

Chapter 3.3 Resolving Internal Conflict: How to Free Billy From Dahmer's Grip

This chapter describes a process for resolving internal conflicts. At a less intense level, we all have internal conflicts. Use of will power can be helpful, but it often backfires. Billy had many internal conflicts. In order to survive Dahmer, he had learned to be numb to any emotion. He still believed it was dangerous to feel anything, and yet he wanted to feel alive and feel emotions like anyone else. He wanted to relax and feel comfortable, and yet he still believed that he had to be on guard all the time or he would be killed. I assume that every part of a person has a positive intent; the result may be negative, but the intent is positive. Resolution of an internal conflict involves finding a common ground between the conflicting parts and creating more effective ways of accomplishing the positive intent.

I was snorkeling off Pelican Beach in Belize. About thirty feet off shore a wall of rocks had been built in about 5 feet of water. The rocks were about two feet below the surface. As I was going over this wall of rocks, I saw a moray eel with a head and body about four inches across and about four feet long. I could see the body as it went under the rocks. The stories that I have heard about moray eels terrified me. I have heard that the eel will bite and grab hold and the jaws will lock. It will expand against the rocks and there is no way to get free. There are stories of divers trying to kill the eel with a knife, but as their air ran out, they resorting to cutting off a foot to get free. I made as little movement as possible as I floated over the eel.

Jeffrey Dahmer's hold of Billy was like the moray eel and persisted even after Dahmer's death. In his head Billy still heard Dahmer's words, "You will never be free of me. I will be with you always." Billy had beliefs about what he needed to do to survive. "I must always be on guard or I'll be dead." Even after the newspaper accounts of Dahmer's death, Billy didn't believe he was dead and thought he might be back anytime. He felt he needed to feel numb—to be dead to the world—in order to survive. Billy said that he wanted to feel emotions like anyone else. He wanted to cry even if that was painful, so he would know he was alive; yet he didn't believe that was possible. The challenge for me was to help Billy break the hold, which the memory of Dahmer still exerted on him.

The first step in his believing that change was possible was having him experience a reduction in his level of anxiety, which was accomplished with the use of the fast phobia cure. The challenge was how to help him resolve the internal conflicts. I asked him to hold out his hands, and told him see one side of the conflict in one hand and see the other side of the conflict in the other hand. On one hand, he believed he must be alert and on guard all the time, or he would again be a victim, and maybe die. On the other hand, he wanted to get his life back – to feel normal and to be able to relax. Another internal conflict was that he wanted to be able to cry—to be able to feel normal emotions—to feel that he was

alive. However, another part of him was afraid to let his guard down.

Another conflict was revealed in an interesting way. I had him make a mental picture of Dahmer. I asked him to experiment by moving the picture closer. As would be expected, the feelings of fear intensified. As he was following my request to move the picture away, he became terrified that he would die. His terror resulted from the times he was tied up with Dahmer hitting him. Dahmer was acutely aware when Billy was not focusing his attention on him. In that situation, one defense is to dissociate—to see the situation from above and feel like it is happening to someone else. When a person dissociates, blinking slows and the eyes focus straight ahead as if on a distant object. Dahmer evidently picked this up. Billy felt if he did not pay attention to Dahmer, he would be killed. When I asked him to move the mental picture of Dahmer away, that fear returned as a flashback. Billy wanted to forget Dahmer, but was afraid he would die if he did. The goal was to resolve these conflicts – but how?

Our culture often views problems using the analogy of a battle, in which one side wins and the other side loses. Most people think of their internal struggles in this way. Quitting smoking should obviously win over continuing to smoke. Losing weight should win over continuing to overeat. However, battles won that way are often short-lived. Will power is used to suppress one side, and often that side rebels and turns the tables.

Professor David Zarefsky teaches a course for The Teaching Company called “Argumentation: The Study of Effective Reasoning.” In his notes about how to argue effectively, he says, “People argue when some controversy or disagreement exists between them. The assent of the other party is desired and must be freely given. Respect for the other party and a desire and confidence in the results make it necessary that the assent be freely given. A person who argues accepts risks, since the person can be shown to be wrong, which can be unsettling and involves loss of face. The person also risks having to alter his or her belief system to take into account something new. The parties assume these risks mutually.”

I think this can be applied to an argument between the two sides of an internal conflict. Each side should respect the other side. One of the principles of neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is that each part of a person has a positive intent. In other words, each part is trying to do something for the person. Each side should be able to listen to the other side and consider the possibility of being able to gain knowledge or resources.

