

# Notes on Subpersonalities

SUPPLIED AS SUPPORT NOTES TO THE WORKSHOP "MEETING THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF OURSELVES"

## The basic concept

The subpersonality model of the human psyche is a tried and tested way of understanding how we work. Using this allows us to create more choices around how we experience and live our lives. I'm quite certain that everyone has had experiences of being different people at different times. I'm certain that the bit of you which has a conversation with your bank manager is rather different from the bit of you which might have a conversation with a child. One of the definitions of a subpersonality is "*a complex of thoughts, feelings and even body sensations which is capable of acting as a complete person for shorter or longer periods of time*".

It is important to remember that all of these subpersonalities have developed for good reasons -- they are personality structures we developed to cope with the situations we found ourselves in as babies, small children and young adults. They helped us survive in our family of origin and in our culture.

## What sorts of subpersonalities are there?

There are all sorts of ways in which people have conceptualised and arranged the possible universe of subpersonalities. I like to look at them in terms of groups.

Firstly, and probably most importantly, there is what I call the **defence group**. This consists of the subpersonalities which have developed to protect the very vulnerable and powerless person that entered this world. Probably the most significant member of this group is the **protector/controller**. This is the bit of us that keeps us safe. That stops us getting into scrapes or into danger. One problem with this is that this subpersonality has developed very early, before we developed our adult coping skills. Now, in keeping us safe, this part of us might restrict us in ways which are no longer useful. Because of its power, we need to negotiate very respectfully with this subpersonality. In a workshop, I will always start by having a dialogue with the protector/controller. Other powerful members of this group might be **the critic, the perfectionist** and **the driver**.

Next comes the **role group**. These subpersonalities are associated with the roles that we fulfil in our lives. **The boss, the mother, the father, the organiser** etc.

The next group might be called the **age-related group**. These include our **inner children** but also the **wise man, the wise woman**. There is, of course a **gender group** -- what we might call **inner male and inner female** -- what Jung terms the **animus** and **anima**.

Next comes the **introjected** group. These are bits of other people or even bits of our culture that we have internalised (or had forced on us) without much opportunity to make them our own. **The abusive father** is one example of this group but cultural attitudes like racial prejudice can also generate subpersonalities which we take on from outside in an uncritical (and often unconscious) way.

There is another group we could call the **trauma** group. These often arise as a result of circumstances in which we have experienced damage or harm. Some of these subpersonalities are **the victim, the bully, the punishing parent, the demon, the manipulator, Mr angry** etc

Then there is group which we could call the **nurturing/healing** group. These often include subpersonalities which we consciously develop as we start along the path of personal development. The internalised **good father, the good mother, the wise and loving being**. Some of this group might be experienced as spiritual or transpersonal. Certainly, my "workshop leader" is a collaboration between my internal good father and my Senex or wise man.

## The concept of opposites

For every subpersonality of which we are consciously aware, there is a complete opposite of this which is often hidden deep in our unconscious. These are bits of ourselves which we have split off and rejected as "not who we are". Nevertheless, these can influence us just as much from their hidden caves as some of the conscious subpersonalities.

## The Witness and the Aware Ego

As we go on -- I want to introduce a couple more concepts -- places to stand, which give us a way of taking charge. First of all there is the **Witness**. This is us, taking a step back, and without judgment witnessing what is going on, naming and labelling subpersonalities -- not doing anything -- just acting as a source of non-judgmental information. The second has a number of names -- the one I like is the **Aware Ego**. This is the "I", the conductor of your personal orchestra of subpersonalities -- or to put it another way, the driver of the car. The one that takes information gathered by the Witness and from the experience of the subpersonalities themselves and uses it to make decisions about who to feature and at what volume, about what negotiations need to take place, what needs to heal and what needs to transform.

**Beware:** If we do not work with our subpersonalities, the bit which is conducting the orchestra or driving the car is not the Aware Ego but what Stone and Winkelman call the Operating Ego -- this is simply one or other of our subpersonalities masquerading as the decision maker -- often the rational self.

### **Why work with subpersonalities?**

At first, all of our subpersonalities are part of our subconscious programming. They are unconscious processes which have developed to defend and protect us during the course of our lives. They constitute our "survival" personality. There is nothing wrong with any of this except that it is unconscious.

Subpersonality work gives us a way of bringing these aspects of our survival strategies into awareness rather than having them be an automatic program. This gives us more choices about how we are, how we react and how we relate. Ultimately, it allows our authenticity through.

Subpersonality work allows us to resolve and negotiate inner (and outer) conflicts -- often, when this happens at an inner level, the two previously conflicting subpersonalities will merge to form a third subpersonality with the most useful characteristics of both.

Subpersonality work also allows us to recognise what drives us in our lives and what bits of us conflict with other people. It allows us to identify the sources of our wants and needs and allows us to heal and reconcile our wounded bits.

Finally, having the skill to move in and out of various subpersonalities at will enables us to let go further into any given subpersonality and thus have a more vivid experience. This wouldn't be safe if we thought that the particular subpersonality was the whole of who we are.

### **Embracing our subpersonalities**

All of our subpersonalities, even the difficult, uncomfortable ones we would rather not recognise, live within us. They cannot be amputated, abolished or otherwise excised. You reject them at your peril. Rejecting a subpersonality doesn't kill it -- it will simply go underground and then get you from there.

The good news is that you can get to know them, heal them, control them, negotiate with them and make friends with them. So embracing, compassion, listening, finding out what they need, parenting and above all *accepting*, are the keys to a successful exploration of this world.

### **Conclusion**

So, in the workshop, we are looking at ourselves (and each other) using a particular model, that of subpersonalities. We are doing it because getting to know this inner family gives us the power to understand, heal and change. We will be using a number of tools and processes, both rational and non-rational and we will have the opportunity to learn some of the skills involved in using these tools and moving between them. And to do this, we have access to each other. Pretty wonderful beings with the ability to work, witness and support each other in integrity, truth and compassion.

### **Book List**

**Embracing Our Selves** -- Hal Stone PhD and Sidra Winkelman PhD -- New World Library, San Raphael, California. ISBN 0-931432-45-6

*This is the key book which introduces the "voice dialogue" technique which is so useful for working with subpersonalities.*

**Embracing Each Other** -- Hal Stone PhD and Sidra Winkelman PhD -- New World Library, San Raphael, California. ISBN 0-931432-60-X

*This takes the concept of subpersonalities into relationship.*

**Discover Your Subpersonalities -- Our Inner World and the People in It** -- John Rowan -- Routledge, London and New York ISBN 0-415-07366-9

*This is a popularised although useful guide to subpersonalities.*

**Subpersonalities -- The People inside Us** -- John Rowan -- Routledge, London and New York ISBN 0-415-04329-8

*This is the academic treatise-- lots of quotes and references.*

**Life Choices, Life Changes -- Develop Your Personal Vision with Imagework** -- Dr Dina Glouberman -- Hodder & Stoughton -- ISBN 0-340-82676-2

*This book does not deal directly with subpersonalities but details the Imagework technique developed by Dr Glouberman which can be an extremely useful tool for exploring subpersonalities.*

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