

# The Neurobiology of Happiness Conference

November 8

# 2009

On November 8, 2009 The Norma J. Morris Center for healing from child abuse hosted a one-day conference, which focused on the impact of childhood trauma on the brain. This is a compilation of what was discussed during the afternoon, in the small breakout groups, following the plenary.

Small Group  
Discussion  
Notes



# Group Discussion Notes

## Table of Contents

The Benefits of Healing in a Community .....	3
Why is it helpful to have an ASCA support group meeting? .....	3
How important is it that there are other people in the room? Why is it important? .....	3
What is helpful about the social aspects of ASCA? For example, going out for coffee after a meeting -- why is this important? .....	4
For some folks it might be a scary proposition to connect with others from the ASCA meetings at a deeper social level, outside of meetings... what has been your personal experience, if any, in addressing this concern? .....	4
Can you describe some of the benefits you have experienced in building friendships with people you have met in recovery? .....	5
How can the positive experience built, for example, in the East Bay ASCA community, be replicated by others who might also want to build community for healing? .....	5
How to Get the Most Out Of an ASCA Meeting .....	6
The Inner Voice .....	7

# The Benefits of Healing in a Community

## *Why is it helpful to have an ASCA support group meeting?*

- Don't feel alone, alienated. Can see how another person, whom I see as a “good person”, also feels shame. I have the same problem as this person; therefore, maybe I'm also a good person.
- Prior to ASCA I had not been in a self-help group before. Therapy groups are not the same as self-help groups. At the first meeting I felt like I was not alone (don't have “six heads”). It felt safe in the group. Prior to this experience I didn't have the language or examples for what I had experienced or was experiencing still. It all came together for me at an ASCA meeting.
- Our abuse was done in isolation. It seems counterintuitive to now be talking about the abuse in a group. Yet, this breaks the pattern and bondage to false ideas.
- Certain feelings like anger can be expressed safely in meetings -- 12 step groups and ASCA groups provide a model for self-parenting.
- It's about connection to others that have been through the same thing as me. ASCA groups are safe, non-judgmental. They helped me put my own experience in perspective, that I'm not crazy. Sharing each other's stories helps put our own story in context. It's different than being with the therapist. Doing this in work on our own is too challenging. Being with others that have been through the same thing lifts us up while we are going through the painful healing process.

## *How important is it that there are other people in the room? Why is it important?*

- It's important to have our affect/emotions in the presence of others who are great listeners.
- I have a community to relate to versus what I might've experienced before, i.e., isolation. There is more camaraderie than just being in therapy
- Not sure why... but I know that I have gone backpacking into the wilderness to be alone for long periods of time, and got sick just being by myself.
- When I was abused it was with no witnesses. I was alone. Hope cries out for the company of others.
- There is a sense of empathy being with others. “If I share my pain, I cut the pain in half. If I keep it to myself, I double it.”
- I value the giving/receiving feedback. Really have to listen, understand, empathize, and connect. Can only do that with others in the room.
- We are social animals. We missed healthy attachment through the parenting we experienced... not “really being seen by the mother”. Being seen by a loving mother lights up our brain. We did not get that when we were young, so instead, as adults we are responsible to rewire our own brains neurologically.
- Having other people in the room who act as a mirror for each other, helps us be able to see ourselves positively.

- We were abused in isolation, and we need other people to heal. Secrets are broken. Isolation is very intense. Connecting with other people, who are also being open and vulnerable, is very unique and healing.

***What is helpful about the social aspects of ASCA? For example, going out for coffee after a meeting -- why is this important?***

- We don't experience much socializing in Sacramento after meetings. Berkeley has more "going to coffee" after meetings, and forming friendships.
- By going out for coffee with others from the ASCA meeting, I'm getting more of that support group experience with no pressures. It helps to create community, safety, to be with other people that understand me. I have formed unique relationships through ASCA, not necessarily friendships.
- Going for coffee stimulates healthier attachments to others, bonding, and commonality. It reminds us that we are not our trauma. We are able to step out of our meetings as whole people.

***For some folks it might be a scary proposition to connect with others from the ASCA meetings at a deeper social level, outside of meetings... what has been your personal experience, if any, in addressing this concern?***

- It's important to be inclusive, especially when the communities are "tight". Community can mean scary things to people, especially if they've experienced ostracization during their young lives. I've experienced being traumatized again when I tried to be included in a tight ASCA community meeting, but felt more like an outsider. It's hard to break in, so I backed off.
- When I was first going to ASCA meetings, I saw my recovery as separate from the rest of my life. But then some people in the meetings started talk about doing more outside the meetings in building a community intentionally. Someone in one of the ASCA meeting said "let's all have dinner together"--then the next time it was "let's go to the gym together"-- and then someone suggested that we have a party. Now most of my dearest friends are from ASCA. And I'm building my life with these people. I can process everyday life stuff with them, as well as past trauma stuff. It doesn't replace family. That yearning doesn't ever get replaced.
- Each group has its own dynamics. That's just the way it is. I tried different groups for personal fit. I need to feel connected; I look for a group of people that feel like they can act as lifelines -- in order to feel safe enough to go deeper. To be honest, my ultimate goal is to **not need to go** to ASCA meetings. In other words, to only go to meetings for "self-maintenance" and to give back to my community.
- By venturing into socializing, I need to learn how to overcome transference. When I go to a new group, I think are they judging me? I recognize that this is my inner voice talking and decide to take this risk. I make a choice and have a good experience and then that allows me to relax more.
- It's an opportunity to model and experience healthy relationships. There are discerned risks. The risks I take are the ones I think are reasonable for me.
- In New York, we don't socialize that much after meetings. Maybe this is because we need to separate all those people who know everything about us from the rest of our friends. Also there's a concern about being stalked. A friend who went to an ASCA meeting was asked out on a date by another ASCA participant. The friend was not interested and it made things very uncomfortable.

