

Pendulation

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Pendulation describes the back and forth motion of a pendulum—forward and back or up and down. In the same way, humans are constantly changing mood and perspective. We're happy, then we're sad, then we're happy again. We are intensely working on something, then a thought comes: “What's for dinner?” At moments, we can be completely absorbed in something, “in the zone.” But eventually, we change. The picture shifts, our mood changes.

This process of back and forth—big picture/little picture, happy/sad, wide awake/tired—is the basic rhythm of life, just like our breath goes in and out. In general, a smooth flow from one side to another is comfortable.

However, shame and trauma disrupt a person's ability to pendulate. Do you remember those pictures that could be two different pictures depending on your view—the one with the wine glass that turned into a couple kissing, or the figure of a woman that turned into the face of an old woman if you looked at it a certain way? That is pendulation, a gentle going back and forth.

Now, imagine one of the pictures is truly horrible, scary and upsetting to look at. If you could take a different perspective, it might be a neutral or even a pleasant picture. But people in trauma or shame are stuck looking at the horrible picture.

The other way that people in trauma or shame can experience life is in flipping—going from one extreme to another. To tear themselves out of a freeze/stuck state, they may move to extreme emotion or extreme action. These two extremes may alternate. If we continue with our metaphor, people may suddenly see the horrible picture as unbelievably beautiful, even sexually arousing, and cycle between the two extremes. In neurophysical terms, a parasympathetic shutdown alternates with sympathetic overarousal. We can see this often in the couples cycle, as partners go from rage to despair and self-blame—and back again.

Our job as helpers is to restore a smooth pendulation and help clients let go of the freeze or calm the flipping, gain freedom of movement and attention, and see a bigger picture. We lessen the extremes and create a larger, more encompassing middle.

By the same token, we don't want to force the client to “work on her problems.” A flow of touching in and going out, getting serious and having fun, cognitive and embodied, feeling emotion and telling stories, reinforces the natural process.

Also, we don't want to leave the client in aloneness. We want a pendulation between client and therapist as we skillfully guide the client's attention, the only real power we have.