

Review of
**“Identifying and Treating Dissociative Symptoms
In Clients with Complex Trauma Histories”**
Joanne Twombly, MSW

Reviewed by Lorna McKenzie-Pollock, LICSW

On April 24th NESTTD’s Community Outreach Committee presented the first of its planned annual basic trainings in dissociation. The training was geared primarily to students and those relatively new to the trauma field, however, it was hoped that there would also be information useful to the seasoned trauma clinician.

The half day training was held at Simmons College. The event was fully registered several days beforehand and a number of people had to be turned away. Joanne Twombly, who conducted the training, is a past president of NESTTD and a past director on the Executive Council of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation. She is an EMDRIA Approved Consultant and an American Society of Clinical Hypnosis Approved Consultant. Ms. Twombly has extensive experience treating and consulting on dissociative clients and has published articles and book chapters on her work. Her practice is located in Watertown.

Ms. Twombly began by giving an overview of the various dissociative disorders. She went on to talk about how often dissociative disorders are missed or misdiagnosed by clinicians. She noted that in seven studies of 719 DID clients (Dissociative Identity Disorder) formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder, it was found that they spent an average of 7 to 11.9 years in treatment before being diagnosed. She went on to state that with the right treatment there is an 80% heal rate, whereas untreated dissociative symptoms slow, stop and complicate treatment.

Ms. Twombly presented some guidelines for recognizing the possibility of a dissociative disorder. These included:

- A complex child abuse history beginning at an early age, or a traumatic medical history
- History of a “wonderful childhood” in a person who is symptomatic
- Multiple prior treatment failures
- History of more than 3 diagnoses including one or more Axis 2 diagnoses
- Symptoms and functioning that comes and goes
- Multiple psychiatric and somatic symptoms, headaches, stomach and GYN problems with no underlying medical cause
- Mood swings, dramatic changes in behavior and appearance
- Time distortions, blank spells, amnesia
- Disremembered behavior
- Ability to block out pain

Treatment strategies discussed by Ms. Twombly drew on material from Ego State Therapy, Internal Family Systems, EMDR and hypnosis, particularly use of safe space imagery, containment and “grounding”. She discussed treatment methods for all three stages of phase oriented trauma treatment, and presented various ways of working with parts. The goal of treatment, in Ms. Twombly’s treatment model, is facilitating internal cooperation leading to the client “owning” the different parts. She presented extensive clinical material to illustrate the various aspects of treatment

Ms. Twombly is a polished speaker with a wealth of clinical experience which she presented in a lively and engaging way.. This was an excellent introduction to the field for new clinicians and a helpful review for those with more experience.