

Family Constellation and Trauma Therapy (by Svagito Liebermeister)

Family Constellation is an effective short term therapy that has the potential to arrive at the roots of problems in a short time. The inter-action between representatives placed in a constellation can quickly reveal underlying conflicts within a relationship system -- for example within the family of a client.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of this method is that the client hardly speaks. In most cases, after representatives for family members have been placed, a client is only an observer. The representatives are moved by the energy field of the system, which is connected to a deeper layer of the mind not ordinarily accessible.

This deeper layer, which Hellinger calls the 'soul', guides the representatives and the facilitator towards solutions. It is a way to by-pass superficial layers of our minds, where our desires, attitudes and beliefs are generated, and directly approach the roots of conflicts.

By helping a client experience that he is part of a much bigger collective system and inviting him to fall in tune with these vaster forces of life, the facilitator helps a client come to a point where he can say 'yes' to life as it is.

This 'yes' to life should not be misunderstood as saying 'yes' to other people, or to every life situation. Essentially, it is a 'yes' to oneself and to one's own individuality, and in this way can be considered to be a spiritual dimension of life.

In difficult or challenging life situations, such as shock or trauma, this ability to say 'yes' to life is often impaired. A person becomes either disconnected from the flow of life, or develops negative attitudes towards life and other people.

Instead, the life of this person may focus on the fear of experiencing such a traumatic event again and on avoiding anything resembling the original situation. On the other hand, there can also be an urge to resolve the effects of a trauma, which can result in people being drawn to situations that have a certain similarity to the original event.

In general, we can say that therapy is an effort to bring unresolved trauma and blocked energy to a completion, and in this way restore a person's capacity to be in a flow with life, reconnecting with other people and looking towards the future rather than at the past. This is the type of 'yes' a client experiences when therapy is successful.

In Family Constellation one can see that this 'yes' is closely connected to one's ability to say 'yes' to one's parents and to receive them in one's heart. It is not a grudging or reluctant gesture, in the sense that a client accepts his parents because he has no choice, but should rather have a quality of rejoicing and gratitude. For this reason, we usually talk more about 'receiving' one's parents, rather than merely accepting them.

In terms of the physical body, the successful resolution of trauma usually leads to a discharge of the stuck or suppressed energy. This means that abnormally heightened states of arousal within the nervous system disappear and a person returns to a normal movement between activation and relaxation that is within manageable limits.

While acknowledging the reality of trauma, Family Constellation offers no specific concept for understanding it. This sometimes leads to neglect of the fact that traumatized clients need to be treated in a way that differs from other clients.

However, the new approach to Family Constellation works more with spontaneous movements of the representatives and this gives time for deeper layers of a family system to reveal themselves. This is closer to the perspective of body-oriented trauma therapy, which considers trauma as an event that particularly affects the body and its nervous system.

The classical style of doing constellations, where representatives are basically guided by the facilitator and his concepts, can easily pre-empt the natural discharge of trauma, forcing a premature conclusion that is not mirrored by the actual state of a client's nervous system.

For example, in a session where the trauma was perpetrated by one or both of the parents, one might see a client being asked -- almost forced -- by a therapist to bow to those parents in a kind of subordination. Such a gesture cannot lead to positive results. Rather, it can be seen as a new form of conditioning, whereby the client is taught what is right and what is wrong and learns to surrender to a moral concept. In a worst case scenario, it could lead to a strengthening of trauma symptoms.

Family Constellation's new approach gives more space for trauma discharge to occur naturally, as the facilitator intervenes less and allows movements of the systemic energy field to unfold by themselves. Nevertheless, it is important to bring more clarity to what actually happens in trauma -- not only psychologically, but also physiologically.

In this article, I will examine how trauma therapy can contribute to the work of systemic therapists. Specifically, I will refer to Peter Levine's ground-breaking approach to trauma therapy, called Somatic Experiencing, which is more comprehensive than other methods, emphasizing the biological roots of trauma and its effect on the body and nervous system. In my work, I found this approach enriching and beneficial when working with family systems, as it focuses on aspects of trauma that can easily be neglected by a Family Constellation practitioner.

