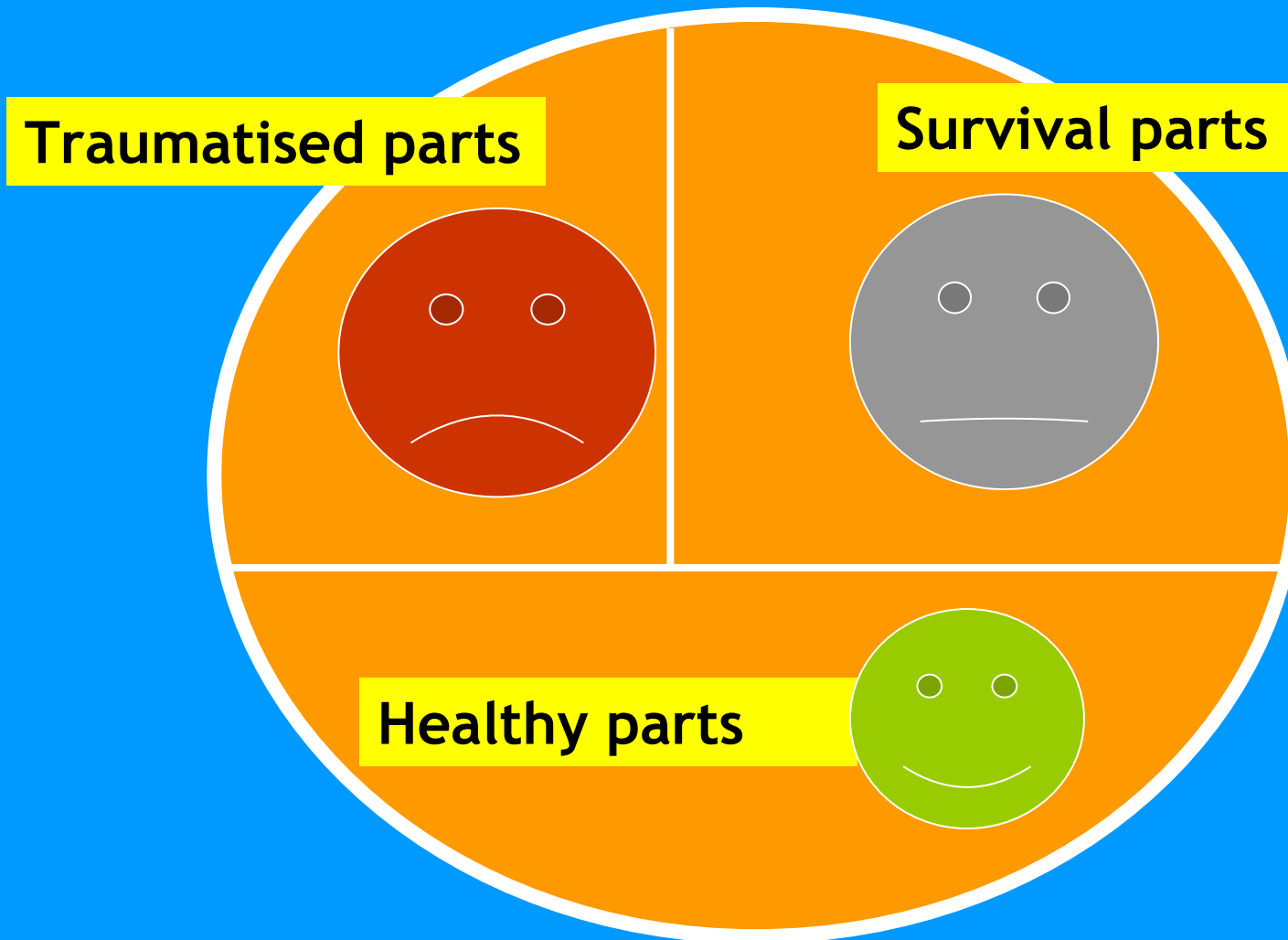
Dissociating

Splitting in the psychic structure

It helps us to survive.



Splits in the personality and identity structure after a traumatic experience



The trauma of parents (trauma of existential threat, trauma of loss, bonding trauma) continue in their children as a symbiotic trauma.

Healthy psychic structures of a child

- ❖ Own life force
- ❖ Own will to live
- ❖ Healthy basic needs
- ❖ Joy to move
- ❖ Joy to play
- ❖ Joy to learn
- ❖ Openness, creativity
- ❖ ...



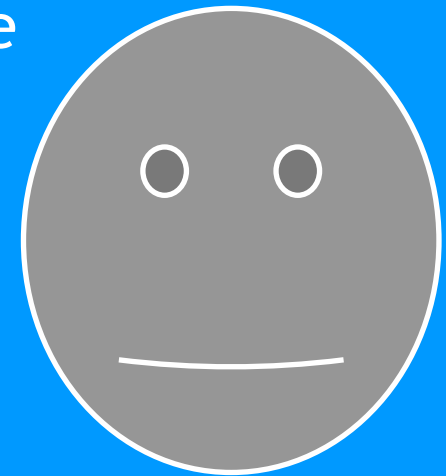
Characteristics of the traumatised part in a symbiotic trauma

- ❖ Desperation that there is no love from the parents
- ❖ Feeling abandoned and extremely lonely
- ❖ Terrified it will die
- ❖ Suppressed rage
- ❖ Suppressed mourning
- ❖ Extreme withdrawal
- ❖ Tendency to give up



