

MULTIPLE SELVES EXERCISE

When we think of who we are, we have a sense of a unified self that is the same throughout the days, months and years of our lives. There is a sense that over time we have changed but also that there is a consistency of who we are.

When we observe our experiences more closely, we can start to notice that we have multiple ways of behaving depending on the prevailing emotion and associated thoughts which impact how we react. That is each emotion impacts our behaviours, urges, roles and thoughts in specific ways. For example in a situation where we are driving and someone overtakes us forcing us to slow down, our anxious self takes over first to slow down to be safe while thinking “the road is so dangerous, can I keep myself safe here” but the angry self focus on the other driver thinking “What an idiot, he could have caused me an accident, I want to tell him off!” associated with the urge to hunk and confront the driver. These two emotional selves are there in us always, coming out, taking over to protect us and keep us safe. They make us think, feel and react in different ways.

The goal is to experience those different parts or selves in a balanced and healthy way. The problem arises when we are stuck in the mode of being angry, or anxious, or sad which limit our ability to think clearly, be flexible and to problem-solve effectively. We can also become confused by their conflicting needs and urges. We can have mixed feelings about a situation such as when we feel ignored by someone. A part of us feels angry wanting to confront but another part feels sad and hurt wanting to withdraw, while the anxious self wants to leave and avoid.

The following exercise called “exploring the multiple selves” aims to understand our different emotional selves (angry, anxious and sad) as well as to cultivate a compassionate self which can regulate the other emotional selves. The compassionate self is being at our best, wise and strong with an overall perspective, to deal with the situation with calm and resilience.

Anger, anxiety and sadness are reactions once we perceived threat or losses. We all have basic human desires to be accepted, to be safe and we all fear to be alone or rejected. Often, we may feel that we are not in control or trapped. The anxiety self is triggered when we doubt our ability to meet a specific challenge. There is a fear of not being good enough or not being strong or wise enough. The angry self tends to criticise, blame, attack and shame others when our needs or expectations are not met. The angry self can turn also inward, attacking the self with harsh self-criticism. The sad self can grieve and feel the loss of something valued and cherished. In addition, the emotional selves of anger, anxiety and sadness are often in conflict with one another. For instance, the angry self will think that the anxious self is ineffective and the sad self weak while the anxious self is fearful of the angry self. The compassionate self has more ability to regulate the emotional selves, having more perspective and understand for better problem-solving abilities. This exercise encourages us to cultivate our compassionate self so it becomes stronger and wiser. The aim of this multiple selves exercise is to understand ourselves more, to promote tolerance, integration and transformation.

To begin this exercise you can think about how your multiple selves behave in general. You can also choose a recent event where you were struggling such as arguing with someone, or a situation where you failed or where disappointed or frustrated to see how each selves experienced the situation.

	ANGRY SELF	ANXIOUS SELF	SAD SELF	COMPASSIONATE SELF
Motive: what do you want to do?				
Attention: What are you paying attention to?				
Thoughts: What are you thinking?				
Body: What do you feel in your body?				
Action: What do you want to do?				
Memories: What are your memories of similar situations?				
How do you normally settle?				
What does the angry self think of ...				
What does the anxious self think of...				
What does the compassionate self think of...				

This handout was modified from Compassion-Focused Therapy and was written by Marie Bloomfield, Clinical Psychologist, M. Psychol., MAPS. March 2020.

Website: www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au

For more information please email marie@bloomfieldpsychology.com.au