First I will introduce some basic concepts, then I will discuss their relevance in a Family Constellation session.

1. Basic Insights

The most important understanding of Peter Levine's approach is that trauma occurs on the level of the nervous system and is not in the event itself. In other words, the same event can be traumatic to one person, but not to someone else. An event becomes traumatic when it disrupts the nervous system's normal ability to cope with an event. It has a quality of overwhelmingness, in which the individual is unable to cope. If a particular event is perceived to be **too sudden**, **too much** or **too fast** for the individual's nervous system to handle, it becomes traumatic.

It is a situation in which the organism does not have the option to react with the instinctive 'fight or flight' options. As a result, the organism goes into a so-called 'freeze' response, where the whole system shuts down in a final attempt to protect itself and maximize the chances of survival. For example, if a mouse is caught by a cat it enters a state of freeze, which protects the mouse from experiencing pain and also inhibits the cat's impulse to kill, thereby increasing the mouse's chances of survival.

Studying the behavior of animals, it has been observed that when an animal survives such situations and returns to normality from a 'freeze' state, it usually goes through a process of discharge. Accumulated energy is spontaneously released -- for example through shaking or shivering. This allows the animal's nervous system to return to its normal level of operation and permits the animal to function as before.

When threatened, human beings tend to function very much like animals because a more primitive and instinctive area of our brain -- the brain stem -- is activated and takes control. This is the region of the brain that is in charge of the autonomous nervous system and controls our survival response. The more recently developed 'human' part of our brain, known as the Neo-Cortex, is by-passed.

There is no need, here, to go into detail about the way the body gets activated and what happens in different brain centers, such as the amygdala and the hormonal response. The important principle to understand is that, when we feel threatened, a physiological process begins that enables the body to respond quickly, with a lot of energy, to maximize our chances of survival.

This immediate response is possible only through by-passing our ability to think about the situation and exert voluntary control – there is no time and no energy available for such complex mental processes. This is why we say that in moments of survival-related stress we function like animals, relying on our instincts, with very little or no control over our responses.

As with other animals, the human body generates a lot of energy in preparation for fight or flight and, when circumstances do not permit such responses, the body goes into freeze mode. In this state, both parts of our autonomic nervous system -- the sympathetic and the parasympathetic -- are highly activated.

When the body comes out of the freeze state, a significant amount of the aroused energy does not get discharged. Instead, it remains trapped inside the body and, in particular, inside the nervous system. This makes us different from other animals, who seem to have no trouble getting rid of excess energy.

What makes us humans different? It is the Neo-Cortex, the thinking mind, that inhibits the release of energy after the threat is over. Peter Levine therefore defines post-traumatic stress (PTS) as an abnormal prolongation of what was originally a quick response to a threatening situation. PTS symptoms are incomplete responses that have become frozen in time. They repeat themselves in endless loops, just like a broken record when the needle gets stuck at a certain point.

The PTS victim remains in a state of heightened activation, as if still under threat, and, as one may imagine, this takes a lot of energy. Moreover, in this state of chronic hyper-alertness, the whole organism gradually becomes more vulnerable to other stressful events, which may be added to the nervous system as new traumas. One result of this is that a person suffering from PTS syndrome now feels compelled to act more cautiously in life, reducing the range of life experiences available.

A nervous system that can no longer regulate itself within normal limits can be compared to a car in which the brake and the gas pedal are pushed at the same time. It is a simultaneous state of high arousal and high shut down. Accordingly, a traumatized person may appear to be in a state of high activation, in which he cannot really relax, or he may appear to be dissociated and absent, as if in freeze mode. Or he may vacillate between the two states.

This is a simplified summary of Levine's approach to trauma. For further study, I invite the reader to pursue the extensive literature available in this field. (See bibliography)

A therapist dealing with a traumatized client needs to understand how and why his client is unable to return to a normal state of functioning. He needs to be able to reach a deeper level of the client's body and nervous system in order to heal the problem. Intellectual insights won't be enough. It is for this reason that Peter Levine has created a specific therapy for healing trauma, which he called Somatic Experiencing, in which the practitioner tries to reach to the level of the brain stem, where the trauma energy is trapped, and help the nervous system discharge the stuck energy.

