

Retreating « unfinished business » in relationships

Letters Protocol with bilateral stimulations

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Classical Letter

Stabilization

Never work without a safe place¹ ! It is also necessary to set a container first. Enough stabilization means:

- The person feels safe in the here and now safe environment, and feels sufficiently well in the relationship with the therapist for being willing to undergo this task.
- Everyday life tasks can be done in a satisfying way.
- The person is able to self-soothe and calm down efficiently.
- Being able to talk about this relationship without being involuntarily overwhelmed by emotions.

Before the session

The person writes the letter to someone with whom there is an unfinished business, whether traumatic or not, and which he/she agrees to address.

The therapist asks the client to write a letter :

- As if the person (target) could understand everything, hear everything the client would like to say, even if in reality this is not true
- Without censuring himself : straight from the heart, with the words which are coming up, until he/she has the feeling of having expressed everything relevant.

This letter can be written :

- As a homework,
- Just before the session (e.g. in the waiting room), or
- During the session (10 min maximum²)

During the session

1. Check for stability
 - a. Put into the container everything which has nothing to do with what is written in the letter.
 - b. Check the safety feeling on the safety scale³ and do all you can to improve the physiological comfort of the client.
 - c. Check the safe place⁴ : « *When you think about your safe place, do the images come to your mind easily ?* » ... « *how does your body react ?* »
 - d. Check for the Stop sign, the position of the chairs, the type of Bilateral Stimulation (BLS), the right distance, ...

¹ Having a safe place means : having been able to install an exclusively positive network, and having it integrated by getting mindfully in touch with a positive and calming body feeling.

² If the letter cannot be written elsewhere as within the therapy session, it is important to catch the first impulse and write it during a short time. During the present session upcoming emotions can be addressed through the written material.

³ « *Between 1 (I don't feel safe at all) and 10 (I feel completely safe in this room with the therapist, doing this task), where are you now ?* »

⁴ Does the person's body calm down, when thinking about the safe place ? Is the safe place still safe between the sessions ? If the answer is yes, you can go to the next step. If no, go back to stabilization and install a new, more efficient safe place.

2. Explain the procedure : (goal : make yourself predictable)

« I will ask you to read the letter aloud. As soon as there is an emotion or a body sensation coming up, I will ask you stop reading, and localize this body feeling/emotion in your body. We will do bilateral stimulation, while paying attention about what happens in your body, until everything has calmed down again.

At this moment, you can go back to the letter, to the phrase just before the one which brought up the emotion, and you can go on with reading, until the next emotion, and then we will redo stimulation. We will go through the letter like this until the end.

It can be that I interrupt you to ask you what you feel. I will always ask you to localize what you are feeling in your body.

When the whole letter is read, I will ask you to scan your whole body with your conscience and read again the letter while staying focused on your body, just to check if we haven't forgotten anything. Is this ok ? » (make sure that the person has understood and that she/he agrees)
3. Before reading, do you feel anything ?
 - a. If yes : BLS
 - b. If no : ask the client to start reading
4. The therapist looks at the non-verbal signs in the client and interrupts reading as soon as an emotion or a body sensation appears. This can come from visual clues, or the client's voice is changing, or even come from a particular content.

As soon as an emotion or a body sensation comes up: ask the client to localize it in the body, then to focus on this place and do BLS, as long as there are changes, until the body is completely calm.

It can be that there are a series of body feelings or emotions: continue BLS until the whole body calms down.

There can be images, thoughts coming up: continue BLS as long as the content changes (until 2 positive or neutral contents upcoming) until the body has calmed down⁵.

5. As soon as the body is calm, ask the client to go back to the phrase before the one which triggered emotion, and continue reading.

A good thing is to especially check the phrase, which has brought up emotion when the client reads it again: « and now, what are you feeling? »

Often the client says: « nothing », or « it's ok » while noticing that where was an issue and big emotions before, it isn't any more: this helps to construct a success story, little by little, and to get aware of it.

6. Repeat the steps from 3 to 5 until the whole letter is worked through.

If there is no dissociative disorder, please go to step 10

If there is dissociative disorder

It often happens, that dissociative functioning clients, although being stable and willing to address a letter, are still stuck in their habit to withdraw from their body sensations. If the first phase has worked out well, it is possible to overcome this habit while asking the client to focus on her/his body and his/her inner world while working out the next step of the letter.

⁵ It can happen that the client goes out of the process. In this case, go to step 5.

7. Start by giving compliments about the already done work. Then it is useful to explain that now it will be important to work with « all what is inside, and which has to do with what is written in the letter. »
If the person agrees, you can ask:
*« please focus on what is happening inside of you,
and do the effort to make contact
with everything inside you,
and which has to do with what is written in the letter. »*
8. Repeat steps 3 to 5 until the whole letter is read.

