



# Personal Conflict Resolution Therapy

An emotion-based approach to interpersonal conflict.

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*“It seems that fighting is a game where everybody is the loser.”*

— **Zora Neale Hurston**

Personal Conflict Resolution Therapy (PCRT) is an approach to resolving interpersonal conflict that came into focus with the publication of “Why We Fight (Because We Don’t Connect)” (Stoller, 2023). The “P” in PCRT distinguishes it from the sociological field of conflict theory (Bartos & Wehr, 2002), which follows Marx to focus on social issues, and intrapersonal Modern Conflict Theory (Brenner, 1994), which is a psychoanalytic framework following Freud (Christian, 2011).

The PCRT approach rests on the observation that conflicts aren’t about issues, they’re about

emotions. Conflicts are not resolved when opposition is resolved or immediate needs are satisfied. The combative nature of conflict is transmuted when the adversaries share each other's emotions as their own. Rational solutions do not stabilize emotional conflicts. Journalist Amanda Ripley (2021) gives personal stories of "the mysterious force that incites people to lose their minds" in her book *High conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out*.

PCRT's critical insight is that intellectual explanations disguise a conflict's cause and obscure its resolution. Most long-standing conflicts are a disjunction between reason and emotion, and this disjunction is only made greater by alternately attempting to explain, constrain, and resolve it intellectually. Compromise fundamentally fails for conflicts that are not emotionally understood by both parties. (Voss, 2017).

While Freud proposed levels of consciousness below our awareness, Jung, Maslow, Assignoli, and others developed theories of higher consciousness. Their work, known as transpersonal psychology, synthesizes social, logical, pathological, and transcendent awareness. PCRT follows Assignoli (Firman, 2011; Rosselli & Vanni, 2014) in asserting that one's higher levels can be known. More than just being knowable, self insight is necessary for enduring resolutions to conflict.

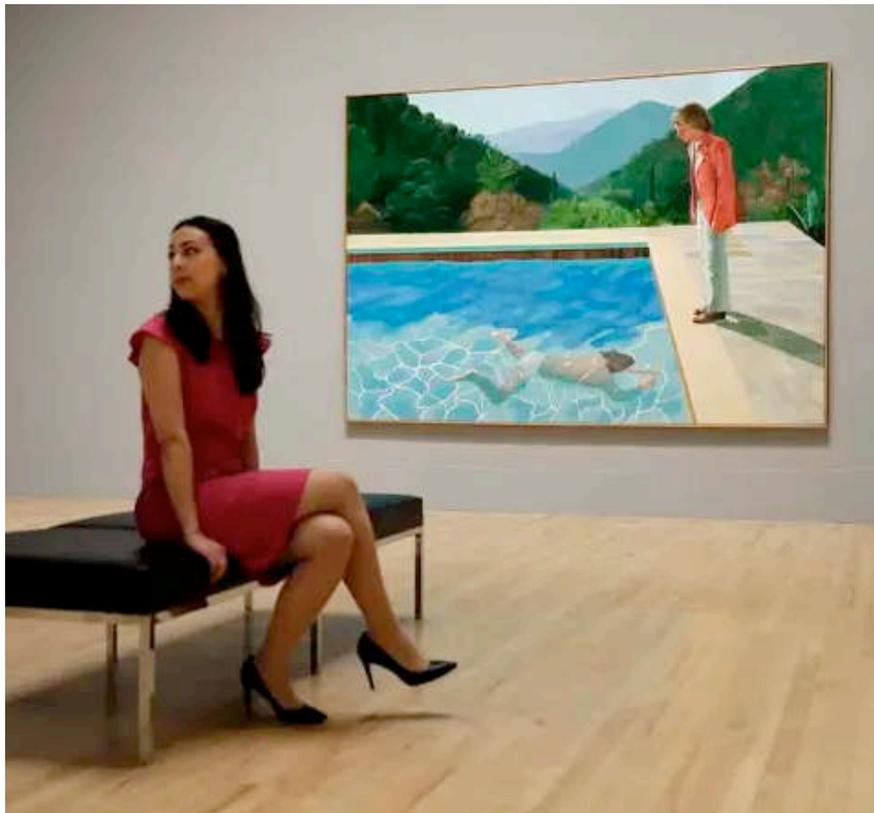
In 1994 Steven Hayes proposed what has come to be called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), the essential goal of which is "to treat emotional avoidance, excessive literal response to cognitive content, and the inability to make and keep commitments to behavior change" (Hayes, 1994). Hayes called ACT a Third Generation therapy. Approaches previous to this and other 3rd generation therapies viewed emotions as digressions; distractions that were destructive to clarity, and which needed to be controlled.

