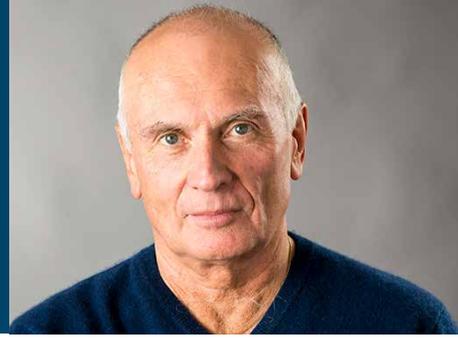




Identifying and Containing Symptoms of Psychological Regression

Dr. Paul Dunion, Mobius Transformational Faculty



Identifying Symptoms

Participants in Mobius Training Programs and recipients of Transformational Coaching or CLI experiences may show signs of Psychological Regression. Psychological Regression is the umbrella motif for Complex Trauma, PTSD or Complex Grief. Our programs are not designed to treat these disorders. At best, we can identify symptoms of Psychological Regression, support and contain the symptoms, and later refer the participant to appropriate care. A participant may be slightly, moderately or severely regressed. The level of regression will depend upon the magnitude of the original injury and the strength of the defenses that come to the surface.

Typically, we enter a regressive state when we hear or see something that reminds us of some past situation we found threatening. We begin to think, feel, and act at the age of the original experience. “When we regress, we leave our new brain, our prefrontal lobe and hide in the limbic brain until the threat and emotional or physical harm has passed. It is in this very old part of our brain that we only have three choices – fight, flight or freeze. Any one or all, of these choices are usually adolescent, infantile and primal” (Growing Yourself Back Up: Understanding Emotional Regression, by John Lee).

Let’s look more closely at some of the typical symptoms of Psychological Regression.

One of the three basic defenses of flight, fight or freeze surfaces. Jaw tightening, fist clenching, shoulders rising, voice getting louder might suggest the onset of a fight response. While tightness in the shoulders and chest as well as the butterfly sensation in the gut may indicate flight. Weakness in the knees and legs with collapsing chest and shoulders accompanied by obvious immobility may indicate freeze.

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Verbosity or extreme silence. Excessive chatter suggests the client may be in a dissociative* state where internal sensation and emotions are translated into cognitive activity, expressed as thoughts and opinions.

Almost a complete inability to identify what is needed or wanted.

Loss of options. When exploring what might be helpful, the participant will only be able to identify one or two options.

Extreme thinking. Speech typically reflects absolutes such as: everyone, no one, always, never, and every time.

Deciding some story about their experience is the only accurate interpretation and absolutely true.

Fear is not experienced simply as an emotion but rather as a belief in the loss of safety.

Mistrust. Holding the belief that there are no reliable external resources or allies.

Experiencing a dysregulated nervous system typically indicated by rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, agitation, sweaty palms, and increased muscle tension.

Responding to & Containing Symptoms

- 1. Containment of regressive symptoms mostly means helping clients to regulate their nervous systems.** The first key is to support the regulation of your own nervous system. You can start by interrupting catastrophic thinking and being aware that you can ask for help, take slow rhythmic breaths, move and be aware of your toes and fingers in order to interrupt the possibility that you may be moving into freeze. Quite often, when the practitioner gets self-regulated, it is easier for the client to regulate.
- 2. Offer the participant genuine attention with empathic resonance.** Keep in mind that this offering is easier when you have experienced attending to your own Psychological Regression. Also, the quality of this kind of attention is likely just what clients did not receive in their psychological history and may be enough to regulate their nervous system.
- 3. Encourage some gentle interaction.** Genuine social engagement is the psyche's first level of seeking protection. You can say something like, "I'm aware that something just happened for you, and I am wondering if you can tell me about it," or "I am interested in what might be going on for you right now."
- 4. If the participant seems able to express thoughts and feelings clearly, simply allow your capacity for empathy to support the process.**
- 5. When the participant seems complete with what needs to be said, help ground them by asking them to look around the room and sort objects e.g., to identify four red things in the environment or three objects larger than a breadbox. Employing what is called "orientation" in this way can support greater connection to the here and now. Finally, make some eye contact noticing if the gaze is soft and engaging.**
- 6. If there are more regressive symptoms being expressed, then it may be important to help them to regulate their nervous system.** You can suggest orientation by asking them to visually identify objects in the environment. If you notice extreme shallow breathing and rigidity of the body, you can help them to interrupt freeze by asking them to simply move their fingers, hands, toes and feet. You can also ask the client to stand and shift body weight from one foot to the other. Often, this can be enough to bring some level of regulation to the nervous system.
- 7. An added intervention is to ask the client to focus on internal sensations such as shallow breathing, palpations above the eyes, tight jaw, fluttering in the abdominal area or heaviness on the chest, etc.** Have the client track internal sensations with eyes closed and as one sensation is identified, simply ask them to focus on it until another sensation gets their attention. When clients report feeling calm somewhere in their bodies, have them focus on the calm for a short while and at their own pace, open their eyes and simply look

