

Harmonizing:

We meet our needs in progressively healthier ways.

We have learned a lot of ways of coping and healing in our lives. Harmonizing involves accepting all aspects and behaviors as creative attempts to deal with the fallout from trauma. It also involves recognizing what is working well, and working toward embracing healthier ways to meet our needs. Sometimes it's merely fine-tuning what's worked fairly well before, and sometimes the changes are more dramatic. The four areas we focus on the most during Harmonizing are our thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and actions.

We've found that it's far, far easier to gently replace less effective habits with nurturing ones, than it is to simply try to stop the old habits. When we replace the old habits with something that truly solves what the old habits are trying to accomplish we can meet our needs in healthier ways, and heal the painful dynamic. Merely stopping a behavior takes far greater will power. It often leads to a relapse because the needs that behavior was filling aren't being met anymore. One example is replacing a pain-distracting technique of self-injury with nurturing techniques of self-soothing. This allows us to heal the pain instead of continuing to avoid it.

Harmonizing takes both tenacity and gentleness. We can be both gentle and respectful of our emotions and urges. At the same time, we can tenaciously implement healthier behavior patterns. There are some changes that may be temporarily painful as we face difficult memories, beliefs or emotions – similar to taking a band-aid off to treat a wound. In the long run, however, healthier behaviors create more joy and less pain than our old behaviors.

There are a number of ways of harmonizing. As long as methods align with the Healing Principles, we encourage their use. We encourage each person to find models and techniques that work for you and adapt them to fit with the help of knowledgeable support. We'd like to hear what's working for you. If you'd like to share your harmonizing models and tools please send them to Healing@VitalCycles.org. Time permitting, we will post those that we feel align with the Principles on the website, VitalCycles.org.

In order to demonstrate the Harmonizing Step we will describe a developing approach, the "Internal Team Model," inspired by a well known therapeutic model*. The I.T.M. is built on the premise that as humans we have various aspects that make up our whole personality. There are statements that demonstrate this. For example: "*I'm of two minds about this.*" "*There's an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other.*" "*I'm feeling torn.*" Here's an example a member gave: "*When I was invited to a party I felt many things. I felt excited to be included, and nervous about being in a crowd. I wanted to please the inviter by attending, and I didn't want to let on that I didn't have other plans. I wanted to meet new people, and I was afraid of being rejected. I wanted to have a great time out, and I wanted to watch TV and relax.*" In this model it is normal for different aspects of our personality to be active at the same time. It is also normal for us to act differently when we are in different situations. At work certain aspects help us do our job. When we are with family we behave quite differently. In romantic situations, yet other aspects are active.

Different aspects normally feel somewhat connected to and part of us, although they may feel unlike other aspects with differing approaches. However, when the intensity of a traumatic experience is too much to tolerate, our brain and nervous system become overwhelmed and unable to integrate and process the emotionally laden material. This can cause the sense of the connections to diminish drastically, called dissociation, in an attempt to avoid and keep boundaries between different and overwhelming memories, feelings, sensations, thoughts, and beliefs. These aspects begin to be more rigidly locked into the creative ways developed to deal with the fallout from the trauma. These coping mechanisms can migrate from their original focus and become patterns of behavior – that can be used any time when we feel pain from any source. The memories and feelings “held” by these different aspects can then become intrusive and overwhelming under future stress and stimulation. Sometimes even positive feelings or events can feel threatening and bring up the urge to use these kinds of dissociative coping mechanisms to protect ourselves.

When we were traumatized various aspects responded differently to cope with the fear and betrayal. Some aspects of ourselves held the pain from that time forward. Some aspects focused more on how to function day to day. Some aspects help us move forward. Some aspects took on protector roles. Other aspects worked primarily at helping us cope with the challenging residual effects of the trauma. It helps to differentiate between the aspect that plays a certain role, and the dynamics it has been involved with. This way we can harmonize by honoring and nurturing our aspects and changing the dynamics.

It helps us to have compassionate understanding for the aspects of ourselves that enacted the old behaviors that served us. We find that compassionately understanding the *positive* intentions of an aspect help us to gradually take care of its needs in healthier ways. They often shield us from the residual effects of trauma such as unresolved anger, pain and negative beliefs about ourselves. We can be grateful to our internal protective dynamics that work so hard to keep us from being overwhelmed by these effects. These protective dynamics keep us in a tightly controlled emotional state in order to prevent the effects from overwhelming us. The traumas often trained these aspects of us to respond to the world out of fear and pain. Years of responding out of fear and pain created patterns and habits.

Usually people can at least hear the fears, or negatively stated view of intentions that come up during inner dialog. Here are a few examples, “I don’t want to die”; “I don’t want to be abandoned”; or “I don’t want to be alone”; etc.