PCRT is a Fourth Generation, transpersonal therapy (Sutich, 1969). It eschews the idea that there is one correct and healthy self in any person. PCRT sees a person composed of competing selves, and emotions as essential to their expression and complementary to intellect.

Emotions represent a foundation of awareness that has evolved through inherited aptitudes, social conditioning, and formative experience. To be resolved, they must be understood and addressed at each of these levels.

Other fourth generation therapies include regression therapy, parts therapy, family

constellation therapy, psychedelic-assisted therapy, and eye movement and desensitization retraining.



Pool with Two Figures, David Hockney

## The Conflict is Not The Problem

The Personal Conflict Resolution approach recognizes problematic behaviors, but instead of aiming to change them, PCRT explores them through channels of heightened awareness and varieties of experience. The conflict is not the problem. The problem is a failure to fully appreciate its context, and find positive guidance from it.

The conflict provides a means to explore unresolved feelings and unpleasant perceptions. It provides a context in which parties can work to build a common feeling, rather than an adversarial context in which each tries to reframe the feelings of the other. The result of a shared context is not a consensus or compromise, but a shared appreciation of personal experiences.

Personal experiences are never real in an absolute sense. They are each person's future projections, and they may be compatible or incompatible with those of another person.

Our perceptions are exaggerated pictures based on past anxieties, present needs, and future desires. Sharing emotional understanding enables us to establish greater congruence. This may not resolve the conflict, but it will provide a foundation for agreeable future actions.

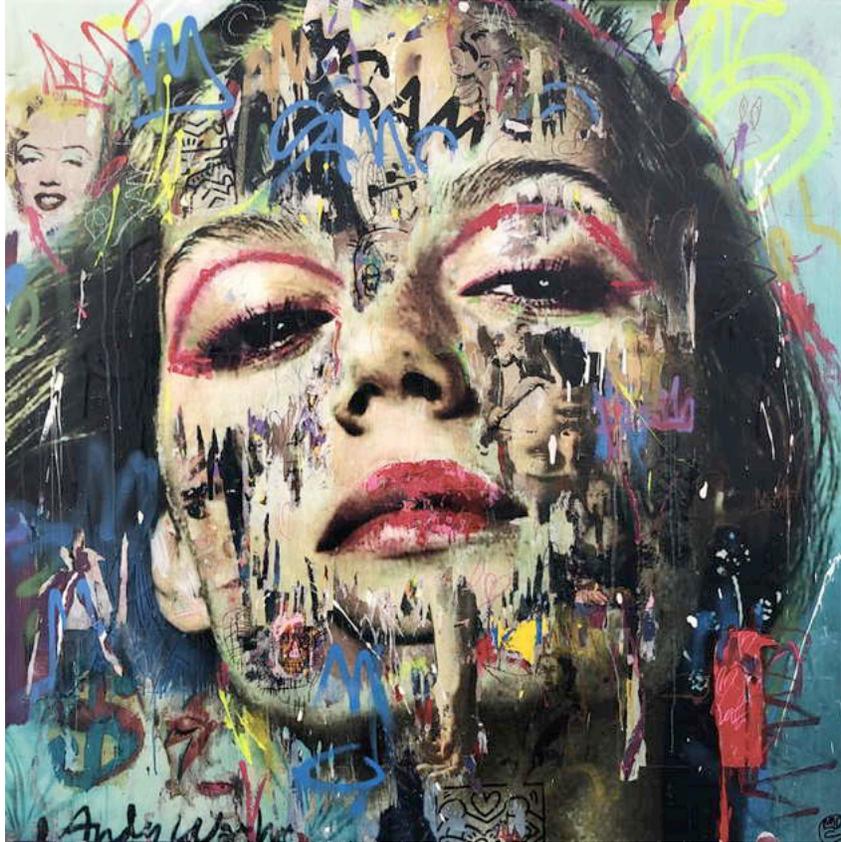
We fixate on our most prominent perceptions. This feeds back to heighten our emotions. In analogy with the 17-th century paintings of Jan Vermeer, a hyper-attention to detail deceives us into believing that what we're looking at is real. In Vermeer's paintings, unrealistically bright details and subtly distorted perspective magnifies our emotions of calm or disquiet, balance or imbalance, invitation and foreboding (Cabañes, 2011).

