



COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES
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TWO-CHAIR TECHNIQUE

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Definition: Encouraging a client to dialogue between two aspects of the self, one aspect expressed while sitting in one chair and the other expressed while sitting in the other chair, switching as needed from one chair to the other

Elements: After a relationship has been established, on noticing that a client has expressed a split into two opposed parts of the self, one of which is expressed in a harshly critical voice (“inner Critic”) e.g. *‘I’m such a loser’* or *‘..too stupid, ..fat, ..ugly, ..needy, ..selfish’*, the therapist may prompt a client to start a two-chair dialogue. When sitting in the Critic’s chair the client speaks from that perspective, often using the unquestioned language of a parent or society as a whole e.g. *‘I guess it’s “You don’t live up to what I wish/expect, to your potential, I know there could be so much more but you don’t allow it.’* Seated in the Experiencing/Self chair the client expresses how it feels to be criticized e.g. *‘Yeah (crying), I can’t find anything to hold onto, can’t see where I’ve ever been able to do it, be effective, I don’t have any confidence at all’*. The client might switch, often in mid-sentence, from sitting in one chair speaking from one self to sitting in the other chair speaking from the other self. When perceiving switches in an aspect of the self during the dialogue the therapist may prompt the client to switch chairs as required. Contempt expressed from the Critic’s chair e.g. *‘You’re pathetic’* might first evoke hopelessness and then shame expressed from the Experiencing chair e.g. *‘I feel so worthless, like curling up into a ball and hiding’* and later more adaptive feelings such as anger and sadness and then self-assertion e.g. *‘Leave me alone. Stop attacking me like that’*. Resolution of the split might be seen with the Critic softening into compassion e.g.: *‘I don’t want to make you suffer, I do care about you’* or the two sides negotiating a solution e.g. *‘I understand you need my support, I’ll be right behind as you go out and apply for a job’* or more often integrating into self-acceptance and better self-esteem e.g. *‘I feel stronger, more confident’*.

In a “self-interruptive split” one part of a client may interrupt feelings of another part e.g. *‘I close off my feelings, don’t allow myself to feel’*. In two-chair dialogue the interrupting part is expressed in one chair e.g. *‘Don’t feel it, it’s too dangerous, hold your breath, distract’* and the interrupted part is eventually expressed in the other chair e.g. *‘It’s like being in a cage, let me out’*.

By the end of therapy a client may have engaged in many dialogues each lasting 10 to 50 minutes, usually in alternate sessions.

Related procedures: “Hot seat” & Gestalt therapy of Fritz Perls, psychodrama, role reversal.

Application: In individuals and groups, especially for self-critical depression and for catastrophising in anxiety disorders.

1st use? Carstenson (1955)

References:

1. Carstenson B (1955). The auxiliary chair technique – a case study. *Group Psychotherapy*, 8, 50-56.
2. Greenberg LS (2002). *Emotion-focused therapy: Coaching clients to work through their feelings*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
3. Greenberg LS, Rice LN, Elliot R (1993). *Facilitating Emotional Change: The Moment by Moment Process*. NY: Guilford Press
4. Perls FS (1969). *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. Lafayette, California: Real People Press.

Case illustration: (Greenberg, unpublished)

Mid-life Eva tearfully reported feeling down and unresolved family issues. She criticised her failure in family relationships: *'My sisters are all married and successful. I've been the black sheep'*. One treatment goal was to resolve her self-critical conflict split.

In session 4, the therapist encouraged Eva to start a self-critical two-chair dialogue by pulling up a third chair and saying *"Let's try something. You seem to have two voices, one critical and the other reacting to it. You can dialogue between them, expressing the critical voice while sitting in that third chair and switching to sit in your present chair when answering that voice#?OK?#*. Eva connected her bad feelings to parental criticism, saying in her parent voice: *'You've never amounted to anything. You didn't complete University. Look at you - you wear rags'*. During her dialogue her critical voice when sitting in the third chair eventually softened and on switching to sit in the other chair her answering voice showed a sense of worth emerging: *'Even though mom and dad didn't love me or show me love, it wasn't because I was unlovable, it was just because they were incapable of feeling or showing love. They still don't know how to love'*. Eva now felt less hopeless.

In sessions 5 & 6 Eva's dialogue worked on her feeling bad about her father's physical and verbal abuse via emotional exploration aided by the therapist's empathic responding and Eva's using other two-chair dialogues. In session 7, Eva and the therapist identified how Eva interrupted and protected against the pain of not having her needs met by laughing whenever she was sad. In session 9 in the "interrupter" chair she said *"You're wasting your time feeling bad because you want them, and they're not there. So it's best to shut your feelings off and not need them. That's what I do. When people hurt me enough I get to a point where I literally cut them out of my life like I did with my mother."*

Eva engaged in self-critical and self-interruptive two-chair dialogues in 4 of her 14 sessions and each lasted about 40 minutes. Other sessions involved empathic exploration and other types of two-chair dialogues. By the end of therapy the hopelessness that was so dominant in early sessions had virtually gone. Her voice wanting love and acceptance became stronger and the critic's voice softened to express acceptance of this part of her.