

Chapter 18: Filling in the Holes: Creating Structures

Chapter 18: *Filling in the Holes: Creating Structures*. Addressing trauma is more than just remembering the past—it involves confronting the deep voids left by feelings of neglect, fear, and abandonment. Growing up without affection, in a world where your pain went unseen, often leaves a person struggling to feel loved or wanted. The emotional scars from such experiences can distort one's sense of self-worth and agency, creating a lifelong challenge in forming a healthy identity.

Research by Judy Herman and others has demonstrated that individuals who felt unwanted or unsafe as children often struggle to fully benefit from conventional therapy. These people may possess a deep intellectual understanding of their issues, yet find it hard to engage with the emotions and memories that would allow for healing. As a psychiatrist, I witnessed firsthand how this emotional disconnect prevented some of my most committed patients from making meaningful progress in therapy. They could not access the emotional memories that could reframe their negative beliefs and feelings about themselves.

A breakthrough came when I attended a workshop led by Albert Pesso, a former dancer and the creator of PBSP (Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor Therapy). Pesso's approach was centered around using physical movements and group interaction to help individuals reconnect with their emotions and memories. His technique involved creating "structures," physical role-playing scenarios where participants could explore and re-enact critical moments from their past. Through these structures, the protagonists could confront the emotional absence in their lives, often for the first time, and begin to fill the void with experiences of care and validation. The physicality of this approach helped the participants experience emotions in a visceral way, something traditional talk therapy often struggled to achieve.

This innovative approach was especially powerful when dealing with unresolved trauma. By using role play and "contact persons," participants could recreate situations where they felt neglected or unloved, and then insert idealized figures into these scenes, such as a nurturing parent or a supportive friend. This process allowed them to experience what it would have felt like if their needs had been met, giving them a new internal map of safety and care. Research on neuroimaging suggests that trauma is often imprinted on the right hemisphere of the brain, the area responsible for nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and body language. By engaging this part of the brain, PBSP therapy facilitates a deeper, more profound healing experience than cognitive approaches alone.

Through these physical structures, individuals could also explore new forms of emotional expression and release. For instance, when one participant confronted her father's abuse, she was able to create an idealized version of him, one who could provide care and protection. As the exercise unfolded, she not only experienced the pain of the past but also began to feel the relief of witnessing a father who was capable of love and understanding. This process helped shift her perception of herself, allowing her to internalize a more balanced and caring image of her father, which in turn improved her sense of self-worth.

The role of the therapist in these sessions is crucial—they guide participants in creating these emotional shifts by facilitating the movement of the structures and offering feedback through "witnessing." The witnessing presence provides validation and recognition of the participant's feelings, offering a safe space for deeper exploration. As the protagonist moves through their structure, they often have powerful emotional breakthroughs, experiencing a catharsis that is difficult to achieve through words alone. For many, these breakthroughs are essential for overcoming the trauma that has shaped their identity for so long.

In these types of therapy, individuals not only come to terms with the hurt of the past but also create new, empowering narratives for their futures. Just like revisiting a difficult childhood memory, these therapeutic exercises help individuals rewrite the story of their lives, giving them a sense of control and agency over their emotions. The result is not only a change in how they see themselves but a transformation in their ability to relate to others, ultimately fostering healthier, more fulfilling relationships. As we have learned through decades of psychological research, changing the emotional landscape of the past can have a profound impact on the present, allowing individuals to rewrite the script of their lives.

Psychomotor therapy offers a tangible and transformative way to reconnect with lost parts of oneself and heal from the wounds of trauma. By creating structures, individuals can relive past events in a controlled, safe space and experiment with rewriting them in a way that fulfills unmet emotional needs. This approach helps break the cycle of trauma and abandonment, offering participants a chance to rebuild their self-worth and reclaim their emotional agency.