

Two-Chair Enactment for Self-Interruption Splits*

*(Taken and altered from Elliott, R., Watson, J. C., Goldman, R. N., & Greenberg, L. S. [2004].
Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy: The Process-Experiential Approach to Change.
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.)

1. Two-chair work for Interruptions is for emotional expression that are blocked or suppressed.
2. The experiencing part of the self expresses a primary adaptive emotion, need or action but is interrupted by the self-censoring part—the “interrupter”—that prevents the person from doing so.
3. In contrast to self-criticism splits which are more verbal, usually the interrupter is largely a nonverbal, bodily aspect, sometimes entirely nonverbal such as H/A or chocking.
4. Self-interruptions are formed at key developmental stages, are responses to environments that did not allow for full expression of emotions and needs; they no longer are adaptive but continue into adult life; they operate at an automatic level that prevent experience and expression; they are learned responses designed to cope with unsafe environments or an internalized lack of entitlement; they are often accompanied by episodic memories of images of time and location when such beliefs were formed

1. *Clinical Indications of Self-Interruptive Splits*

- a. Self-interruptions are common within empty chair work where one: runs into blocks when attempting to express emotions or needs to imagined SO's; may hold back full expression/intensity of feelings or trouble accessing or stating needs; in unfinished business, avoidance processes and over-control are common.
- b. Fear losing control, hurting someone, not having needs met, fear feelings of devastation and disappointment; fears of annihilation
- c. Catastrophizing or guilt, shutting down, going numb, and dissociation may have been adaptive at one time but now interfere with the integration of traumatic or negative experience. With fragile Participants, may be best at first to explore these processes with empathy before attempting to tolerate and explore avoided painful material.
- d. Blocks and interruptions related to internalized taboos, false beliefs and injunctions: e.g., “you just don't talk to your mother and father like that,” or “I am not going to ask my mother/father for attention or love b/c I will not get what I want anyway so it is better not to need anyone.”

2. *Markers for Self-Interruption*

- a. Interruptions may be related in a story or occur in real time; degree to which interruption is explicitly expressed varies; the primary feeling may be so efficiently interrupted that it may not be apparent; may be observed when unable to express an emotion, a need, or unable to complete the expression of it, and when asked describes feeling blocked, burdened, oppressed or reports onset of

tightness in chest or throat, pain in the neck, or a h/a: In empty-chair work, participant responds with “It just won’t come out; I feel so small.”

- b. Interruptions have 3 characteristics: (a) participant begins to describe or express a feeling, need, or action, (b) a restriction or interruption of the feeling, need, or action is described or exhibited, (c) the participant expresses a distress or discontent as a result of the interruption, including a physical reaction like pain, often the internal experience is one of feeling squeezed, blocked, or stopped—e.g., “I started to get angry with my mother, then it just went away and I had a blinding h/a for the rest of the night.

3. *Participant’s & Coach/Primary’s Processes (what happens) in Two-Chair Enactment for Self-Interruptions (see summary chart on last page)*

- a. Primary’s goal is to heighten awareness of the interruptive process and help participant access and allow blocked or disavowed internal experience.
- b. Best to put the part of the self that is interrupting in the other chair, and ask the participant to enact holding the experiencing self back.
- c. The Table at the end summarizes the steps and stages of task resolution and facilitative Primary responses.
- d. Can begin with suggesting to the participant to sit in the chair and be the physical expression such as heaviness. This is more likely to stimulate associated emotion schemes and facilitate full expression of emotions: e.g., have participant imagine or act out the heaviness or choking sensation on the experiencing self, “Go ahead and push down on him/her; make him/her slump.”
- e. Encourage exaggeration and intensification of catastrophic expectations against emotional expression—useful in heightening awareness of impact of injunctions and blocks: e.g., “Make him/her afraid; tell him/her what might happen if risks what needs to say; really scare ‘um. How exactly do you do that to him/her?”
- f. This approach heightens how the participant creates own anxiety by imagining catastrophic fears as coming true; awareness of tension, isolation, or powerlessness seems to increase awareness of a desire to relieve the discomfort through expression and propels the participant to stand up for self.
- g. Participants learn how they block their emotions and what they say to themselves to do so; directly observe what self-interruption leads to in the form of depression, anxiety, guilt, physical tension, or pain.
- h. As a result, they come to a greater sense of agency and control and realize just as they produce emotional and physical discomfort in themselves, they can change these feelings.
- i. Once the block is removed the Primary returns to empty-chair work and helps the Participant express constructive angry—the resolution of self-interruption splits can be the key to resolving unfinished business; possible to pursue two-chair enactment as a task in its own right rather than as a subtask within empty chair work in which case more time is needed at each stage; could then engage in the task repeatedly, and work toward full resolution, specifically in the form of helping the Participant feel more empowered.

4. *Example Case of Two-Chair Enactment for Self-Interruptions:*

Following is a brief sequence of getting past a block within the context of empty-chair work—does not usually move this quickly:

Primary: What happens when you try to express your rage at your mother?

Participant (as experiencer): I feel like I am in a box and I cannot come out. [Stage 1: Marker]

Primary: OK, can you come over here (pointing to the other chair), be the box, and put the experiencing-self inside? (Participant moves to interrupter chair.)
What do you say as the box?

Participant (as interrupter): I am the box, and I have you and I will not let you out. [Stage 2: Entry]

Primary: OK, tell me, as the box, what is your objection to letting Participant out?

Participant: S/he is safe in there. I can protect her. S/he will not get hurt.

Primary: OK, so tell her/him about how you are keeping him/her safe.

Participant: I am keeping you safe in there, don't come out, I am protecting you. You could get hurt if you even, if you stick your head out a little.

Primary: OK, now come over here and, as the experiencing-self, tell your box how that feels. (Participant moves to experiencer chair.)

Participant: Well, I feel kind of claustrophobic in here. I am squished. I would like to have a little room to breathe, [Stage 3: Deepening]

Primary: Well, s/he is trying to protect you. What do you say to that?

Participant: Well, I'd like to come out a little. I am not so afraid. I am a big girl and I think I can handle whatever will happen, [Stage 4: Partial Resolution]

Primary: OK, then can you say this to your box? Tell her/him what you want.

Participant: I want to come out. I want to be free to express my anger. [Stage 5: Self-Assertion]

TWO-CHAIR ENACTMENT FOR SELF-INTERRUPTION SPLITS

Two-Chair Enactment Stage

1. *Marker confirmation:* Participant engages in or describes how one part interrupts another part.

2. *Entry:* Participant actively enacts own possible self-interruptive process in concrete specific manner.

3. *Deepening:* Participant contacts and differentiates feelings of passivity and resignation.

4. *Partial resolution:* Participant clearly expresses interrupted emotion.

5. *Self-assertion:* Participant clearly expresses need associated with the emotion.

6. *Full resolution:* Participant feels empowered and envisages or plans new actions in the world in order to meet need.

Primary's Responses

Reflect or direct attention to marker.
Establish collaboration.
Structure dialogue.

Separate and create contact.
Promote participant's owning of experience.
Increase participant's bodily awareness.
Promote awareness of self-interruptive activity.

Differentiate self-interrupter.
Promote awareness of agency in self-interruptive activity.
Increase participant's awareness of passive but biologically adaptive aspect.

Identify interrupted expression.

Stimulate and support emerging assertiveness in felt-need aspect.
Experiment with appropriate interpersonal expression of need (two-chair dialogue).

Encourage empowerment.
Following dialogue, facilitate meaning Perspective.