

# Coherence Therapy

## Clinical Note

Note #4 (v2.0)

Topic: Coherence Therapy for low self-worth: How to orient the client

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*This Note describes how to begin Coherence Therapy with clients who want to dispel their low self-worth. The start of the work is slightly different for low self-worth than with most other symptoms in that it is best to begin by giving the client a short explanation, a cognitive map, of the approach.*

*It is not the norm in Coherence Therapy to provide the client initially with a cognitive map of the process. Usually this is done only to clear away certain types of resistance if and when they occur. Low self-worth is the exception to this rule. To see why this so, recall that for integration of a discovered pro-symptom position, the client's cognition in the neocortex lets go of the anti-symptom view of the symptom and, as a result of experiences during sessions, comes around and verbally recognizes (matches, aligns with) the pro-symptom emotional truth of the symptom discovered experientially in the limbic system.*

*However, clients working on low self-worth have a particular difficulty doing this. The initial, conscious, anti-symptom position of people with low self-worth tends to be extra strong in viewing the symptom (low self-worth) as all bad, something only to oppose and counteract, and a permanent truth. This extra-strong anti-symptom stance makes it harder for these clients to make sense cognitively of seeing their low self-worth as important to have, even after in-session, experiential encounters with its importance and coherence. This difficulty in bringing their conscious, cognitive view into alignment with the underlying emotional truth of the symptom is a type of resistance to integration—a cognitive dissonance that predictably slows or blocks the Coherence Therapy process with low self-worth.*

*You avoid this problem by giving the client a cognitive map at the start of the work on low self-worth, and by referring to it again as needed. Details follow.*

### Initial cognitive map for client

*Say to client, "The key to unlocking your low self-worth is in one simple sentence that I'll give you now. Then we'll start using this key. The key itself is simple but it takes persistence and diligence to use it successfully. It's a process that might take 2 or 12 or 20 sessions. Here's the key: Whenever you start going into those negative thoughts or feelings about yourself, it means that some big dilemma would start cropping up if you didn't.*

*"I'll give you a card with that sentence on it: 'Whenever I start going into those negative thoughts or feelings about myself, it means that some big dilemma would start cropping up if I didn't.'*

Then tell client, “It’s never at all apparent that some big dilemma would start cropping up if you didn’t dive into low self-worth, because the low self-worth totally keeps it from cropping up very, very effectively. That’s the whole point. What we’re going to do is uncover and face the specific, big dilemmas that you’ve been solving or eluding in that way, so you’ll see for yourself what I mean and this will become real to you rather than an abstract idea. And then we’ll find other, new ways that work for you to deal with those dilemmas. Are you OK with this approach? Shall we begin?”

Next you begin the experiential discovery and integration work, a process described in the Coherence Therapy Practice Manual. This Note does not review that process.

## Second stage of cognitive map

It can be fruitful to extend the client’s cognitive map after a first pro-symptom position has emerged. At that point, the first part of the cognitive map has become real to the client: he or she is now in touch with one specific, big dilemma that was successfully eluded by going into negative thoughts or feelings about self in some recent, concrete situation.

An example is a client who went into self-doubt and an “inner critic” type of harsh self-attack at work, right after his boss was scoffingly dismissive in response to the client proposing a certain approach to a project. The experiential discovery work on this incident surfaced an emotional truth that finally became verbalized as, “If I stayed self-validating after he talked to me like that, I would have seen the abusiveness of it, and then I’d feel more hurt and anger than I know how to handle or keep quiet about. He fires people who talk back. Trashing myself feels bad but it kept me quiet, kept my job, and kept me from feeling a lot of worse torment.”

With the client in touch for the first time with how the low self-worth was actually needed, next prompt client to see that client’s emotional truth shows the realness of the cognitive map, simply by reviewing client’s material: “That was our first use of the key: you found the particular, big dilemma that actually was present when you dove into trashing yourself so that it wouldn’t crop up: you would have recognized your boss’s abusiveness, you would have felt tormented by feelings of hurt and anger you don’t feel ready to handle, and you might have talked back and gotten fired. You found that you dove fast into negative self-talk because it’s a device for keeping yourself quiet, eluding all that danger—not because it’s truth about you.”