Similarly, a person in a heightened emotional state succumbs to a kind of tunnel vision, fixating on certain memories and associations and believing them to be real. PCRT accepts these perceptions relative to a person's emotions, but works to build a more inclusive picture of the truth.

PCRT gives emotions a voice so that they can play a foundational role. The emotions may be problematic, and their desires may be negative or destructive, but they must be explored to uncover their origins and intentions. They cannot be judged on a practical basis alone.

Emotions are not superficial, although they may speak a capricious message. They are the summation of a particular perspective that has become part of a person's reality. They are not a complete, comprehensive, or entirely correct perspective, but they convey aspects of a person's reality.

Emotions fight for acceptance. And fights are emotional by definition, as opposed to debates, arguments, or disputes. Conflicts that have become combative are fundamentally expressions of emotion. These emotions will remit and may be assimilated once that aspect of one's personality feels it has been fully heard.



Love Me, Maria De Campos

## Four-fold Approach

The development of therapies for understanding emotions has been slow. Ellis's Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (Froggatt, 2005) attempts to corral emotional behavior within rational constructs. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy focuses more on a recognition of self (Hayes, 1989), and less on the remediation of symptomatic behavior.

Personal Conflict Resolution Therapy sees the self as constructed from logical, illogical, comprehensible, and irreconcilable aspects. The object of PCRT is not to know oneself in the sense of being self-aligned, but to recognize one's many aspects. PCRT focuses on conflicts as useful steps on a path to synchrony with oneself and with each other. The full meaning of any conflict is only as understandable as one understands oneself. PCRT follows these four steps:

### **1- Clarify and amplify the rational conflict and its emotional associations.**

Underlying each reason are emotions and associations. Rather than disputing the reasons,

explore the associations. Trace these to their emotions not for the purpose of resolution, but to expand and understand them. Once these feelings are clear enough to be fully understood, they can be evaluated, included, or set aside.

## **2- Explore and reveal the depth of each person's emotion.**

Issues, actions, and explanations are the consequences of emotional triggers, not the origins of conflict. The trigger is not the conflict, it is only a sign of it.

In some cases of injury, assault and insult is intentional. If this is the case, then make it clear and enable separation. Even in this case, however, if there is a victim/perpetrator cycle, then there is a larger goal beyond protection. The conflict is an opportunity to expose this cycle. It is not the therapist's responsibility to break the cycle, they don't have the authority, but they can expose its roots.

## **3- Invite emotional responses without confrontation.**

Arguments become amplified because feelings are not understood. This failure to understand exists in both the delivering and the receiving parties. The delivering party, often the aggressive or disruptive party, introduces chaos because they are not yet able to get in touch with themselves. The opposing party can help be the mirror—and mirroring is their fundamental role in the conflict—when they fully appreciate the direction of the assault.

PCRT asserts that this assault does not need to be physical or aggressive, it can be passive or evasive. It is an assault because it takes power and safety away from the person who receives it. The assault is a projection through which the assaulting person gains clarity and connection.

The parties present themselves as wanting to resolve their conflict, but that is not an equally shared desire. Neither fully understand the conflict, and both have different goals. The conflict is the pain of a thorn, and each person's thorn is different. The object is not to remove the pain, it's to remove the thorns.

## **4- Create a conjoined resonance between the emotions that emerge from one party, and the responsive emotions of the other.**

A conjoined resonance is a shared feeling with similar implications for both. From this joint perspective, the two "thorns" of the conflict become the same thorn, and both parties can work to remove it by pulling in the same direction.

People have only partial understanding of each other and themselves. They match parts of themselves with roles they are reading onto the actions of the other. These projected roles likely have some reality, but they are not accurate, complete, or sustainable. Each party must recognize the role they are playing in how they perceive the other, and they likely play multiple roles.

When both parties are conscious of the roles they create in themselves and evoke in the other—the roles they are needing, expecting, or playing—then they can assess the reality, sustainability, and necessity of these roles.

There are many roles, and these roles have many origins. Only by having both parties understand, explore, and speak from these roles can they ultimately accept or reject them. This is a process in which both parties decide to share the same drama.