- Friendship cannot be forced. There is a social aspect to the support groups. And some of us have other social networks to rely on, not necessarily other ASCA people.

***Can you describe some of the benefits you have experienced in building friendships with people you have met in recovery?***

- It accelerates my “reprogramming” from the effects of child abuse. I can reframe everyday experiences continuously versus one time per week with my therapist. We are programmed generationally to comply with past generations. Forming friendships that extend the recovery experience outside of ASCA meetings, helps me reprogram that original “generational programming”.
- I met my best friend in a 12-step meeting. We formed a friendship that led to accelerated mutual development -- it happened naturally. Nothing was forced. Relationships like friendships have to happen naturally.

***How can the positive experience built, for example, in the East Bay ASCA community, be replicated by others who might also want to build community for healing?***

- Start by defining what a community is. It's a loving group of people who care about each other support each other -- who enjoy being together. It's a collection of people with a common understanding, experience, and set of beliefs. A community is self-sustaining.
- Most of us in the East Bay meetings, share the same therapist. He actually instigated and encouraged us to extend our relationships outside of ASCA meetings. That is something unique to our particular ASCA meeting. It definitely helped us become more like “an intentional community” in the East Bay.
- I'm not drawn to the idea of belonging to or creating an intentional community right now. Why? It involves certain commitments and responsibilities... responsibilities that I am not ready for right now -- things like decisions by consensus, etc. There's also a danger of codependency and groupthink that I'm not willing to risk.
- Having a newsletter can help us become more of a community. So can holiday parties and putting ourselves on Facebook.
- Creating "Traditions", sort of like the 12 step program, might help people who want to build more of an intentional community.
- No "shoulds" to building community -- it's important to give ourselves at least 10 meetings to decide on how deep we want to go with extending recovery relationships outside the meeting.
- There has to be a willingness to create community outside of ASCA meetings.
- Seeing ASCA co-facilitators exhibit healthy interactions inside the meetings helps --it gives me hope, and helps to counteract my basic mistrust of people.
- Other factors that help build community:
  - positive healthy interactions between individuals at the meeting level
  - personal fit and lifestyles
  - forming organically versus intentionally

## How to Get the Most Out Of an ASCA Meeting

Sometimes I get inhibited because I am afraid that I'll get carried away and reveal too much and later regret it. So I wind up saying less than I want to. So my solution to this problem is to work out beforehand what I want to reveal in the meeting and stick to my plan. By honoring the plan, I am able to relax and open up in the way I want to because I don't fear I'll say too much.

I benefit from preparing throughout the week for the meeting. I think about what I want to say and this prompts me to work through my feelings. At the meeting, I rarely repeat everything I have prepared because this exercise brings out so much.

I find myself tightening up if there are new people in the meeting. For a while, I did this unconsciously. Now, I am conscious of it so when there are new people there I know I'll reveal less until I know them better. Consciousness of the issue, helps me to relax.

I remind myself that I do not have to entertain everyone in the room. My share is for my benefit primarily. I don't have to be insightful and witty. I don't have to make everyone laugh. Rather, what I seek to do is express myself in a way that is healing for me. If I worry that this seems selfish, I recognize that such a feeling in this forum is a byproduct of the abuse I suffered. This is the place where I can be the focus for five minutes.

I find it helpful to read the relevant Survivor to Thriver passages depending on the rotation.

I get more out of meetings when I go frequently. If I don't come for a while, I tend to feel stuck in the meeting.

# The Inner Voice

## Object Relations/Self-Object/Inner Voice

The Inner Voice is not a magical thing. It is a process of the brain and mind that has a scientific explanation

Definition and development of the self-object and the Inner Voice

Freud defined an "object" as anything that satiates an infant's instinctual needs/desires.

Object-relations theorists such as Winnicott, Klein, Kohut, and others state that the "objects" are humans particularly the mother that an infant has a relationship with.

As the child grows, he forms a representation of the mother-object in his mind. This is called the self-object. The nature of self-object is similar to the feelings, thoughts and behavior of the mother toward the child. Alice Miller discusses that in early life the child seeks and courts the object/mother and how the self-object becomes the object of courtship in adult life. Especially for abused children who never received love from their mother objects.

Inner Voice "Symptoms"

The voice can be verbal but it isn't always.

It can be conscious but isn't always.

The voice shows up as persecutory thoughts about self and others. The goal of the negative inner voice is to express contempt.

It often shows up as if they are your own thoughts and feelings. For example, "I feel like am going to be rejected." If you were to answer the question, "Why would you be rejected?" the response would be indicative of "the voice". For example, "I would be rejected because I am stupid and unattractive." These are statements from the "voice", expressing attitudes of the interjected object or self-object. The words "you are stupid," could be the actual words your parents said to you as a child, but that isn't always the case.

As adults, we seek to agree with the Inner Voice/Self-Object to have a relationship with her. In addition, we believe that the object can transform us from bad to good. We court the self-object because we keep trying to resolve the trauma of the relationship from the past.

Annihilating the Inner Voice

Learning about its structure, purpose, and intent gives us knowledge and power.

Grieving the loss of the fantasized relationship with the parents.

Challenge the INTENT of the voice. Some people find it helpful in the early stages of confronting the Inner Voice to challenge the CONTENT of the voice. However, the content of the voice can be ever changing. One day you can be too talkative and the next you are too quiet. If the purpose of the voice's message is not to be helpful, then it is best to ignore all of its statements.

Talking to others in a supportive environment about what the inner voice says.