

MAKING PEACE WITH YOUR SUBPERSONALITIES

Background and context

Subpersonality is a common term used in many schools of psychology. Subpersonalities are considered to be characters that emerge at a time when the individual is overwhelmed by a particular event, experience or feeling. They are usually thought of as personal constructs designed to help us deal with psychosocial situations. The problem is that many of the subpersonalities that were conceived at the time of incredible fear, anxiety, and trauma, have now set up residency to such an extent that they are no longer transitory forces in our lives, helping us to manage a crisis. They have become dominant forces, displacing the authentic self.

At Reach we think of subpersonalities as a community that makes up the individual. It's helpful to think of the self as a community but sadly in most instances, this is a community working against itself, which is one of the primary purposes of psychotherapy and personal development - that is, to persuade this community to pull together and create harmony and well-being.

In this worksheet, we are going to discuss how to achieve this outcome. You may need some help to do this although there is a lot one can do by oneself. But don't be afraid to seek help if you need it.

Even though it may be challenging at times, this is a very rewarding experience, so don't be intimidated by the steps you are invited to take. Let us begin creating a community that is focused on healing and positive outcomes.

1. Identifying and naming your subpersonalities

If you are stuck, then no meaningful progress can be made until you've identified and named your subpersonalities. This may take some time and will involve regular periods of reflection, so that you can 'listen in' and hear their whispers. These subpersonalities are always expressing themselves in one way or another, each vying for some attention or control. There are many subpersonalities, far too many to name here, but amongst the main characters are:

The people pleaser, who doesn't know how to say no and is always looking for ways to fit in. There's the chameleon, who changes his form according to his audience. Then there's the caretaker, who looks after everyone, often at her own expense. The martyr does the same thing but generally more dramatically. Then there's the star, who must be centre of attention and will do whatever it takes to claim the limelight. The perfect one never makes any mistakes and is intolerant of others who do. Amongst the other big influencers is the controller. She must be in charge as no one else can do the job as well as she can. Then there's the manipulator. He's always trying to get his way and will do whatever is required to achieve the outcome he seeks. The saboteur is another powerful character in this drama, dismantling anything that threatens her autonomy.

It should be stated for clarity that there is usually one subpersonality who is the primary influencer, and finding him/her can unveil the inner workings of the whole community.

The more we explore our inner terrain, the more we'll find there are many influences that play themselves out in our day to day lives, but unless we're paying attention, we're unlikely to notice them. This is because they are often camouflaged in justification, pretence, and denial. They are

deeply connected to our defence mechanisms, which are busy trying to protect us, even when we are wrong. If you look within, with an honest, enquiring mind, you will discover they are not difficult to find.

2. Understanding your subpersonalities

Each subpersonality has a unique set of qualities and characteristics and to invite them on a journey of positive change, we need to understand their traits and idiosyncrasies. This means getting to know them. This will take time, requires listening keenly, and patience. This is not something that can be hurried. In practice it means having many silent moments with each of the main characters and finding out what makes them tick.

You will find that there is always a particular quality that drives and inspires each personality, and if you can understand what that is, that's where you can build a relationship. We call this conscious intimacy. It's where you create a connection which emerges out of self-reflection. This leads to a knowing and understanding beyond logic and the intellect. This is why you have to listen and feel your way into these relationships. The more time you spend asking 'who are you really' and listening for the response, the more each subpersonality will tell you its story.

3. How they express themselves

The more you develop a relationship with these subpersonalities, the more their secrets will become clear, and you will come to understand all the ways in which they act out and express themselves in your life.

Remember, the subpersonality is trying to survive by any means necessary. It's always looking for food (energy) and as with all energy, survival is paramount. It is playing a role that it considers essential to its own survival, and at some point, this was a role that benefited the whole organism, but in the web of dysfunction that currently exists, that ship has long since sailed - and the original reason that this subpersonality was created is no longer visible. So, what we have is something that unknowingly takes us further away from who we are, keeping us trapped in the illusion that we are independent and free.

Again, it is observation, listening and patience that are required if we are to understand the many expressions of these subpersonalities. Look closely at your behaviour for the clues. Look honestly at your intentions and your relationships because there you will find much of what you're looking for.

4. Understanding the relationships between subpersonalities

Once you understand the role and personality that each member of the community has, the next important task is to understand how they relate to one another. When you look closely at your community, you'll see groupings. Even though some subpersonalities may stand alone, by and large they are grouped together in dyads and triads.

In this phase of the process, your focus should be on understanding what these groupings have in common. There is usually at least one characteristic that holds the group together, and if you can

find what the common denominator is, you can begin to establish new conversations, built on mutual interest rather than self-interest, and mend the fractures in the system as you go.

It's important to try and find their common language. What binds these different personalities? You'll find the subpersonalities come together where the other members of that group serve their needs. The more closely you look, the more you'll see the threads that bind them. And if you can make connections, you can create a harmonious community. It's important not to force this process... you just need to keep listening, waiting, and negotiating; and a willingness to go forward together will be established.

5. Creating a peace treaty

By now you've named the subpersonalities, developed an understanding of their nature, examined how they act out in your life, built a mind map of their relationships, and now you can begin to facilitate conversations between the different members of the community. At this point, a peace treaty can be established... a new mission statement.

Here's one way to put together a peace treaty. In your mind's eye, see the key members of the community of the self, usually around 5 or 6, and choose a venue and context that works best for you. You could see the group sitting together around a table, or on a beach, gathered around a campfire or some other setting that you prefer. This is a meeting of hearts, where each one is going to get a chance to speak and everyone in attendance will listen keenly. If you have the privacy and you prefer, you can say what needs to be said aloud, giving each member of the group a voice, a say. The more sincerely this is done, the more the sweet fruit of reconciliation, hope and contentment will be experienced.

It's important that each member expresses its fears and concerns, as well as its desires and hopes. Each subpersonality has the need for survival, and we need to be mindful of this, in order that we can offer each one reassurance and the promise of a better tomorrow. We need to gently persuade each subpersonality that collaboration is where the greatest sense of well-being and joy will be found, and that the old narrative of self-preservation is now redundant and a new paradigm is needed, one based on kindness and cooperation.

This is a very personal journey and should be taken in a way that best suits you. There's no right or wrong way. What's provided here is a template that has been tried and tested over many years to very good effect.

Another way to establish a peace treaty is striking up conversations with your subpersonalities through journaling, which can be very effective in establishing a dialogue and creating a new paradigm.

Whatever method you choose, as long as it is done with an honest and sincere heart, the results will be marvellous and the destination divine.