Characteristics of the survival strategies in symbiotic trauma

- ❖ Struggling with the parents to get their love
- ❖ Idealisation of mother and father
- ❖ Identification with the survival strategies of the parents
- ❖ Wanting to rescue the parents
- ❖ Merging with the traumatised parts of parents or grandparents
- ❖ Denying one's own trauma

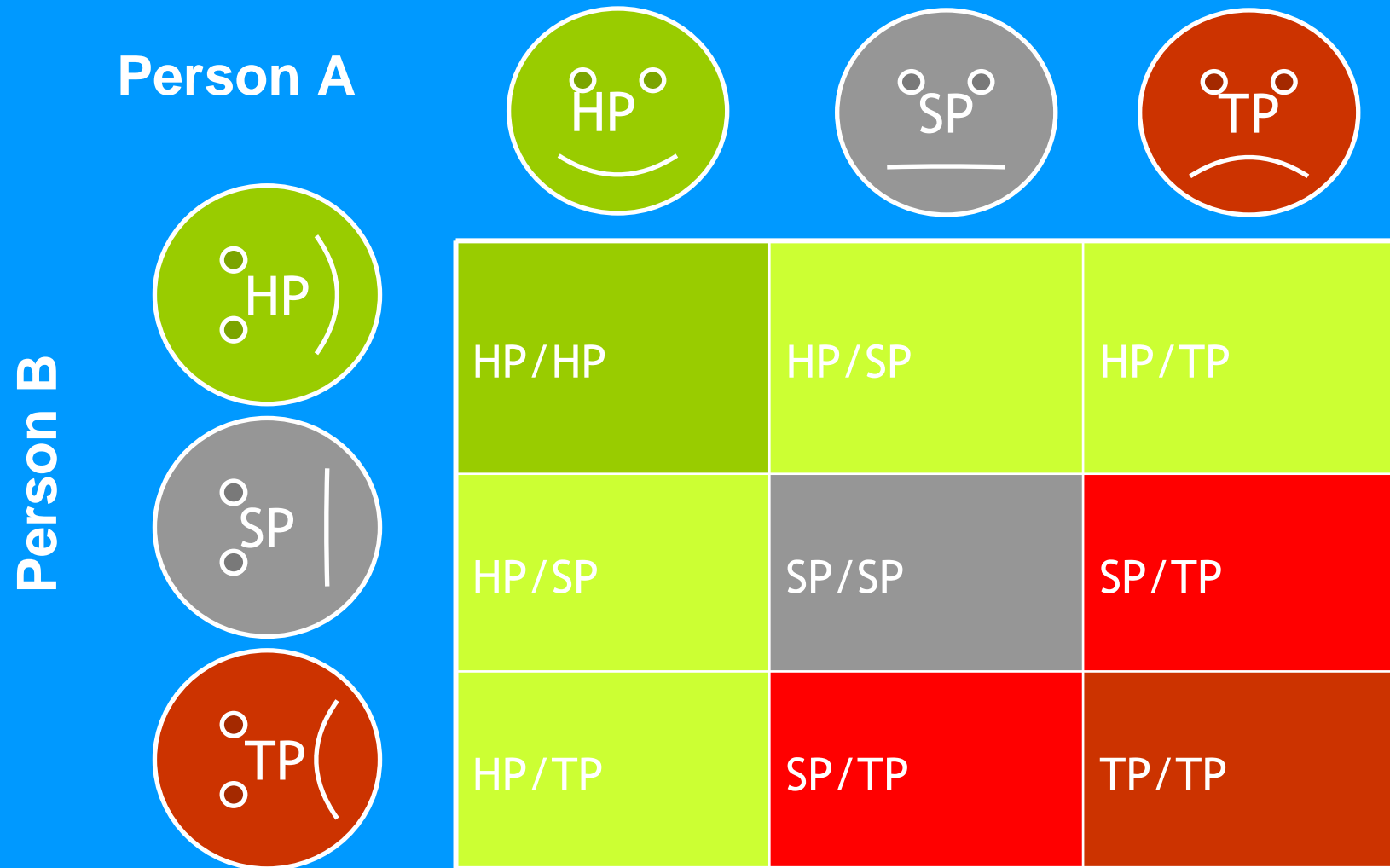


Consequences of a symbiotic trauma

- ❖ Living another person's identity
- ❖ Inability to distinguish between ones own feelings and those taken over from others
- ❖ Lifelong symbiotic entanglement with the parents
- ❖ Symbiotic entanglement in all other close relationships
- ❖ Psychic problems of all sorts (anxiety, hyperactivity, depression, addictions, psychosis ...)



Healthy or symbiotically entangled relationships?



Characteristics of symbiotic entanglements

- ❖ Interactions between SP/SP, SP/TP
- ❖ Possessive and clinging behaviour
- ❖ Pushing the other to change
- ❖ Disapproval, a weight of expectations
- ❖ Inability to understand each other
- ❖ Rage, hate and aggression
- ❖ Dominance, rebellion, submission
- ❖ Exploitation
- ❖ Illusions of love, forgiving and reconciling



Steps towards resolving a symbiotic trauma

- ❖ Learning to distinguish between realities and illusions
- ❖ Learning to distinguish between our feelings and those of others
- ❖ Finding back to one's own healthy needs
- ❖ Learning to say "No"
- ❖ Disentangling from symbiotic entangled relationships
- ❖ No longer trying to save others
- ❖ Being neither victim nor perpetrator
- ❖ Acknowledging one own's trauma
- ❖ Living healthy and constructive relationships



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Literature

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