

Keynote lecture proposal for Heidelberg 2018

How schema therapists work with parts of the self to bring about corrective experiences in the deep structure of personality

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Early schemas set up in the attachment system in infancy and childhood run automatically and implicitly. They incorporate what Bowlby aptly called “working models” of self in relationship to others and of how the world works. When, for whatever reason, parents or caretakers cannot meet the child’s basic needs, schemas are maladaptive and become the source of long-lasting problematic patterns of cognition, emotion and behaviour. Practical cognitive and behavioural interventions often fail because they cannot reach these implicit maladaptive schemas and change them. In schema therapy, identifying parts of the self (which we call schema modes) is a first step in preparing the way for creating corrective experiences at the deep structural level. This can only happen when we access Child modes that are built from memories that are often very early and felt as emotions and body states rather than seen as pictures or movies. However, access to Child modes is often blocked by a range of Coping modes which result in dissociation between parts of the self. We guide clients to become aware of Coping modes, and see that, though they may have been helpful once, they are now preventing change. This can open the way to working directly with the Child. The basis of the healing process is limited reparenting: the child is offered meaningful corrective experiences of what it is like to be cared for, taken seriously, valued, and protected by a reliable other (usually the therapist). Several clinical examples will illustrate what this looks like in practice and how obstacles to access to the Child states can be overcome.