



MY EXPERIENCE OF PHASE THREE WORK



by Carolyn Spring

I wish I could sit down with a marker pen and draw out a nice, neat sketch of the work I've done in therapy, with periods of time, like 2007-2009, 2009-2012, 2012-2015. That would be lovely. Phase 1: all that safety stuff, all that trying to calm things down and beginning to 'just notice', and learning to breathe, and building some trust. Phase 2: the yukky-memory stage, all the explosive out-of-the-unconscious surges of fragmented memory that start to take shape and join the dots together of a narrative timeline. And then finally (finally!), Phase 3: just tying it altogether, reaching forwards to create a new future, and everything, everyone, all of my parts living happily ever after, amen.

But it's not been like that, and I don't think anyone really ever thinks it is. Time and again, I've read about the fact that

it's not 'linear', that no one expects it to be. But are people just saying that? Do they really believe it? Because for me it's always been three steps forwards and two steps back, and it's hard not to feel that you're 'failing' in some way when right in the middle of things going well, suddenly, you're back to basics again and you're spending a session knee-deep in self-harming and suicidal tendencies. One of my therapists used to talk about how she'd come back from some training, and she'd have it all neatly lined up in her mind that first this, then that, and hurrah. But then ten minutes into the session with me and it was all just merged into one like someone stirring milk into custard. It has only been in retrospect, from a mentalising stance (and, I'm sure, some rose-coloured spectacles), that she could make out any kind of distinction between the different phases in our work together.



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I understand that the phases are sequential: they give some kind of road map to both therapist and client of what to work on and how to build a treatment plan. And I understand that they are hierarchical: there needs to be a foundation of stability before undertaking trauma work, and the reaching forwards into a future life comes because of the stability and the processing that has gone before it. And I would say that it has in many, many respects been like that for me. But it doesn't look like it at the time.

I used to struggle to understand what phase 3 could possibly be about, because my life was so consumed with just surviving, and then so consumed with working through traumatic material to neutralise it, that I imagined that therapy would always be like that, and that once it was no longer happening, there would be no more need for therapy. I do see an end to my it, but only as I outgrow it and not because we're not dealing with trauma every week.

And in the meantime, this phase 3 work seems to be ever more important. It makes me realise how much we used to 'process trauma' over the space of several sessions, and huge gains would be won, but then I would try to put it out of mind. Dissociation is such a habit that even after neutralising a particular traumatic event, I would still tend to avoid it. So it became part of my narrative history only in the sense that it

remained in a box with 'Do Not Disturb' written on it. Phase 3 work has helped me to assimilate the contents of that box into my daily life, for it to become part of my narrative history that I 'own' and admit is mine. It's neither centre nor outside; it's allowed to be part of my life, but I don't need to concentrate on it. There grows a companionable silence with this traumatic past –something that I don't need to talk about, but I could do, if I wanted to, because it no longer stings. When trauma is something that has burned a hole in your skin for so many years, when trauma is something that you have lived your life avoiding, it is a strange thing to be able to sit in a room with it and just let it be, without it hurting (or at least, not hurting as much).

Phase 3 for me has been a lot about figuring this stuff out at the level of how it affects me, right here, right now, and what I want my life to be. It's been about building a future, a life that is resilient because it has survived and then processed trauma, and yet doesn't focus exclusively on it. A large part of that has been the shift in my dissociative personality system. I had hundreds of parts—the proliferation of them previously seemed to serve the purpose of allowing me to avoid, and continue to avoid, and continue to continue to avoid. Flitting from part to part, I didn't ever have to hold the whole of the trauma in my mind. I was like a dazzling light show on the inside of me, the colours ever shifting, ever changing, nothing



constant, nothing still. As I worked through the trauma and the reasons for my switching, the lights began to settle, and pure colours began to emerge. I settled eventually onto a dozen or so alternate personality states, each with a purpose, each with a meaning, each a tinted aspect of myself. And then gradually, softly, their colours began to merge into one another as they lost their separateness.