at different objects in the environment for 20 seconds or so.

8. **One of the gentler ways to support regulation, that is if your client is comfortable creating mental images, is to ask them to close their eyes and create an image of what they define as a very safe and comfortable place.** Encourage them to see themselves at this place. You can ask questions like regarding descriptions of the place and how they feel being there. As you witness a softening and coloring of the facial muscles, including smiles, there is likely a regulation of the nervous system taking place.

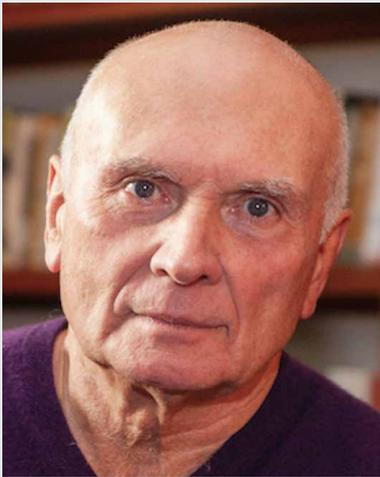
9. **Allowing a defensive pattern of fight or flight to complete itself is an excellent way to help regulate a nervous system.** “Post traumatic symptoms are fundamentally incomplete physiological responses suspended in fear. These symptoms will not go away until the responses are discharged and completed. Energy held in immobilization can be transformed” (Peter Levine). Physiological responses include the energies of fight and flight. If they appear and/or are reporting feeling scared, you can invite them to stand and gently run in place which can complete a flight pattern and bring regulation to the nervous system. In very intimate safe containers like a CLI, if they are expressing anger, you can provide an opportunity to discharge the fight pattern by growling, biting down on a towel or punching in a safe way. The punching is more effective if, after the vigorous motions, you ask them to do the same movements in slow motion. It can be helpful after

finishing a flight or fight pattern to encourage the use of the visual exercise. *(I don't recommend helping a participant finish a fight or flight pattern unless you have done it yourself and have some experience helping others.)*

10. **If the client is discharging sadness, help them to release the energy by encouraging breathing and eyes to remain open.** If you witness them swallowing the energy by clenching their jaw and teeth, encourage them to softly open their lips and breathe. Quite often, such an expression of emotion will regulate the nervous system.

I strongly suggest not to minimize the offering of containing regressive symptoms by helping to regulate the clients' nervous system. It may be the first time they experience a regressive state without feeling overwhelmed and swamped. It can be helpful to view Psychological Regression as the psyche, accompanied by a dysregulated nervous system, attempting to address unfinished business. The emotional material may be driven by early trauma or some unfortunate situation. Addressing the long term therapeutic need is beyond the role of a Mobius Practitioner. We can contain symptoms and refer clients to where they can best address the problem working with a skilled therapist after the session.

**Dissociation: leaving present time. Often you can see this in the eyes: twitching or eye rolling; lack of ability to stay in conversation with you; laughing inappropriately; minimizing while talking about tragedy; discounting any attempt to connect affect with what is being discussed.*



PAUL DUNION earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

Dr. Dunion has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. He is a wholistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma. He is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Dr. Dunion established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.



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