The cognitive map can then be extended a bit further by telling client, “We’re going to keep using the key in the same way. We’ll unlock and find the hidden dilemma that’s cropping up in every situation where you go into any form of negative thoughts or feelings about yourself. There’s a range of different dilemmas that people solve or elude by going into low self-worth, so we might very well find different ones for you in different situations. And the way we’ll find them is the same as how we did it here today: by replaying the situation without any negative thoughts or feelings about yourself. Then the dilemma crops up, and you feel it, and that’s how you recognize it. It’s not that you ingeniously figure out or analyze what the hidden dilemma is. No. That’s never conclusive. It’s by actually bumping into the dilemma as an experience that you discover it, and you bump into it in the replay by not going into low self-worth to elude it.”

Usually the best post-session task at this point is the integration task of real-time recognition, written out on another index card given to client. For example:

*Whenever I notice I'm going into negative thoughts or feelings about myself, that's now my SIGNAL to think, first, "Oh, there's some big dilemma now, and I'm keeping it from cropping up by going into this negative stuff about myself." And then, second, to think (either right then or later on, in hindsight), "What dilemma would I feel in this situation if I didn't go negative on myself to elude it?"*

As always, tailor the wording to fit the client's material and temperament. For description of the full process of discovery-integration-transformation of low self-worth, please see the *Coherence Therapy Practice Manual and Training Guide* as well as case examples of low self-worth in these publications:

Ecker, B. & Hulley, L. (2000). Depth-oriented brief therapy: Accelerated accessing of the coherent unconscious. In J. Carlson & L. Sperry (Eds.), *Brief therapy with individuals and couples* (pp. 161-190). Phoenix: Zeig, Tucker, & Theisen.

Ecker, B. & Hulley, L. (1996). *Depth oriented brief therapy: How to be brief when you were trained to be deep, and vice versa*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Advanced stage of cognitive map

As listed on the next three pages, there are over a dozen different, well-defined "big dilemmas" that are eluded by going into negative self-regard. These ordeals are encountered immediately when a person stops going into negative self-regard. Each of them—or rather, the avoidance of each of them—corresponds to a separate pro-symptom position for having low self-worth.

If the client has relatively strong ego strength and has already encountered two or more of these arduous dilemmas productively, he or she might be able to make good use of the complete list. Familiarity with the different possible dilemmas helps these clients recognize those that underly their own use of low self-worth. This in turn helps guide the in-session work of discovering and integrating pro-symptom positions.

The list on the following three pages is suitable for giving to such higher-ego-strength clients. (This version of the list is adapted from the version for therapists in the *Coherence Therapy Practice Manual*.) The therapist should emphasize that not all of the dilemmas necessarily apply.

**PLEASE NOTE:** It is of course a matter of clinical judgment to discern whether a particular client will benefit from this list or is likely to be emotionally destabilized by it. Each of the unrecognized dilemmas in the list is a type of emotional ordeal and entails revisiting unresolved pain, fear, loss, anger, etc. For some clients even handling one of these uncovered dilemmas at a time is quite daunting and requires a careful pace of small steps. The list should not be given to such clients.

## *The hidden basis of low self-worth*

When people go into low self-worth, there is much more going on than their negative thoughts, feelings or views about themselves.

Getting negative toward yourself feels bad, but it very effectively avoids even worse sufferings and dilemmas—and *that's why we do it*. This understanding is the key to dispelling low self-worth at its very basis.

The even-worse sufferings and dilemmas that people avoid by going into self-negativity are listed below. Once you recognize which ones are true for you, you can begin finding different solutions to them than plunging into negativity toward yourself. Once you have found viable, alternate solutions to all of the dilemmas that you now solve or avoid with self-negativity, your self-negativity simply won't be needed any more and so will stop arising. Warning: You might need a capable therapist's help to deal in a new, conscious way of dealing with these dilemmas, because they're hefty and tend to be loaded with unresolved hurt, fear, anger, deprivation and/or loss.

In the descriptions, "you" is the other person(s) in a specific situation you are working on—either a recent situation, or one far in the past—and could be a friend, your boss, a checkout clerk, your spouse or your parent(s).

The best way to identify which dilemmas are operating for you in a given situation is not by trying to figure it out or analyze yourself. Rather, simply replay the situation in your imagination, this time *without* getting negative about yourself, and just see what you start to experience by being in the situation that way. In other words, in the replay, at the point where you went negative about yourself, this time you will think, "If I don't go negative about myself right now—if instead I stay self-validating, ok with myself—" Persist in this for a minute or so, staying neutral or positive toward yourself, and just look over at the other person(s) in the situation. Something unwelcome or uncomfortable will start to crop up. Allow it, feel it, then find simple words for it, and write them down. You will then find that you have encountered one of the items listed below, in a personal form unique to yourself.