In the process, he takes care to expose the nervous system only to as much activation as it can absorb without going into freeze. In other words, the work has to progress slowly, from a resourced state, in which over-stimulation or reliving of a traumatic event are avoided.

Traditional therapy runs the risk of overwhelming clients, exposing them too fast to a stimulus that in some way resembles the original event that caused the trauma. This 'overwhelm' is likely to result in re-traumatization.

Levine's approach poses an interesting challenge to our work as Family Constellation practitioners. It reminds us that clients who suffer from trauma may need to be exposed to a threatening situation more slowly, with more support. It helps us understand that a person may know all the entanglements that led to a traumatic event and may even be conscious of the roots in the family system, but this may still not relieve him of the related symptoms.

The physical responses that are responsible for trauma symptoms are governed by a part of the brain that has not yet realized that the threat disappeared long ago. Intellect doesn't go deep enough to touch this layer. This is the reason why, in trauma therapy, we speak of a 'biological completion', where the body itself can learn to complete the past.

This can be seen as complementary to the completion of a movement within the family system, as it is done in Family Constellation.

2. Trauma healing techniques and how those principles can be adopted for the work of Family Constellation

I refer here mainly to methods developed in Somatic Experiencing.

Resourcing is a method where the client is brought in contact with whatever helps him maintain a sense of self and inner integrity. There can be outer resources, such as persons, special places, or objects. There can be inner resources, such as personal qualities and abilities. Resources can be experienced on a physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual level. They are unique to the individual and can also change during a session. Their function is to strengthen a client in the face of difficulties, or disruption, which otherwise would lead to re-traumatization.

The building of resources is an important part of trauma work. It prepares the client to face challenges without being overwhelmed by them.

Applying this principle to Family Constellation can mean various things:

It can mean that, when a client is highly activated, one may not begin a constellation immediately, but first try to lower his activation and help him find some inner or outer resources. This can be done through working with the body and helping a client become aware of parts of the body that are more calm and less activated. Or, one can help a person realize that, where he is right now, is a safe environment, where no threat exists and the danger is over. Working with a client's eyes can be an important element in this context.

Resourcing has a lot to do with giving the client a sense of well-being, which is also known as 'grounding'.

However, grounding does not necessarily include a feeling of connection with the feet and legs, or the lower part of the body, as this may be the activated part. Sometimes, the whole body contains so much aroused energy that no resource can be found within the body itself. Then one has to find other resources outside the body, even fantasy images may be helpful, or the therapist himself can act as a resource.

Example: In a session, a client was very activated and afraid, when thinking of his mother. Rather than asking him to say 'yes' to his mother and receive her, the therapist asked the client to imagine how he would have liked his mother to be, creating the new image as a fantasy of the imagination. Describing this image, the client began to relax, discharging energy, and was then able to be more present for the session. From this secure point, he gradually became more capable of looking at his actual mother.

Only when a person is sufficiently resourced is he able to receive a constellation and benefit from insights that arise during a session.

Sometimes, it may even be necessary to interrupt a constellation, if a client becomes too activated, loses his sense of well-being and grounding, and is unable to follow the constellation.

Resourcing also covers another aspect of constellation work. Within a constellation, a therapist often has a choice: to work with the biggest entanglement, or to give attention to that part of the system where a client can receive the most support and strength. With a traumatized client, it will be better to look first for resources within the family system.

In other words, the facilitator needs to be able to see whether love and support is available from the side of the mother, or from the side of the father, then help the client become aware of that, instead of focusing on what he did not receive. Sometimes, he may need to find love and relaxation by being surrounded by his other siblings, or, more generally, from life itself.