I've never tried to 'fuse' or 'integrate' my parts. I've always figured that there's a reason for their separateness, and when that reason ceases to serve a function, so the separateness will dissolve. And I've found that to be true. I'm always vaguely suspicious of grand claims of complete healing or integration: I see us all as being on a spectrum and we slide along that spectrum based not only on our resilience within, but on the stresses without. At times everyone faces events in their life that are so overwhelming, such as sickness or bereavement, that they fall back towards more primitive ways of coping. If we claim to be completely 'integrated' or 'fused' then we can feel a failure when, under extreme stress and in the absence of other options, we revert to dissociation as a coping mechanism. Personally, I wouldn't see this as 'failure', 'loss of healing' or anything else. So I don't claim to be 'integrated' because I know that if the stakes are too high, I'll do whatever I can to survive and it's possible that I'll turn again to the tools I used as a child.

So phase 3 for me has not focused on 'integrating' or 'fusing' parts, but it's still true to say that I am not nearly as dissociative as I used to be. I am largely co-conscious, except perhaps when tackling still-tricky subjects in the context of therapy. And I enjoy a high degree of internal collaboration: the sense within me, most of the time, is that all my different parts are pulling in the same direction. My focus has been on building a new life, a 'post-post-traumatic' life as I've called it elsewhere, rather than trying to twist my multiplicity, through force, into a single braid.

I've grown enormously in self-acceptance, which has been key as I've worked through some of the wider life issues of phase 3: relationships, vocation, physical health, becoming who at core I am meant to be. I tried so hard, in the dark days before therapy when I was unaware of my dissociativity, to make myself better either by sheer force of will or by harsh self-castigation. I've now learned that compassion is truly transformative, and so phase 3 for me has been about nurturing and growth, of figuring out what I want my life to be, and being encouraged towards it, rather than just running scared from my past, my self, and my selves, or desperately trying to force things to work.

Indeed, much of the phase 3 work in practice for me has been akin to life coaching. I've had to come to a



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realisation that I can do life, and even do it well, despite not yet being ‘sorted’. I’ve understood, at last, that I don’t have to wait until some point in the future when everything is resolved before I start living, but that the journey is forever and the journey is now. Having DID is no longer an impediment, because I am in control of it far more than it is in control of me: I can use dissociation as a tool to keep some of the trauma out of mind some of the time, so that I can focus on other things, but it no longer lives my life for me.

In Judith Lewis Herman’s terms, I’ve got back a sense of control, connection and meaning: control over my symptoms, at least most of the time; connection with other people, with myself and with my narrative history; and meaning in terms of the existential and spiritual sense I ascribe to my life and what has happened to me. I no longer believe that I was abused because I was bad. I no longer believe that I did anything to cause it. I no longer believe that I am unworthy of love, incapable of relationships, or deserving only of bad things. A lot of the beliefs that I have carried around with me all my life have been brought under the microscope, and reformulated. It takes a lot of standing back from the imminence of flashbacks and fight-flight-freeze to see the bigger picture and to realise that there is a lot of evil in the world, but I am not evil; to realise that I was powerless as a child, but I am not powerless now; and to realise that

dissociation is logical, but it’s no longer the only way to manage my feelings.

And so in many respects the work of phase 3 is about pulling together all the threads of phases 1 and 2 and weaving something beautiful with it. It’s not about denying that phases 1 and 2 took place, or were essential, but it is about learning from them and applying it to daily living, so that we can do more than just survive atrocities—so that we can live.

Every so often, I dip back into phase 2 work—as new material emerges, as new issues rise to the fore—but always from a fresh perspective, from a higher place up the mountain. Sometimes stuff that we worked on years ago is revisited—not as a repetition, but rather as a reworking. I look at things that happened when I was little, not just as the terrorised four-year-old reliving it, but as the adult who understands some of the culture of the 1970s, some of the cognitive distortions of abusers, some of the dynamics of abuse. I’m looking at my abuse, effectively, with the eyes of my adult self, rather than just experiencing it from within as the traumatised child, which is what it’s like in a flashback or a dissociative state.

So it’s integrative: it draws together the me-as-adult-me now, and me-as-traumatised-child from back then, and makes me one complete person. I can remember some of the trauma now



with the sense that this is me, as an adult, looking back on me as a child (the me who is the same person as adult-me) and I'm no longer in it but I'm just remembering it, and I'm thinking about it, and letting feelings come up, but the feelings aren't overwhelming me. That's a long way to have come. I've still got a way to go, but I know that I'm on the right tracks, and I know that I'll get there.

See also:

- [The three phase approach: part one – safety and stabilisation](#)
- [The three phase approach: part two – treating trauma](#)
- [The three phase approach: part three – consolidation, integration and reconnection](#)
- [My experience of phase three work](#)