In the second session Billy began to deal with the conflict between wanting to feel emotions, and fearing letting down his guard in any way. I wrote down on one sheet of paper, “I want to feel alive,” and put it on the floor on the right. I wrote, “I can’t let my guard down” and put it on the floor to the left. Months later I asked him what had helped him and he said, “You put those papers on the floor, and I could see that I had options.”

I asked him what being on guard accomplished for him. He said he must constantly remember what happened. I asked what remembering accomplished for him, which was even more important. He felt he needed to be cautious... if he was cautious all the time, he felt that he was in control. I asked him what being in control accomplished for him and which was more important. Billy said, "I don't want to let anyone get hurt. If you don't trust anyone, then you can't be let down." I asked him what that accomplished for him, and he said that he wanted to be level, that he didn't want the intense fears.

Then I dealt with the other side, and had him look to the right at the other sheet of paper. Feeling emotions---what would that do for him which was even more important? He said that he wanted to be able to cry, to have passion in his life, to love his wife and kids more. I asked him what experiencing emotions would give him and which was even more important, and he said he thought that experiencing emotions would make life easier.

Then I could point out to him that the two sides have similar goals. The goal of being level (which meant not having such intense fears) and the goal of life being easier were similar. The next step was to explore what one side could offer the other side.

He felt that feeling more emotions could make him more vulnerable, and the part that wanted to feel more could use some protection. So this part borrowed, from the other side of him, the ability to be on guard and protect himself.

The side of himself that keeps his guard up realized that to be more level, he needed to have some positive feelings to offset the fear, pain and numbness. This side needed that feeling which the other side could provide.

I asked him to hold his hands out and see the side that wanted to feel emotions in the right hand and to see the side that felt he needed to keep his guard up in the left hand. I told him to slowly begin to move his hands together. I asked him if any part of him had any objection to the two sides merging. He nodded, "No." As his hands came together and his fingers intertwined, he leaned back in the chair, his expression softened, and his hands moved to his chest. This procedure is called a visual squash and is useful in integrating opposing beliefs or viewpoints. Other internal conflicts were dealt with in a manner similar to that described above.

Emotional Management Suggestions

To help yourself in dealing with an internal conflict, you need to be aware of the conflict. Physical symptoms are often the result of unresolved internal conflict. An assumption of (NLP) is that every part of you has a positive intent. One hint is to notice how you express the physical complaint, and assume that this expression is literally true. "I have a pressure headache." "I feel like I can't swallow" (what someone is pushing you to accept). "She gets under my skin." "My skin crawls."

Go inside and ask your unconscious what having that symptom is trying to do for you. One man had frequent headaches, which prevented him from working. The headache was essentially saying, "When the pressure gets so high, I am going to force you to quit work for a while." The challenge is to find other ways to fulfill the positive intent. This man had a lifelong pattern of committing himself to projects without considering how he was going to get the time or energy to fulfill the commitments. After he changed this pattern, his headaches became infrequent. Sometimes, when he felt a headache coming on, he was able to bargain with the part of him that produced the headache. He said to himself, "If you hold off the headache today and allow me to finish this commitment, I promise I will take a break tomorrow." The headache held off, but, of course, he had to honor his promise to take a break the next day.

Having to rely on will power is another indication of an internal conflict. The power of the will is used to keep another part of the person under control. The person often views that part of himself as his enemy. If that part takes over, then the person may say to himself like the comedian Flip Wilson quipped, "The devil made me do it." The person disowns part of himself. A presupposition of NLP is that every part of each of us has a positive intention. I have often asked people who are struggling with their weight what the part of them that overeats wants to accomplish. Some responses have been: "It pleases my mother." "I want to get my money's worth." "It is the one thing that I can do for myself." "Eat because the people in China are starving." "My mother believed that as long as you were sitting at the table, you should be eating." "It is a sin to waste food, so I have to eat everything on my plate." "As long as I am eating I won't be lonely." "If I am fat, then guys won't hit on me, and my husband won't be jealous."

If you are achieving a goal through will power, I am not advising you to give up that accomplishment. Ask the part of yourself, that you are controlling through will power, what that part is trying to do for you. I assume that part has a positive intent, although the end result may be negative or self-destructive. Go inside and wait for an answer. Often the answers seem strange. If you have been trying to get rid of that part of yourself, it might take a while for that part to trust enough to give an answer. Once you have an answer, then you need to find more effective ways of accomplishing the same thing. It is best to come up with at least three new options.