Example: In a constellation, a female client could not recall any important events in her family. When placing representatives for her parents, the mother was drawn away and started to express a lot of violence and pain and was unable experience relaxation, even after more representatives were added to the constellation. The client herself went more and more into a frozen state. Asked how she felt, she replied that she was not touched by what she saw, as if it had completely by-passed her. The therapist dissolved the constellation and instead placed the actual client and her three siblings in the middle, next to each other. The client immediately came out of her dissociated state, feeling relieved and looking at her siblings with love.

In the face of dealing with trauma, one has to be very aware of this principle of finding support for the client, not focusing only on those members of the family system from where the trauma is coming.

Important questions are: Who was able to support and take care of the child/client? What did the client receive (rather than what he did not receive)?

Titration describes the process of slowly entering traumatic areas of activation, so that feelings and sensations can be processed gradually, bit by bit, without overwhelming the client. It helps to minimize activation by slowing things down, giving space to break down the experience into manageable pieces. This gives the body time to integrate and generate its natural resources.

Titration can be compared to opening a champagne bottle, which is under pressure. When opened quickly it ‘explodes’ in a way that much of its content is spilled out. However, when it is opened in a slow and ‘titrated’ way, the air and pressure can be released without creating an explosive reaction.

This principle is important for any kind of therapeutic session when dealing with traumatic content. For example, the client can be asked to talk slowly, leaving gaps between his sentences, or be requested to talk about one issue at a time. Bert Hellinger sometimes allows a person to utter only one sentence, which can be seen as a way to contain the energy.

Sometimes even no sentence is uttered.

It is good to remember to deal with one issue at a time in a constellation session, leaving related issues for another time. It may be good for traumatized clients to avoid looking directly at the most challenging event, dealing instead with some less fearful issue, even if this is not considered to be the root cause of a problem. This is contrary to some people’s idea, who may think one should always go directly to the root of a problem.

Pendulation describes the natural flow between trauma and resources (trauma and healing vortex). It is a technique used to connect with a small amount of activation, allowing it to discharge, then swinging back to the available resource.

It can be also embraced as a general principle of a therapeutic session, where one moves between supporting a client, helping him to disidentify with his problems, then challenging his ego structure and working on his issues.

(I have described this in more detail in my book ,The Zen Way of Counseling: A Meditative Approach to Working with People’).

This principle is especially important, because in trauma a client often becomes disconnected from his resources, easily has a sense of being overwhelmed and is often unable to control his behaviour. As a result, he may suffer from a certain symptom that he cannot control, which worsens if he is confronted with too much activation similar to the original traumatic event.

This principle also applies to Family Constellation. For example, someone on the father's side of a client's family suffered a severe traumatic shock, while on the mother's side there is more strength, continuity and support for the client. The therapist may focus too much on helping the client disidentify from the father and his family, which may turn out to be impossible. The client may even wish to cling to the father, staying closely connected with him, unless love and support from the mother is included from the beginning of the work. This additional strength can facilitate a movement away from an unhealthy identification with someone on the father's side of the family. Often, one can see a kind of pendulation in a constellation, when a therapist asks the client to look at his mother and father alternately. In the new approach, working only with spontaneous movements, there can be a natural pendulation not initiated by the client, but part of a bigger movement, the movement of life, where entangled and healing movements alternate. Seen from this perspective, one can say that life itself has a natural power to self-regulate. Or, one can say that life is a process of involvement and coming out of involvement. One has to identify before one can disidentify. These insights of trauma work can help facilitators to be less one-dimensional in their approach, more conscious of the fact that in a trauma there is an intrinsic potential. But to access this potential, it may not be enough to make a client aware of the deeper laws of life, but to accompany a client to a place where he is able to discover and realize these laws for himself.

For example, if a client experienced a sexual abuse, it is not enough to know that eventually victim and perpetrator have to meet. It may be too early to confront the victim with the perpetrator, as is often done in Family Constellation sessions. It may be more important to help the client find resources as a first step, then to see how much confrontation he can tolerate and what kind of healing movement can arise.