When the trauma originally occurred these reactions were critical to our survival, but they tend to persist as unconscious fears about life that guide our behavior and self-concepts until they are finally replaced.

Each of these fears that affect us has a positive intention underneath, such as the following examples: Trying to prevent being hurt (these usually start when we have no other choice in a situation in which we were powerless). To stay alive. To get love. To get food. To have a sense of control. To make pain more bearable. To feel deserving of life, love, protection, etc. To protect others.

By focusing on the positive intention at the core of the protective mechanism we can then find much healthier replacement behaviors that help fulfill the intentions. Staying focused upon the negative intentions tends to perpetuate fear and defensiveness.

Replacing brings us to better places and healthier patterns, than simply trying to abstain. Remember, we do all behaviors in attempts to meet our needs. Now we can gradually use healthier ways to get those needs met. We strive to focus on making progress, knowing that perfection is one of the myths impossible to attain. The more we do the healthier behaviors the more easily and quickly we become able to pull ourselves out of self-negating patterns. Celebrating successes in the direction of less pain and more joy inspires us to continue healing.

Below are examples of these replacements from some of our own personal experience with these aspects of ourselves. The chart is divided into four columns. The first column contains possible names for types of aspects common to many people. The second column lists many of these aspects' goals and attributes that are evident in a healthy state. The third column identifies some common dynamics that apply to the various aspects after being impacted by trauma. The fourth and final column gives possible healthier alternative behaviors and beliefs for these aspects. It is important to remember that this chart will not fit everyone. In fact we writers agree that it does not fully describe each of our own internal situations. It offers ideas we can use for customizing our own deep and meaningful harmonizing model.

Aspects Chart (Note: re-label and redefine categories to what works for you.)

| Aspects | Goals & Attributes | Common Dynamics before Harmonizing | Healthier Alternatives |
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| Inner Wisdom | <p>Goal: Authentic richness of living.</p> <p>Attributes: Lives at the core of who we are. Provides nurturing to other parts. Fed by love, respect, understanding, and acceptance. Respects and is interested in self and others. It is more focused upon being rather than doing.</p> | <p>Our Inner Wisdom is often protectively hidden under layers of habits and defensive mechanisms to keep it safe from trauma. Difficult to discern and hear from. Lack of self-respect. Denial of the importance of one's own being. Denial of self-worth in public situations. Being disconnected from this aspect can leave us feeling adrift with little sense of who we are or where we want to go.</p> | <p>More time spent in the state of Inner Wisdom. Tapping into the confidence, creativity, serenity, joy, light, gentle playfulness, and authenticity. More and more we can get in touch with our Inner Wisdom before responding to others' behaviors, with the ability to see more clearly, calmly and more authentically. We can view others and ourselves with compassion, caring and insight. Gentle humor is a strong sign.</p> |

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| Stabilizers | <p>Goal: Stability, trying to keep the inner world balanced.</p> <p>Attributes: Persistent, consistent.</p> | <p>Seek to avoid change, not rock the boat. Numbing dissociation, avoidance, and distracting behaviors to suppress emotions. Repression of memories, staying active to avoid feeling pain aspects carry, codependence and pleasing others and counter-dependence.</p> | <p>They can focus on keeping life nourishing and sustainable so that all of our selves are resiliently stable.</p> |
| Producers | <p>Goal: Actively influence our environment favorably for us.</p> <p>Attributes: Assertive, plans ahead, organized, focused, action-oriented.</p> | <p>Seek to avoid and distract from pain and feelings with activities to “get over it”. Can be judgmental, workaholic, perfectionist, nagging, overly self-critical, and obsessive with certain behaviors and in general try to control too much.</p> | <p>Focus on being financially comfortable. Helps us achieve excellence. Motivate us towards self-improvement. Make and keep our homes comfortable and safe. Taking care of responsibilities that help us live well.</p> |
| Adventurers | <p>Goal: Provide energy and strength to protect and address problems.</p> <p>Attributes: Give surges of energy to make changes. Assertive and single-minded focus.</p> | <p>Adventurers seek to immediately overcome the pain and fear of traumatic memories with behaviors that cause extreme mood shifts without regard for consequences. They have extreme, aggressive, and urgent reactions to emotions they see as threats. They hate to feel weak, to admit vulnerability and dependence on others. They usually function in fight, flight or freeze mode, engaging in adrenaline producing activities that risk life and limb. They can push addictive and</p> | <p>Our adventurer aspects have so much power and vitality to help us drive healing – making us stronger, more independent and more resilient. Once these aspects understand how they can help, they often become very motivated to help us heal. For an adventurer to accept that we were victimized (as distasteful as that is) at the point of trauma it helps in letting go of the feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame.</p> |

