

Practical Strategies for Trauma Therapy: Containment and Distancing

The following strategies are adapted from Dr. Sandra Paulsen's work with the Early Trauma Protocol.

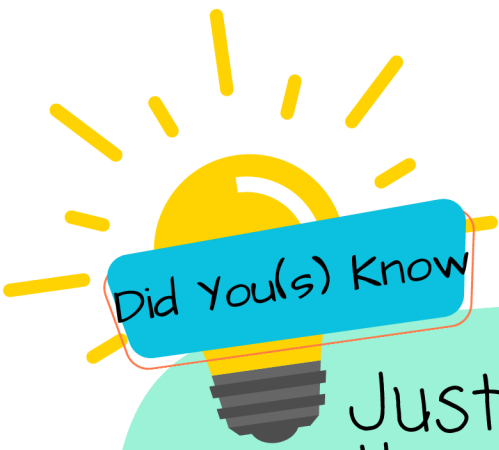
Paulsen, S. & O'Shea, K. (2017). When There Are No Words :Repairing Early Trauma and Neglect From the Attachment Period With EMDR Therapy. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Paulsen, S. (2007). Looking through the eyes of trauma and dissociation: An illustrated guide for EMDR therapists and clients. Bainbridge Island, WA: Highpoint Press.

Dr. Paulsen draws from the work of Dr. Jaak Panksepp regarding hardwired affective circuits.

Panksepp, J., & Biven, L. (2012). The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

**Worksheet design and plural-inclusive language adaptation by
Melissa Barsotti, LCSW, Mindful Therapy Practice (2025).**



Containing

Just because a thought/picture/video/flashback/memory pops up in the mind, it does NOT mean that you(s) have to sit with it in that moment at that time.

If you(s) are not in a place to give the mental space or emotional attention needed to a

- thought
- memory
- picture
- flashback video
- body memory

it is okay to gently put it away in an imaginal container until you(s) have the energy and resources to return to it.

THIS IS NOT REPRESSION

Containing is intentional. containing means you(s) will come back to the memory, etc., but only when there are the proper resources to do so.

CONTAINING IS A WISE RESOURCE

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Creating and Using Your Imaginal Container

Examples of imaginal containers include:

- Storage Box
- Metal Vault
- Jar with lid
- Wooden Box
- Treasure Chest
- Time Capsule

You(s) are invited to take a moment to imagine your own safe container. Consider these gentle questions as you create it in your mind:

1. What does your container look like?
2. What is it made of?
3. Does it have a secure lid or closure?
4. Where can you place this container so it feels safe and distant enough not to cause harm?

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Suggestions for times you(s) may want to use your imaginal container

For support after trauma work, you(s) may want to tuck the memories into the container, allowing yourself/selves/system, space and safety as you(s) leave and return to life outside of the therapeutic room/space.



You(s) can also put away memories, etc in a container prior to an interview, job, meeting, engagement, etc.

Essentially, only be with these difficult memories/thoughts/events/videos/pictures when you(s) have the right amount of energy, mental space, and resources to attend to them with the perspective of the most Resourced You.

We do not want to repeat the past when you(s) were flooded with something and you(s) did not have the proper resources and support.

If it feels right, you(s) are invited to take a moment to reflect on when you(s) might choose to use your imaginal container.

I/we might use my/our imaginal container when...



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Exploring Shame Through the Distancing Technique



Trauma therapists often use a Distancing Technique to bring more objectivity when looking at a memory, event, or thought. This can help You(s) see the experience with greater accuracy, instead of only through the painful narratives or lenses carried from the past.



Before moving forward, I invite you(s) to pause for a gentle system check-in. Notice together how each member of your system is feeling about continuing this exploration. Some may feel ready, others may feel uncertain, and all responses are welcome.

If it feels supportive, you(s) may invite the Most Resourced Member to participate in this process. Or, you(s) may pose the question to the system: Which member feels most capable and willing to participate right now?

Do we have agreement from the system for this member to take part? Take your time, and notice what decision feels right for you(s).

Let's take the example of looking at shame. Sometimes, directly stepping into the experience feels overwhelming. Distancing allows You(s) to observe it safely, with more clarity and compassion.



Exploring Shame Through the Distancing Technique

If it feels right, you(s) may choose one or both of these ways of creating distance:

Looking Through a Window:

Imagine your most resourced self/selves sitting safely inside, looking out a window across a mile or more. From this distance, you(s) notice how shame is represented in another window, far away.

Using a Stick Figure/Cartoon:

Imagine shame being portrayed by a simple stick figure drawing. This figure is not you(s), nor anyone you(s) know. It has nothing to do with your own story or experiences. It is simply a way to observe shame from the outside, safely and objectively.

You(s) are invited to use either of these options, or create your own way of placing shame at a distance that feels right for your system.

Reflection

If you(s) feel comfortable and have permission, what do you(s) notice as you(s) observe shame from a distance in this way?

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Exploring Shame Through the Distancing Technique

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2024), shame is "a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong behavior or foolish behavior."

For many, shame often carries the sense of being wrong or not right at the core of oneself.

Exploring What Is Wrong or Not Right:

Now, as you(s) observe this stick figure from a distance, gently allow your imagination to consider: What could possibly be 'wrong' or 'not right' with what you(s) see unfolding.

Notice what comes up. Then, with curiosity, ask:



What IS WRONG with this picture?



What IS NOT RIGHT in this picture?



What characters are present?



Is there someone to blame?



Does this person deserve this blame?



Does this person deserve this Shame?

Reflection

As you(s) explore this, notice how different system members are responding. What messages, impressions, or reactions are you(s) receiving from each member?

If it feels supportive, you(s) may also thank each member for sharing their perspective.

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Exploring Shame Through the Distancing Technique

Continued Reflection

As you(s) explore this, notice how different system members are responding. What messages, impressions, or reactions are you(s) receiving from each member?

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Finding the Right Distance Noticing and Calming the Emotional Charge

Continued Reflection

As you(s) observe the drawing or image in your mind, notice the emotional charge that arises. Using a 0–10 scale, where 0 is calm or neutral, and 10 is the most intense. Gently check where the charge is for you(s) right now.

If the charge feels too high, for any member of your system, you(s) are invited to adjust. You(s) might change the drawing, shift the image, alter the stick figures, or increase the distance from the window, until the charge lowers to a level that feels more tolerable, ideally below a 5.

Please know these steps can also be done entirely in your imagination without drawing them out. You(s) are welcome to return to this distancing practice anytime it feels supportive, wherever you(s) may be.



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