In general, one should stay closely connected to the client and his reactions to what he sees unfolding before him, not only watching and observing the movements of the representatives in the constellation

Many times, Family Constellation facilitators tend to forget the actual client and only watch the representatives of a constellation. This may be acceptable in an ordinary situation, but when dealing with a traumatized client one may miss the fact that he is being subjected to over-stimulation or re-traumatization.

Another principle of trauma work is called **discharge**, where activation is helped to gently leave the body. This may be accompanied by the restoration of certain responses that have become inhibited and frozen within the physiology. Trauma therapists specifically talk about the fight, flight and orienting responses.

Family Constellation therapists need to be aware of any discharge that happens in a representative, or in the client himself, which is usually a sign that a client is coming out of an identification, or re-establishing a missing connection. This can show in a deep out-breath, a physical relaxation, a smile, or an emotional expression such as laughter or crying. Usually, it leaves a client stronger, more integrated and more available to the present moment. On an emotional level, this needs to be distinguished from so-called secondary emotions that weaken a client and are the result of continued identification. They do not relieve the client and do not open him to any new territory.

Trauma therapists usually take care that any discharge in a traumatized client happens gently, gradually, and should not lead to over-stimulation. A lot of importance is given to **integration** and helping the system to re-**organise** itself. These are essential elements: giving enough time and space to a client without moving too quickly to new material, slowing things down and waiting for the client to be able to absorb what has been processed.

This approach serves as an important reminder to Family Constellation therapists. It usually is better to look at one entanglement at a time, to emphasize one important insight, to avoid any long talk or analysis after the constellation, giving the client enough silence and space to

absorb what he has seen. It may be also important to check if the client has arrived back in the „here and now“ and is able to understand that the past is over, not only intellectually, but existentially. It may be necessary to remind the client of a new resource he has found during the session, helping him become aware of the effect this resource has on him right now. Trauma therapy gives special importance to **educating** a client, helping him understand what is trauma, why symptoms develop, how to support the body in order to overcome such symptoms. It has been found that, with education, a client is more able to support himself in daily life and also feels less shame about his powerlessness to control his symptoms. To understand what is a panic attack, what may lead to it, what is helpful in such a situation, may be the first step in regaining control. Traumatized clients need to be able to regain control over their behavior as a first step to finding relaxation and overcoming the consequences of their trauma. This also means that a therapist may give practical homework to his client. This is different from the usual approach to Family Constellation, where we do not spend much time in explanations and offer nothing specific for a client to do after a session. In terms of family conditioning, this approach is appropriate, but it may not be enough when dealing with the body. The body needs to be supported by the intellect; it needs to be given enough time for re-learning and perhaps given additional support through practical exercises that can be done at home.

3. Other benefits

Of course, many therapists and Family Constellation practitioners already include some of these principles in their work. Still, it is a helpful reminder, especially as trauma has not been understood rightly in the past and is not paid much attention in the work of Family Constellation. Also, the need to include the body is often not given enough importance. In my opinion, facilitating constellations without helping the body to integrate those experiences is insufficient.

In my work, I have been adding the physical dimension by including active meditations in a course of Family Constellation. I feel it essential for clients to become conscious of what their body is carrying in terms of undischarged, stuck energy.

For trauma clients, this is even more important. They suffer from symptoms that need to be addressed physically, not only through understanding the family dynamics that created them. For example, it is helpful for a trauma client to learn to sense activation and discharge on a physical level, something which is called ‘tracking’ in Somatic Experiencing. This can be done before and after a constellation.

Before a constellation session begins it can be useful to lower arousal and help the body discharge excessive energy that originates in an unresolved trauma. This preliminary process grounds a client in the present moment and makes him more available to observe, absorb and integrate the work. Often, as we have already mentioned, traumatized clients are either hyperactive or in a dissociated state. In both cases, a constellation is likely to by-pass them, with little or no positive result.

After a constellation, it is helpful to give time for integration, tracking the effect of what has been observed in the body. This will give more depth and meaning than simply asking a client if everything has been understood. In my experience, many clients answer ‘yes’ to such questions out of a sense of shock, or in an effort not to appear ignorant, or to please the therapist, rather than from real understanding.

