

Direct Eye Contact
(Technique for Making Contact with Internal Parts)

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Note: This brief “how-to” essay about the specific technique of direct eye contact does not provide information about the wider context of dissociative phenomena. Please do not use this tool until you have a basic understanding of dissociated internal parts.¹

I. Introduction: At the first advanced Theophostic^{®2} training we attended, in October of 1998, in the middle of a bunch of comments about working with internal dissociated parts, Dr. Smith made the single comment "Make sure to look directly in their eyes to first establish contact with the dissociated parts." He never elaborated, didn't demonstrate, and I have never found this in any of his written material. I scribbled it on the back of one of the pages of our advanced manual and found it there several months later when I was stuck with a particular client and was trying to find anything that might be helpful. I implemented this simple directive and was amazed at the results.

What was so striking to me is that I had been doing everything Dr. Smith had described for two to three months, with the exception of the direct eye contact. After trying to connect with internal dissociated parts for several months with no success, the person reported experiencing “something stirring inside” within seconds of adding direct eye contact to our work. The client suddenly perceived that there was some “part” of his mind that had been holding the emotions disconnected from the memory in some way. I made a few gentle comments directly to this internal “part,” and then requested that it come forward with the “missing” emotions. The emotions connected with intensity within a few moments and our emotional healing work began to move forward again.

I immediately thought of other clients that seemed stuck at a similar point (trying to connect with internal dissociated parts, but with no success). Over the next several weeks I tried this simple tool in each of these situations and was amazed and grateful to observe similar dramatic benefit with many of them. Charlotte and I have now been using this tool on a regular basis since about January of 1999. We have found it to be helpful in many client situations and also in my own healing work (see essay “Dissociative Phenomena: Case Study and Reflections”).

II. Brief description, practical comments: The following is a brief description of the technique (as I use it), along with some additional practical advice with respect to using it.

A. Always start with explanation and asking permission: When I first began to use this

¹ See “Dissociative Phenomena: Case Study and Reflections,” “Repression, Denial, and Dissociation: ‘Where did kindergarten and first grade go?’”, and “Internal Family Systems” on our website for additional information about dissociative phenomena and dissociated internal parts.

² [®]Theophostic Prayer Ministry is a trademark of Dr. Ed Smith and Alathia Ministries, Inc., of Campbellsville, Kentucky.

technique, I would often spontaneously start to demonstrate direct eye contact and speaking directly to internal parts as part of the initial explanation. However, on several occasions the people I was working with experienced dramatic responses from their internal parts as soon as I started the demonstration part of the explanation, and they were moderately freaked out by the experience. They had not previously been aware that they had internal parts, and they felt like they had been caught off guard by experiencing dramatic internal parts phenomena before adequate explanation and conversation. We also realized that it would have been good to have asked for permission.

So now I am careful to always start with simple, brief comments about dissociation, a brief explanation regarding the direct eye contact technique, and asking for permission before trying it. For example: "Sometimes traumatic memories and/or emotions can be disconnected and carried separately by a part of the mind as a way of protecting you from the pain. There may be a part of your mind protecting you from the memories (or painful emotions – for people who have the memory but the emotions are missing). I would like to try talking right past your conscious adult. I am going to ask if there is any part of your mind that is carrying the memories (and/or painful emotions). Your job is just to observe and listen. Please describe any thought or word or image that comes into your mind in response to what I say. Sometimes people don't see or hear or sense anything – that's okay. If you're okay with it, I would like to give this a try and just see what happens."