If there is transgenerational trauma or non-constructive transmission

9. It can be useful to do a « giving back ritual⁶ » :
 - a. Please ask the client to imagine the person to whom the letter is written. BLS
 - b. Then lead the client to establish a contact through an interaction as with an ego state: explore reactions on both sides and do BLS until the interaction is calm.
 - c. Then ask the client to imagine what she/he carries, in a suitable form for him/her. Explore how this looks like. BLS
 - d. Then, guide the client through the giving back ritual by asking him to say either mentally or aloud:
« While working about myself I noticed that I carry things which don't belong to me, » while doing BLS.
« and as all this doesn't belongs to me, I give it back to you, and you can give it to whom it belongs. » while doing BLS.
N.B : there can be strong emotions arising. This has to be handled as usual abreactions, with BLS sets until everything is calmed down again.
 - e. It often happens that clients are reluctant to give back. In this case, it may be useful to do the following interweave:
*« Sometimes small children, as courageous as heroes, would do anything possible in order to help their parents. (do BLS)
Especially when they notice that their parents feel not well. (do BLS)
Then they take on their little shoulders the problems of the parents, by hoping that this will bring them relieve. (do BLS)
And finally, this doesn't give relieve, neither to themselves, nor to the parents. (do BLS)
The work of the parents is to carry out their problems themselves, (do BLS)
and the one of the children is to trust the parents, that they will succeed. »* (do BLS)
 - f. This interweave can be done step by step, with BLS, the main goal is that the client, mentally, can give back her/his undue burden, accepts to let go of it, and lets the receiver handle it, by inviting him to give it back to ascendants.
 - g. Then, this ritual can be ended with the statement: « I will continue my life on my own, and I will enjoy life. Be well. »
 - h. This step is completed if the person is completely calm, well oriented. Very often, important and meaningful thoughts and new ways of thinking are emergig, which can need further discussion.
10. Ask the client to reread the letter as a body scan:
« Please think again of the letter, and of the person to whom you have written, and check your whole body. Tell me if you notice anything, or if the entire body is calm.. »

⁶ This procedure comes from the constellation work (see : Sparrer, I. (2007) *Miracle, Solution and System. Solution-focused systemic structural constellations for therapy and organisational change.* Solution Books, United Kingdom)

- a. There can be body feelings or emotions arising : do BLS until the body calms down. Then ask the client to do the bodyscan again.
 - b. If the persons' body is already calm, do a series of BLS, then ask him/her to reread the letter with his attention focused on the body, as to see if there has nothing been forgotten.
 - c. If during this bodyscan lecture any material comes up: do BLS, then continue reading. If during the bodyscan lecture there is more than twice upcoming material, do the whole bodyscan procedure again.
11. If there is no more material, then the session can be closed up. Ask the client to set all what is not yet reprocessed into the container. Then ask the client to go back to the safe place again, until the whole body is well.
- Greet the person, and evaluate the work, which has been done. Then do the session closure with the usual information: « *There can be images, or thoughts arising, as well as emotions, according to what you have worked through. There can also be dreams, even nightmares, This is quite normal. Just notice them briefly; we will come back to it at the next session. Remember that you have a safe place, that you can use, and that you can put in the container anything you don't want to address at the moment. If necessary, you can call me.* »

At the beginning of the next session

At the next session, please do a re-evaluation while exploring:

- How the person has felt after the last session.
- Was she/he stable? or has there been any destabilization ?
- If there has been destabilization, explore how the person has managed to restabilize.
- Evaluate if you will continue with the letter, or if it is necessary to target and reprocess an upcoming fear, or to reset a pervasive emotion or body feeling, or if you have to just do more stabilization.
- Explore if there has been changes. If yes, please explore in detail how the person has been able to implement them.
- How the person feels according to the letter and to the person to whom she/he has written it,
- if there are new thoughts, feelings, understandings, events, dreams, nightmares,

Continuing after an incomplete session

Please go back to the letter, where you have stopped after last session, and ask the client to return to the previous paragraph and continue reading.

Sometimes it can be useful to return to the beginning of the letter, especially when there is a long time since last session. The person, by rereading this part, can evaluate the changes since last session. What showed up to be upsetting before has often become neutral.

Generally, as soon as the not yet worked out section begins, emotions and body feelings will arise and the process can go on.

Letter form the future (Yvonne Dolan)

The client writes a letter from the future according to a problem she/he wants to address.

The therapist asks the client to write a letter:

- « Choose a precise date in the future,
 - then choose a real person to whom you would love to report good things.
 - Then project yourself at the chosen date,
 - and describe a situation, in which all the problems for which you have asked help, have vanished. Please describe your (every day) life, as concretely as possible, along with the circumstances in your environment, feelings, thoughts, etc. »
- The person can describe how she/he was able to get there, but this is not necessary (this is a possibility, but most of the people have no clue about it).

Work out this letter by using the letters protocol described from step 1 to 11

N.B. In the letter from the future, all emotions/body feelings are reprocessed with BLS, even positive ones, because they show being often ambivalent, and linked to fears.