**1. A very big disconnect between you and me.** We're not in shared reality about me at all. You don't know me or see me. I'm on my own here. (This disconnect doesn't happen at all if I adopt and agree with your negative view of me.)

**2. Awareness of being mistreated or betrayed by you.** This shatters my "good" image of you, so it's a big loss—also disorienting? frightening? angering? (This disturbing awareness of mistreatment disappears if I agree with you about me and think: it's my fault and I deserved how you treated me.)

**3. Powerlessness over getting you to stop being critical, rejecting, abandoning, neglecting, abusive—and that's terrifying.** (This disappears if I think that how you treated me is my fault and deserved, because then I'd have power to change your behavior toward me—by changing *me* and becoming worthy enough to deserve positive treatment.)

*List continues*

## *The hidden basis of low self-worth*

**4. Great danger in how you will respond** if I feel and know I'm worthy and valid, and say and do what's true for me instead of saying and doing what you want me to. You would then criticize, reject, humiliate, abandon or attack me. (This danger disappears if I agree I am unworthy/invalid/etc., because then I can easily ignore whatever might be true for me, stay hidden and be safe.)

**5. Awareness of living out much less than my full potential.** Intensely painful grief over having lost so much of what my life could have been because I was led to live in a false negative view of myself. (This deep grief disappears if I agree I am unworthy/inadequate/ stupid/etc., because then no potential was unrealized.)

**6. Ongoing vulnerability and risk of failure, criticism, and rejection.** If I see myself as capable and worthy, I have to go for it in life. But if you stand up, you can be knocked down. (If I agree I am incompetent/stupid/etc., then I don't have to try for anything, keeping me safe from life's setbacks and blows. Industry and achievement are not expected of a fundamentally deficient self.)

**7. Existential weight of self-responsibility for how my life goes.** If I know I'm ok, I'd feel responsible for my life. (Seeing myself as fundamentally deficient takes me off the hook for being responsible to build my life in the world, keeping me free of all the effort and uncertainty that entails.)

**8. Crisis of faith in the world, human nature and/or God.** If I see myself as worthy and lovable, how do I make sense of the fact that it's a world in which I was allowed to be so harmed and abused? How am I to still see the world and/or God as just, sensible, and good? (This crisis of faith disappears if I agree that how I was treated was due to my own unworthiness.)

**9. Zero accountability, apology, remorse from parents for the harm they did to me.** Sure, "the best revenge is a good life," but if I move on into feeling good about myself and into a basic wellness going forward, I'm accepting getting no justice and no acknowledgement of being harmed and wronged by them, and that is utterly galling and unacceptable. (The injustice and nonaccountability disappear if I agree that how I was treated was my own fault, and due to my own unworthiness. Plus, the poor state of both my life and myself is the very evidence I'm shoving in my parents' face to get them to realize how they hurt me.)

**10. Quest for the caring attention and nurturance I didn't receive as a child.** I'm owed it. I didn't get to have a child's proper experience of being taken care of, and I want it! If I feel ok about myself and if I'm doing well in life, no one would give me any caring attention, and I'd never get it! To hell with grieving and accepting not getting it—I want it! (Staying in low self-worth, visible woundedness, poor functioning and incapability is my only chance of attracting from others the caring attention I crave.)

**11. Quest for the carefree childhood I was deprived of.** I'm owed it. I didn't get to have a child's proper experience of being carefree and playing happily, and I want it! If I see myself as capable and adequate, I'll have to shoulder responsibilities forever, and I'll again be deprived of being carefree. (If I believe I'm not capable of much, I'm free of demands and pressures and I get to have the carefree life I was robbed of.)

*List continues*

## *The hidden basis of low self-worth*

**12. Actual remorse and limits.** There is a very bad thing I knowingly did, and if I now felt ok about my basic worth, it would mean I'm a very bad person. (If I punish myself by seeing myself as low and unworthy, then I'm not a bad person even though I did that; a bad person wouldn't even feel bad about it. By feeling low self-worth for doing bad things, I get to do them and still feel I'm a good person.)

**13. Shadow struggle.** To feel good about myself, or to see myself as capable, or to feel confident is to become an arrogant, insensitive monster like [Dad, or Mom, or sibling], who could do no wrong and was always above everyone else, in his own world. (By feeling bad about myself I reassure myself that I am *not* like that and am *not* becoming like that.)

**14. Loss of familiar, lifelong identity, roles and patterns of relating to others and to life.** To see and know myself as ok, worthy, lovable brings a sweeping loss of familiar sense of self and roles—an identity crisis that is deeply disorienting and grueling. (All remains nicely familiar if I park in my negative self-regard.)