

Chapter 28

The Utility of Containment

Container resources expedite the process of returning difficult content to the “limbic brain.” Containers very often are a cognitive strategy or intention not to engage with something right now. A container can also include somatic sensations, because if we only address the cognitive aspects of rumination, we may be leaving a lot of distress in the body, which can reactivate the mind. Containers are also a helpful ritual in pivoting away from activation. It’s a ritual that signifies something to parts. However, the reasons that we need to container matter.

Many problems with containment come from the assumptions that clients make about what containment means. For instance, what it means to current functioning, what it means for their past, and what it means for their recovery. For example, many clients may argue against containment as a form of avoidance.

Again, we need to explain clearly the intention of containment. All of these are good/healthy/adaptive reasons for containing something that has been activated:

- We have been trying to solve the problem using strategies that have a very long history of being ineffective (rumination, allowing lots of memories/cognitions/themes to connect).
- Now is not a good time to try to resolve the problem or issue.
- The issue is intruding on our ability to function at the present time.
- The problem is actively contributing to the current instability.
- We would like to exercise control over what is getting our attention in the current moment.
- Adaptive containment is ultimately about client agency... deciding on purpose what to attend to in this moment and what to defer, because we are not wired to attend to everything past/present/future in every moment.
- Containment is the beginning of stability.

Ultimately, we want to emphasize that it's okay to container because we have a plan to resolve this issue in an effective way at a later date using a transformational psychotherapy.

The following containers are not ideal:

- Diaper Genie
- Rocket
- Incinerator
- Trash can
- Explosive

Containment is one of the best adaptations of human evolution. The “limbic brain” is a container. We are information processing systems. When we encounter information that we cannot assimilate because we were too shut down, too overwhelmed, or lacked the needed adaptive information at the time, it is helpful to have a place to put it until we can try again to assimilate it.

Clients often come to us with a lot of ambivalence about carrying a lot of contained experiences. On one hand, they have been consciously and unconsciously trying to process (or at least manage) this information using incredibly ineffective strategies for all of their lives. On the other, they have visceral experiences (all of them bad) from trying to purposefully interact with contained information. Containing isn't a neutral activity. Asking a client to simply let go of information that is both existentially salient and intractable is not a neutral ask. Everything we container, past interactions with the container, past strategies to try to process trauma, and the fact that we are carrying stuff that needs containment are all implicated in what makes purposeful containment difficult for many clients with complex trauma.

Containment Isn't Just for the Visual Stuff

The way we often teach containment is as a visualization resource. It is helpful to know if your clients struggle with visualization, and many will. Again, containment is a metaphor and also a ritual. A lot of people don't intuitively understand metaphors. A lot of people don't resonate with rituals, particularly visual rituals. If we appreciate how hard the minds of our clients are working to keep them safe every minute, difficulties with visualization make sense. For a practical example of this, imagine slowly counting from 10 down to zero. As you are doing that, subtract that

number from 10. So, $10-10 = 0$; $10-9 = 1$; etc. While you are doing this, try to imagine the calm scene of a beach, the waves, seagulls, sand, sky, sun, clouds, and sounds. Now, try doing all of this with your eyes open, because closing your eyes may make anxiety or disconnection from the present more noticeable.

Imagining something like a container is a creative task, and the creative parts of the brain aren't strongly online when our nervous system thinks we're at war. Again, very few works of great literature were written in the trenches of Europe.

Sometimes, the problem with visualization isn't related to the container itself but to identifying what to container and trying to find a "handle" on the material. One of the things we might contain is our body-based sensations from the activation. The ShopVac resource from the Four Blinks Version of Flash is a helpful resource for containing body-based activation quickly.

Test the Container With Something Other Than Trauma

When working with clients with complex trauma, one of the common mistakes I see in many scripts is asking people to test the container using pieces of actual trauma when developing the container. I like to test the container using something innocuous, like a business card or a slip of paper. Testing the container using something neutral is something that is built into the Four Blinks Version of Flash script and can give us some confidence that containment works without substantial risk of overactivation.

Sensory Grounding (And Other Resources) Are Also Containment Strategies

If we think about what is broadly happening with containment, there are many ways that we may be able to do it other than using the standard Shapiro container resource. Sensory grounding is also a containment strategy in the sense that a lot of rumination and trauma activation happens in an abstracted (perhaps even partially dissociated) state. Finding our way into the "safety" of the present can help create the conditions that can quickly allow material in awareness to find its way back into the trauma containers of the limbic brain. Sensory grounding can help us briefly escape processes that may be feeding activation. Sensory grounding is also a great way to transition to containment and to help make sure that we

have enough footing in the present and increase the chances that containment will work effectively... at least for a while.

What Does It Mean When Clients Say That Containment Doesn't Work for Them?

Want to be respectful when a client says that something doesn't work, but there is also information in it. That information is essential so that we can help navigate these difficulties. Sometimes, a client's problem containing reduces to one of the following:

- I have to keep doing it. It doesn't stay contained.
- Parts of me don't want to put this issue away for now.
- It's probably not one thing that needs to be contained. When content seeps into awareness and rumination starts, clients with complex trauma often do not have one thing to container. They will often struggle to find a handle or a perspective on the material once they have been handling it for a while. It's easier to contain fragments of memory for many people than it is to contain whole themes, particularly when those themes connect to core needs, so we should show clients how to container a piece of it.