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Psychotherapy
Couples
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Group Seminar Audio Series

Why We Don't Change: The Vertical Split

As an alternative to Freud's horizontal, topographical structure of the mind which prioritized material stored in the unconscious, Kohut's view of vertical splitting argued that unwanted aspects of the self can be active in the world through cell divisions of the identity. Within each cell resides thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences that are not shared with the other cells and cannot be displayed with ease in a world that judges the identity. Thus, each cell conceals a particular component of who one is that cannot be displayed. Often originating from toxic shame experiences early in development, pathological vertical splits are linked to phenomena such as addiction, infidelity, self-sabotage, identity formation and consolidation issues, and various types of anxiety. *This interactive Relationship Group seminar was recorded on January 5, 2019 in Laguna Hills, CA.*

Key Excerpts:

- *According to Freud, there are three levels of consciousness that make up his topographical model of the mind. The mind is divided into horizontal layers, i.e., there is the conscious and the unconscious and the preconscious falls between these.*
- *In this horizontal depiction, Freud emphasized the importance of material that was not directly accessible to the conscious and therefore resides in the unconscious. This material is reprehensible to the mind, immoral, non-ideal, guilt-producing. It is material that cannot be experienced or shown to the world.*
- *A vertical splitting suggests separate sectors of the mind that are organized side by side. According to Heinz Kohut, vertical splitting allows different states of self-experience to exist in different cells that are manifested in the world. What was previously stored in the unconscious by Freud is now manifested in the world for Kohut via distinct manifestations of one's self.*

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Key Excerpts (continued)

- *In normal functioning we, we have vertical splits just to live life in a variety of contexts. Common vertical splits include acting in the role of parent, lover, and employee, where you act in different roles and situations but are more or less the same person across all of them. There is a central organizing morality and sense of self that is consistent across all of the splits.*
- *But at times the vertical splits can become too intense or “thick,” obstructing a shared moral consciousness that runs across all of the cells occupying one’s life. Pathological vertical splitting provides a mechanism for the mind to allow, for example, an affair to occur. In your life there may be one cell that is your married life cell and another, separate cell, that is the cell you occupy when you have the affair.*
- *The formation of vertical splits or cells often begins without much intensity and then builds: as each new cell is formed, an individual tends to fill that cell with new experience, inadvertently making the cell bigger and bigger and more and more diverse from other existing cells. Once you have a well-formed cell, it takes on a life of its own and it’s harder and harder to break down the walls between the cells and even harder to integrate or merge them.*
- *Toxic shame is one common cause of maladaptive and pathological vertical splitting. When one is shamed repeatedly, or experiences feelings or desires or thoughts that will likely not be*