So, to help a client become aware of physical sensations before and/or after a constellation can enrich and deepen the benefits of a constellation. (This is an interesting field for further study).

There is another benefit of body-tracking before a session:

In constellation work, especially when working with movements of the soul or spirit, it is essential to find a right starting point for the session. In other words, we need to decide whom to place in a constellation, whom to choose from a family system. This may be just one or two people, but they need to be the right ones, otherwise the work may go in a different direction, with no solution for a specific problem.

The less representatives, the more concentrated the work, so it is important to start with a significant person. Sometimes this may be easy to decide, but in many situations this is not so obvious. Many experienced facilitators who have watched Bert Hellinger begin a constellation session with only one representative have been puzzled how he is able to come to a certain conclusion. Whether one agrees with all of Hellinger's conclusions is not something I will discuss here, but it is obvious that he places great importance on the selection of a significant family member related to the client's issue.

I have discovered that guiding a client to track his body sensations, moving through cycles of activation and discharge at the beginning of a session -- without being too concerned about relating this to family dynamics -- can lead the therapist to discover the right and important person with whom to start the constellation.

I have been experimenting with this approach with trauma clients and have always found that the body itself will guide me to what is important. At a certain point, it becomes easy and obvious to see which person from the family system needs to be selected for the constellation.

The following example shows how working with the body can be combined with constellation work:

A female client, about 40 years old, is having a session. She is quite fearful, her body is trembling and she has difficulty speaking with a normal tone of voice. Before inquiring about her issue, I first help her to become more calm. I suggest that she doesn't fight with the trembling feeling, but rather focuses on an area of her body that is less affected and relatively calm. This helps her tolerate the activation more easily and soon she is able to discharge some of the physical tension. I also help her to realize – simply by inviting her to look around -- that she is in a safe and supportive environment.

After some time, she tells me that a memory is arising of her father suffocating her with a pillow, when she was about 6 years of age. She remembers that she felt she was going to die. Without going further into this memory, I remind her that she didn't die and, when she relaxes a little, I ask if she remembers where her mother was at the time, and if there was any support available.

She tells me that her mother and other siblings were watching the event and seem to have been paralyzed. She remembers the feeling of letting go and not fighting. I inquire if this response was perhaps what saved her and she agrees. I point out her ability to let go and surrender as a personal resource that saved her life. After this, her energy slowly starts to expand. Previously, her energy had been pulled back from the periphery of her body and held at the core, with her extremities being under-charged and in a state of near-collapse – a typical fear-type physical condition.

Now her body position changes and her arms become more charged with energy. When I invite her to carefully track her body sensations she starts noticing the charge as it enters her arms and hands. As this happens, she makes defensive and protective gestures, especially with her right hand and arm. After following this for a while, she feels more grounded, present and in her strength. I explain to her what happens in the body after such a traumatic event and also the difficulty in developing self-trust that occurs when a parent is unable to be a safe and reliable support for a child.

Now my client is more stable and ready to look at the family dynamics that may have driven her father to become such a threat to her life. It is clear that she will have to solve this issue

with her father in order to establish healthy relationships with men. In her life, she tends to keep men at distance, while at the same time is searching for a father figure. Letting her face her father in a constellation from the beginning may have been an overwhelming experience for her. Such a confrontation without proper preparation could have led to a strong reaction, or traumatized her further. Now she is more prepared. I ask her if she feels ready to proceed with the constellation and she agrees. She chooses representatives for her father and for herself, then watches at a safe distance. When they face each other, the father cannot see his daughter as his daughter. The representative for the client starts to look at the ground and so – in accordance with Family Constellation dynamics -- we place someone there to represent a dead person. The client lies down next to her. The father is touched by this move, but remains frozen. After placing two other men in the picture, more movements happen and the impression arises that her father took on a murderous impulse from his grandfather, who seemed to have murdered someone. The client, on the other hand, took on the burden of representing the murdered person. After a while, I ask the representatives for the father and the daughter to again face each other. This time, more acknowledgment is possible. The father is able to see his child and the daughter can take a few steps towards him. At this point we left the constellation. Afterwards, the client felt she could relax more with her father and even visit him, which had been difficult before. She also felt more at ease about her present life situation, to allow things to grow slowly, without forcing herself into having any steady relationships with men.