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| | | <p>compulsive use of substances and behaviors (alcohol, drugs, food, sex, etc.). They can create dissociation in response to emotions and memories. They may engage in self-harming behaviors that make us feel less unsafe and more stable.</p> | |
| Seekers | <p>Goal: Live more fully.</p> <p>Attributes: Curious, eager, sensitive, they seek life, love, joy...</p> | <p>Strong reactions of fear, pain, rage, despair, guilt, shame that are often feared by other aspects. Carrying these emotions they seek a way out – of the place where the traumatic memories keep replaying... a way out of the pain, the fear, feeling trapped, feeling terrible about ourselves, the sadness ...</p> | <p>Framing what they seek in the positive. E.g., if a seeker says, “I’m afraid of dying”, see them as “I want to live.”</p> <p>Once healed they are free again to seek love, vitality, joy, etc. They can frolic in the “Inner Wisdom”.</p> <p>Cautionary note: The strong reactions of the seekers are often feared by other aspects. It is important that we are attentive to safety when working to help these aspects heal.</p> |
| <p><i>Note: many dynamics overlap between roles. The dynamics listed here are where they most often are found.</i></p> | | | |

Activities: (The following activities can be done in a Healing Journal and/or with the support of others.)

- Activity 1:** Choose one of the aspects you can identify with.
- a. Create your own name that works well for you and that aspect of you.
 - b. Write down what parts of our description of that aspect feels right to you.
 - c. Write down other descriptions of goals and attributes that make sense to you.

- d. Write down one protective dynamic/behavior that you see that aspect engaging in. Then write down positive goals and intentions of that behavior, and what you would like to have as a healthier option.
- e. Gather ideas from our chart below, other people on a healing path, professional helpers, etc., on how to help this aspect of you to replace beliefs and behaviors to regulate or safely vent its emotions and beliefs.

| Protective Behaviors | Possible Positive Function of Protective Behaviors | Healthier Behaviors |
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| Isolating when traumatic memories are intruding | Trying to reduce stimulation to calm things down and stop traumatic memories from intruding. | Calling other healing trauma survivors, going to a Vital Cycles meeting, calling therapists, inviting friends for meals. |
| Over stressing my body through over-work, pushing past limits, ignoring symptoms of stress, self-sacrifice, etc. | Keeping attention away from traumatic material, feeling in control by engaging in distracting activities. | Learning to pace ourselves: e.g., listening to our bodies' sensations and needs, resting, taking naps, saying 'no' to things that would push us too far. Being gentle with ourselves for having human limitations and challenges – realizing no one is perfect. Respect our bodies by acknowledging our needs and taking care of them. Use other techniques to contain traumatic material, e.g. aspect finding a safe place, putting memories in a container. |
| Sleep deprivation | Trying to prevent nightmares, staying alert to protect oneself because of traumatic intrusions that cause you to believe you aren't safe in the present. | Sleeping adequately, creating an environment that supports good sleep including saying "good night" to all aspects like helping them go to a safe place to sleep. |
| Painful and disturbing sexual fantasies and behaviors | Strong stimulation to block feelings or traumatic memories. Repetition of painful traumatic memories to try and understand them. | Allow aspects of self that want to act out to vent in a journal, talking nurturingly to self in a mirror, reading a book about healing one's sexuality. |

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| Cutting (self-mutilation) | Strong stimulation to block feelings or traumatic memories; to feel alive/not numb; to “punish” another aspect that is blamed for abuse. | Venting emotions through internal dialog in journaling and beating a pillow or using imagery to “turn down” intensity of strong emotions or deposit strong emotions in a strong container; feel alive by other strong stimulation e.g., holding ice pack, hard exercise, deep breathing, having fun, journal or seek support. |
| Drug or alcohol addiction | Numbing out traumatic memories and feelings. | Deep nurturing behaviors and habits, and healthy means of excitement and adventure. |
| Toxic Relationships | Seeking connection with others because attachment is necessary for human survival, and turning to familiar, although toxic, sources. | Replacing them with nurturing friendships and relationships. |

Activity 2: Gradually do more and more of the replacement behaviors until the pain and fear fade and the replacement beliefs and behaviors feel natural. Note, this activity may take months or even years. Remember to pace yourself gently and compassionately. Pushing too hard actually slows down the healing.

** Note: In alignment with our “Independence Principle” we do not endorse specific therapeutic models. The “Internal Team Model” is simply included as a way to demonstrate a way to do the Harmonizing Step. The Internal Team Model draws heavily from the “Internal Family Systems Model” by Richard Schwartz, and “Eye Movement, Desensitization and Reprocessing” by Francine Shapiro.*