And I am careful to *not* include any aspect of demonstration in the explanation conversation.³

B. Make direct eye contact, talk directly to possible internal parts: Looking directly in the eyes of the person to whom you are ministering (make sure to make direct eye contact), I speak directly to the internal parts I think might be there. As much as possible I speak what is on my mind with transparency ("think out loud"). For example: "I think there is probably⁴ some part of ___'s mind carrying the memories/emotions we need to work with. Let us help. I would like to hear from any part that is carrying the memories/emotions or any part that knows about them."⁵

It is okay to wait quietly for a response. Some people will sit quietly for 10 to 20 seconds before perceiving an internal response. If the person I am working with doesn't get a response within 10 to 20 seconds, I will make additional comments as they come to me (still making direct eye contact). For example: "I am asking for your help. I won't try in any way to make you cooperate. I couldn't make you cooperate even if I wanted to. I know it feels like I can

³ This all pertains to the first time I use the direct eye contact technique with a given recipient. Once a person is familiar with it, I just make a very simple request for permission, such as, "Is it okay if we do the eye contact thing?" before including it in a session.

⁴ Make an honest statement of your level of certainty. As you learn you will become more confident and this will help. Don't lie or exaggerate – my experience is that internal parts appreciate integrity and transparency and can smell exaggeration or dishonesty a mile away. Honesty about uncertainty seems to work much better than trying to fake confidence.

⁵ Concerns about suggestibility and false memory are beyond the scope of this brief, practical essay. For careful, thorough discussion of suggestibility and false memory, see Karl D. Lehman, "Repressed and/or Dissociated Traumatic Memories are a Real Phenomena," last modified 6/14/2004, <http://www.kclehman.com>, and Karl D. Lehman, "Direction, Suggestion, Misattribution, and False Memory," last modified 6/15/2004, <http://www.kclehman.com>.

see you, but I am just guessing that you are there. If you are carrying the memories/emotions we need to work on, the only way for _____ to get healing is for you to let her have the memories/emotions. I would really appreciate it if you could help us.”

If I am fairly confident that there are internal parts carrying important pieces of the puzzle, I will ask specifically about guardian lies. For example (still making direct eye contact): “If it’s not safe to let _____ have the memories/emotions, if it’s not safe to tell us about them, it would really help if you could let us know why it’s not safe – then we could ask Jesus to help us figure out what to do. Could you tell us what you are afraid will happen if you let _____ have the memories/emotions? If you tell us about them?”

Usually I will close a trial of direct eye contact if I don’t get any response in two to five minutes. I make a comment such as: “If there is a part of _____’s mind that knows more about the memories/emotions we are working on, it’s okay for you to decide not to talk with me. I want you to keep watching and listening. It would be especially helpful if you could let _____ know in some way why you are afraid to help us. We invite you to communicate with _____ in any way you want to – in his/her dreams, thoughts, images – any way you would like to,” and then move on to other trouble shooting ideas. Occasionally I will feel lead to continue longer than two to five minutes (even though still getting no response). Thoughts will just come to me and I will continue with direct eye contact and “transparent conversation” for as long as it seems comfortable.

C. Some internal parts will wait a while before responding: With some people I have done this many times before getting any results. They look right at me with an intensity that feels like “someone inside is listening” and the person often comments “it is just totally quiet inside.” After a number of sessions internal parts suddenly start communicating and cooperating. It seems like the internal parts were listening and trying to decide whether or not to cooperate, trying to evaluate the risks and potential benefits of letting themselves be “seen” (dropping the dissociative defense of invisibility). Then they finally decided that the only way to freedom was to cooperate with the emotional healing process. On several occasions the internal parts have described exactly this process: “We have been watching and listening since the first appointment. We have been trying to decide whether it was safe to cooperate.”⁶

D. Direct eye contact is not as important once initial contact has been made: As I have used the direct eye contact technique in working with many different people, I have discovered that it is usually not as important once initial contact with internal parts has been made. A few recipients find that it is still necessary for making and maintaining contact with internal parts. Some continue to find it to be helpful, but report that it is no longer absolutely necessary. Some find it to be helpful in certain situations, but distracting in others. And some find that it is consistently easier to communicate with internal parts while looking away or with their eyes closed.