This example shows how trauma work and Family Constellation can be combined to reach to a more comprehensive and complete picture. Of course, sometimes one can reach to good results using only one of these methods. But the chances are higher that some important aspect may be left out, or that the client may be too aroused to properly absorb the insights that were available to her.

4. Two standpoints give a vaster vision

As we have seen in the previous example, it can be helpful to combine trauma work with Family Constellation. Even if a facilitator does not wish to do this, it is helpful to have an understanding of both approaches to therapy and healing.

Family Constellation, on its own, sometimes does not include the body fully enough and may overlook the effects of trauma on a client's physiology. As a result, the facilitator may jump to conclusions and confront a client with something that can only be the outcome of a long process. Intellectual understanding may happen quickly, but, as we have seen, it takes time to absorb this in the body and let the body learn from it.

On its own, trauma work may overlook the systemic aspects. In other words, when we do not include what we take on from a former generation, we are bound to recreate similar traumatic situations again and again. For example, one can help a person overcome the effects of an accident. But unless we know what led this person to have the accident -- for example, an identification with a former family member, whom one wants to follow into death -- these benefits may be only temporary and similar situations may be recreated.

So whether one uses one or both methods does not really matter. What matters is to work on both levels, with the personal as well as the systemic, or collective.

To end this article I want to summarize a few principles that one should remember when working with a traumatized client:

1. The work should proceed slowly. One should avoid any confrontation in the beginning and make sure that the client is in contact with his or her resources.
2. One should be attentive to signs of activation or dissociation and avoid any re-traumatization.
3. It is often helpful with a traumatized client to let him choose the representatives, as this will give him a sense of being in control. It avoids giving the client the feeling of being subjected to uncontrollable events, which is what happened in the original trauma.
4. During the session, it is important to keep in touch with the client, helping him to track his body sensations. In this way, one can make sure the client is still present to what is happening.
5. One should always be ready to interrupt a constellation, if it becomes too overwhelming for the client.
6. It is good to limit the work to only one aspect of the constellation, or one entanglement, respecting the limits of how much the client can safely absorb. One can also check with the client if he wants to go ahead or not.
7. It is often better to keep a client out of his own constellation, remaining with his representative, as this allows him to keep a safe distance.
8. Sometimes it is better to leave things open to interpretation, rather than giving a detailed explanation, or being too definite about what happened. In this way, the soul is addressed rather than the mind and there is more space for the client to slowly absorb the situation. The placing of representatives without naming whom they represent, can also be a way to protect the client. For example, one could place someone to represent the real, hidden, underlying issue, rather than trying to find out exactly what this issue may be.
9. Physical contact, such as placing a hand on the client's arm, or behind the shoulder, can serve as extra support. However, one should be careful to respect the physical and energetic boundaries of the client. Trauma always includes a boundary rupture and clients often cannot sense their own boundaries, or, alternatively, may have very rigid ones. Bringing awareness to this, for example through asking a client about his response to being touched, can help re-establish healthy boundaries.
10. There may be additional means of support available, depending on the situation; for example other people in the room, if it is a group situation, or even objects in the room.
11. It can be helpful to give the client an understanding of the mechanisms that lead to trauma and that he is not 'wrong' or 'stupid' in his behavior. Also, when one wants to end a constellation without explaining what happened, one should check if it is necessary to explain to the client why it is better to not talk about those details.

To conclude: one should always observe how much a client can absorb and integrate. The therapist needs to make this decision, because traumatized clients tend to overestimate their own capacity and challenge themselves too much.

The principle of taking one small step at a time, leaving space for integration, is a good guideline for working with trauma. Tracking physical sensations is the measure of whether one is going too fast.

Emotional expression is needed sometimes, but the work should focus more on learning to contain and feel emotions, rather than having explosive outbursts.

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