

Chapter 3.9 Identification with Dahmer

In this chapter I describe how Billy's identification with Dahmer was manifested in various mannerisms, sometimes with outbursts of anger. We tend to identify with who has the power and control, and victims identify with the abuser, particularly if the abuse has extended over a period of time. The victim then often hates the part of himself or herself that is like the abuser.

Early in therapy Billy talked a lot about how distressed he was when he had mannerisms like Dahmer. He said, "He had a northern accent. When I am angry I have a northern accent. I tend to dress like Dahmer dressed. He would hold his lips a certain way--a thin line, pursed together. He had a certain look in his eyes. He rotated his body a certain way. Dahmer would lunge and hit and choke and not say a word. He loped when he walked. He was silent. It was hard to tell when he was angry; there was no way to know before he attacked. He had a lot of charisma. He could convince anybody of anything."

Billy identified with Dahmer when he was angry. Billy had felt that his life depended on reading Dahmer's moods, and he retains this ability to pick up the nuances of other people's emotions. His anger was triggered by an expression or tone of voice that indicated that someone was not listening or was making fun of him. I helped him to change the look or tone of voice so that it had less effect on him. Often a parent or sibling becomes a role model, and the identification is useful. It is a problem when the person identifies with abusive behavior or mistreatment. The identification and resultant undesired behavior often occurs at a time of stress, particularly when the other has an expression, gesture or tone of voice that mimics that of the abuser. The person often hates the part of himself that behaved like the abuser. The frequent comment, "I don't know what got into me. I'm not like that."

In the preceding chapter I discussed creating an alternate past and how that influenced identification with the abuser. So the creation of an imagined past can be quite effective. Billy's memories of Dahmer are coded in his brain cells. Changing that coding in Billy's brain did not change Dahmer. However, creating an alternate view of Dahmer as being more human and having some positive intentions changed the effect of the identification. Another way of stating it would be that Billy identified with a softer, humanized Dahmer, and this was more useful to him. In the later stages of therapy, I asked Billy what part of Dahmer would be useful to identify with. He said that Dahmer was able to talk to anybody and was very convincing. Billy said he would like to be able to talk to people and have influence on them as Dahmer did. However, Dahmer had lied and he didn't want to do that.

Emotional Management Suggestions

So what can you do if you have an undesirable behavior which occurs at times of emotional stress? If you are mistreating others as you were once mistreated, you are acting out of identification with the person who mistreated you. There are usually triggers that initiate the behavior. The content is less important than how the person looked or how the person sounded. First, figure out whether you respond more to what you see or what you hear. It is easier to change the trigger than it is to eliminate it. If you respond to a tone of voice, you could make the voice sound like Sylvester the cat, or Mickey Mouse, or your favorite singer, or blend in with your favorite or silliest music. If you respond to a certain expression, you could see the person as a toy soldier, or as a paper doll, or any cartoon character. Select the changes that are most effective in minimizing your emotional response. Then go back in time and imagine making those changes in situations in which you previously had little control. Then go forward in time, and imagine making the changes in situations which are likely to occur in your future. The more you repeat this, the sooner the new program will become automatic.

Another possibility is creation of an alternate past as described in the previous chapter.