III. Why does it work?: I have wondered why this simple technique is so effective in facilitating contact with internal parts. I don’t feel like I have definitive answers to this question, but will briefly share a few thoughts: 1) Most of us realize intuitively that direct eye contact is a

⁶ I have also worked with people that appear disconnected, have clues indicating dissociation, but that have not yet responded to anything we have tried. I have used direct eye contact and “transparent conversation” as described here on a regular basis for a number of months but have not seen any response. I will send out a note when we figure it out.

powerful interpersonal connection – “The eyes are the windows to the soul.” 2) The therapist/minister is more transparent while making direct eye contact. I think this helps the person’s internal parts decide whether or not they can trust you. They can get a better read on your honesty. They can get a better read on whether you have questions, fears, or reservations that you have not discussed with them. They can also get a better read on whether you are getting triggered in any way. I find it impossible to intentionally withhold information while making direct eye contact (I can try, but the other person can pick it up immediately). 3) Kids (including internal child parts) seem to have a longing to be “seen,” acknowledged, recognized, validated. How many of us have heard a child say, “Look... Look at me... Hey!...HEY! Look at me!” Internal parts often have the intense subjective feeling that you can see them when you are making direct eye contact and talking to them.⁷ Often the wounds the internal parts carry include being neglected, ignored, and invalidated. Just being “seen” and given positive, caring attention seems to contribute to the healing in many cases. One client I worked with began crying within moments of initiating direct eye contact, and commented, “I feel like there is a little place inside saying ‘Somebody finally sees me. It feels so good to be seen’.” Another client responded with, “I feel like a little part inside is saying ‘Somebody has finally found me – he knows I’m here! Maybe he can help.’”

IV. Note regarding therapist/minister having anxiety and/or difficulty with direct eye

contact: If it is difficult for you to maintain non-anxious eye contact I would encourage you to focus on this in your own emotional healing work. It used to make me anxious to maintain eye contact in many situations, and I couldn’t concentrate on any significant task while maintaining eye contact. In fact, Charlotte had actually observed this and commented on it, thinking that it must mean something. And I had always gotten defensive, and responded with something along the lines of, “It’s always been this way - this is just the way I’m built. Eye contact is an intense social phenomena - it takes too much energy and concentration to maintain eye contact. I can think, listen, concentrate better if I close my eyes.” Then I noticed that this long standing pattern was changing. It seemed that as I received my own emotional healing it was becoming easier and easier to make and maintain non-anxious eye contact – Charlotte, friends, and clients also noticed the difference. We eventually figured out that it is very difficult for me to make eye contact when I am triggered into non-relational mode. Although it happens much less frequently now, discomfort with eye contact continues to be an excellent clue that I am getting triggered in some way, and that I have lost access to my relational circuits. (For additional discussion of direct eye contact, triggering, relational circuits, and non-relational mode, see the section on eye contact in chapter sixteen, “Loss of Access to Relational Circuits, Expanded Discussion,” in *Outsmarting Yourself*.)⁸

V. Helpful resource regarding internal family systems: The essay on our Web page titled “Internal Family Systems” describes a book that I have found to be very helpful in working with internal parts. There are caveats (I disagree with the author on several important points), but overall this book has been very helpful. I would encourage you to review the “Internal Family Systems” note and consider this book as a resource if you are getting stuck working with internal

⁷ If the wounds and lies involve shame and/or fear, this subjective sense of being seen can be very alarming. This is a common reason for no response. Often the person will report sensing that an internal part is present but they will feel like it is “hiding” in some way. The part will begin to cooperate and eventually become visible as guardian lies and spiritual infection around shame and/or fear are addressed.

⁸ Karl D. Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself: Catching Your Past Invading the Present and What to Do about It*, (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2011), pages 131-134.

parts.

VI. Caution: Direct eye contact is a particularly powerful form of interpersonal connection. When using this technique, the minister must therefore be especially careful regarding concerns about power differential, appropriate boundaries, etc. in the therapeutic relationship.