It is the necessity and not the reality of this drama that is the therapist's concern. In most cases, there will be a sequence of dramas and a panoply of characters. Some characters may be authentic and others false presentations.

In the case of disintegrated personalities, one person's characters emerge and retreat, unknown to each other. They may work against each other. This most likely would not be evident to the disintegrated personality, but it should be recognizable and revelatory to the actual person with whom they are in conflict.

This disintegration is revealed most effectively by inviting each emotion to speak, and to accept their motivations, associations, and conclusions without dispute. It is these inner character's inability to prevail in conflict that leads them to evasive, deceptive, and desperate projections and presentations.



## Techniques of Exploration

PCRT aims to explore what does not make sense, not to correct or redirect it, but to make sense of it. The more a person understands about their situation, the greater their ability in adopting a different attitude (Martinie, 2006). It is up to the parties in conflict to decide how to apply their attitudes and intentions. Where most therapies presume there is one personality motivating a given individual, PCRT asserts there are many.

Few of one's personalities are in close alignment, and each has access to different memories and associations. In extreme cases of stress and dissociation, these personalities cannot establish continuity. They may not remember how they felt or acted. When there is complete amnesia there is Dissociative Identity Disorder, but a spectrum of disconnection prevails in most people. Under extreme stress, almost everyone dissociates.

### Confabulated Reasoning

The parties in conflict are encouraged to present the associations that underlie their feelings and to connect these with their thoughts. Unlike Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), which aims to correct irrational or ineffective thinking, PCRT encourages its greater expression. The conflict's origins are not in the potentially twisted reasons, but in the feelings and associations

that support them. As in dealing with a tape worm, we want to draw the whole emotional and associative entity into view.

The more obscure and less factual the reasoning, the more likely it is closer to a person's true feelings. The person who is expressing their reasoning can be accepted without judgement, but the party with whom they are in conflict will experience these as rationalizations, accusations, threats, or fabrications.

The opposing party should recognize this will be their reaction, that these assertions are not truths, and that they do not need to defend their position. Their goal should be to understand the associations on which the illogic is based, not correct the logic, as one would be inclined to do if one was trying to work from the truth. There is no truth, only points of view.

## Hypnotic Visualization

We think our rational minds control our thoughts, and we move from one idea and action to the next based on our understanding. This self-justifying process obscures our true feelings beneath a screen of rationalizations. When left to ourselves, we continue to affirm our reasonable behavior. We'll continue to do this even when we lose our sanity.

In fact, we rarely have any idea where our ideas and reasons come from. They come from memories and emotions over which we have no control. It is these associations that our environment draws out from us, not the reasons we ascribe to them.

Hypnotic visualization is a technique of wakeful dreaming. It lowers our reactivity to conflict or, placed in a perceptual context, it decouples our executive function from conflict awareness (Egner, 2005). By releasing our reasonable control, we are better able to follow trails of memory and association. As with nighttime dreams, this trail does not follow a logical or plausible path.

Different visualizations can start at the same point and lead to different paths of memory and association. No one path is more correct than another, but some may be more powerful, predominant, or fruitful. Under duress, when a person's intentions are strained, they can be attracted to uncommon and unwanted action-oriented paths.

The aim of hypnotic visualization is to explore paths not normally intended (Hunter, 2004). These are not the paths to which one's "normal" ego is committed to or aware of. They are the

emotions or personalities that emerge when one is in conflict. We cannot manage them until we become aware of them and communicate with them.

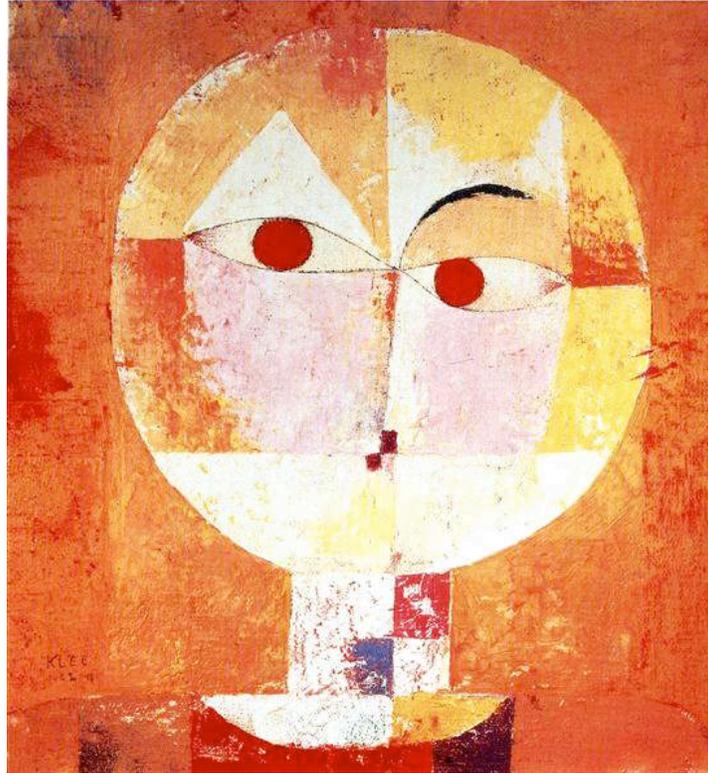
### Alters Explicate Alternatives

The partner in the conflict, who notices the emergence of these alternate moods and personalities, may not know how to deal with them. Revealing these feelings becomes a process of understanding. We can assume that previous attempts to engage with these alternates have failed, and their obscurity has been a stumbling block to progress.

In hypnotic visualization, each party is asked to speak from each of their potentially many voices. They are asked to retain awareness of their alternate feelings, associations, and memories while each of their inner aspects explains their one-sided points of view. They are asked to hear and accept their multiples.

In the context of internal family systems (Schwartz, 1997), egoistic alternates represent parts of oneself with different needs and strategies. There is no stable resolution as long as these aspects in each of the disputants continue to shift in dominance and alliance. As long as there is no one voice, group of voices, or consensus view of the solution, there will be no one satisfactory path forward.

PCRT cannot create agreement where there is none, but it can get these voices to communicate and move into greater alliance. It is up to each person to pull their personalities together and establish their own consensus. Personal integration can be a lifelong process. PCRT helps the process by respecting a person's alternate aspects and encouraging positive dialog between them.



Senecio, Paul Klee, 1922

## Integration

Witnessing this dissociation, the counter-party can better understand the person with whom they are dealing and move toward partnership. It's likely that the counter-party will be listening from an internal family aspect that is dominant and defensive. They will need to expand their listening perspective.

The process of creating empathy, appreciation, and engagement occurs outside the context of rational thoughts and goal-oriented strategies. Reaching a deeply engaged state is easier for some people than for others, but with practice and increasing positive rapport, people achieve it.

Invite both parties to a state of hypnotic engagement in which multiple aspects of each party are present. Resistance will likely be obvious through avoidance, distraction, discomfort, indifference, or boredom. All of these being typical of a person who is defensively resisting deeper focus and engagement.

Creating an emotionally relaxed and egoistically accepting state requires skill in inducing

rapport, which is a state of light hypnosis. Creating it in people who see each other as adversaries requires patience, sensitivity, and support from and for both parties. The resulting congruence is unstable, as what creates relaxation in one may cause tension in the other. The therapist has to work both sides, bringing opposites together on a shared stage.

If the goal is well explained, consonant with both parties, and there is a common desire for revelation, then inducing a hypnotic combination should be possible. That level may feel insufficient for resolving differences—it is indeed a beginning, not a conclusion—but it is a congruent emotional state of non-confrontation and, potentially, an alliance.

It is often the case that there is no mutually rewarding, intellectual solution to the presenting conflict. The presenting conflict may have grown in the soil of making differences real, and not real needs. Such is the origin of feuds, prejudice, and insult. These differences represent emotions and associations that need to be released, removed, dissolved, or forgotten in order to build a consensus solution.

Resistance to authentic feeling may be the major stumbling block. PCRT does not aim to solve the problem, but to enable full, emotional engagement between parties. When deeply and authentically empathetic, the parties are most able to move forward. It is for them to decide what they move forward to.



The Little Street, Jan Vermeer, 1657-1658

## Conclusion

Personal Conflict Resolution Therapy expands on the trend that's emerging in neuropsychology, integrative medicine, psychedelic-assisted therapy, and psychosomatic therapies. It emphasizes an expanded awareness of a plurality of selves, perceptual filters, and legacy associations. The conflict that is presented is rarely the conflict that's in need of resolution. Conflicts are symptoms, and their resolution rests on the recognition and rebalancing of a larger psychic structure.

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