

# Restorative Practices Applied to Inner Conflict

by Paul Redekop

## Abstract

*The ability to employ restorative practices in whatever context, whether in the criminal justice system, in schools, in social services or in our own personal relationships with others, is greatly enhanced by the ability to apply these practices in relationship to our selves. This involves the ability to recognize when we are trying to punish our selves, or where, all too frequently we get caught up in cycles of alternately punishing and indulging our selves. Instead, we can learn to apply the principles of successful conflict resolution to our selves and work toward transformative solutions to our own inner conflicts. This will enable us to apply these principles more effectively in our own personal relationships and to help others to transform their conflicts.*

Restorative practices have gained a growing acceptance in various contexts, from restorative justice practices in the criminal justice system, to schools, social services, the community and others. Along the way, those who have learned to use restorative practices in each of these contexts have also learned to apply them to their own personal relationships, becoming better able to have productive and joyful relationships with those people who are most important in their lives, as they learn to do things with those others instead of to them or for them.

The next step for these people, and an important step for anyone interested in living a more joyful and fulfilling life is to apply these same practices to their own inner conflicts. This means learning to be with ones self, like a true friend, accepting and supportive but at the same time aware of ones own flaws and shortcomings and working constructively to overcome them. It means being with oneself rather than trying to do things to oneself, trying to over control, suppress or dominate ones true self, overindulging ones self, or, worst of all, attempting to ignore or deny ones true self.

The main focus of this paper will be to help readers to become more aware of how they relate to themselves, using an adaptation of Wachtel's Social Discipline Window (Wachtel, 2014) Do they try to not relate to themselves, attempting to ignore or deny their true nature? Or do they try too hard to be in control of themselves, and become angry and punitive toward themselves when these efforts are unsuccessful? Do they do things for themselves too much, being overly self indulgent and self-accommodating? Or are they able to be comfortably with their selves, address their own inner conflicts successfully along the road to increasingly rich and fulfilling relationship with self and others.

But before we examine the question of how we relate to our selves more closely, we need to look first at the nature of the self as a

relationship, so that we can better understand the relationship between the use of restorative practices with others and with self. We also need to look briefly at the nature of inner conflict; its signs and symptoms.

## Self as Relationship

We're all the products of ongoing conversations with our self and with others. One view (Mead, 1962) says that our internal dialogues are between the "I" and the "Me," where the "I" is the active, initiating part of self, the part that starts the conversation. The Me, on the other hand, is the social self, the voices of others that we have internalized, incorporated, made part of our selves. What complicates things, though, is that there's not just one but many me's – probably almost as many as all the people we have ever met who have made at least some kind of impression on us.

When we put our conversations within ourselves together with our conversations with people around us, complications multiply rapidly. As soon as another person speaks to us, a complex process of interaction begins. An internal conversation is initiated with that person, in which we try to work out how we should respond. We ask ourselves questions like "What did he mean by that?" "What kind of response would I be looking for if I were her?" "What kind of response would I like to get back?" Notice how even in these basic questions we begin to internalize the other. That is, we take an impression, like a psychic photograph of the other person, into ourselves and make it part of our inner conversation. Which means, of course, that when we are interacting with others we're always in some sense interacting with our own impressions of what others are thinking. In other words, we are really interacting first of all with our self.

Once we see the self as a relationship, or rather as a series of relationships, (Charon, 1997) we can begin to understand the experience of conflict within the self very much as we understand conflict with others around us: as an expressed struggle between one part of our self that has goals that are incompatible with the goals of another part. Then we can start to apply the concepts of conflict resolution to our inner experience. But first, we need to recognize that just as conflict is normal and natural in our relationship with others, so conflict with our self is normal and natural.

## We All have Inner Conflict

A recent study (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010) found that people spend 46.9 percent of their waking thoughts on something other than what they are doing at that particular moment. This means that just

about half of our time is spent inside our heads, and outside of time and place – not completely disconnected, necessarily, but not really there either. The study also found that people were on average less happy while their mind was wandering than when they were actively engaged with the outside world.

It could be that we are less happy inside our own heads because we often disengage from our exterior surroundings when we are not enjoying what we are doing; for example, when we start daydreaming out of boredom or tune out because of frustration. Or perhaps we are sitting on the bus with nothing “better” to occupy us. It could be that when the mind roams it gravitates to the negative, just as the eye finds the single black spot on the pure white tablecloth. We’re often warned against spending too much time with our own thoughts. We’re told not to become dreamers, not to lose touch with the reality of the world around us, not to become failures and losers in the eyes of the world. We’re told that the world of our own thoughts can be a frightening place, with monsters, demons, and evil thoughts lurking in dark corners.

We’re told that people who spend too much time with their own thoughts are fools, lost in their own world, out of touch with reality. But at the same time, people are just as likely to think us fools if we’re not self-aware enough. The problem is that human existence is basically conflictual. I have identified two of these underlying conflicts. There are more, but I think these two are enough to make the point.

One underlying conflict is the unique individual versus the product of society paradox. On the one hand, we’re entirely the products of our society. How we think is shaped by the language we learn very early in life, and our beliefs, values, and the way we see the world are irrevocably shaped by our caretakers from the very beginning. Sometimes it feels as if we’re simply characters in a play, acting out a part that was handed to us at birth and just trying to remember our lines. But at the same time, each of us is a totally unique individual, so that no one else can completely understand who we are and what makes us tick. By the same token, we can’t ever fully understand anyone else. Sometimes it feels as if we are in perfect communication with someone; we feel as if we know what they’re thinking, what they’re feeling. But at other times it feels as if we really are all alone in the universe: “I am a rock. I am an island,” as in the old Simon and Garfunkel song. Our social self is engaged when we’re interacting with others and our environment more generally. This is the 53.1 percent of our waking life where we generally seem to be happier, according to the study. The unique private self is reflected in our own private and personal thoughts.

A second paradox of human existence that informs the analysis of inner conflict involves the difference between who and what we are, and who and what we could be or should be. This is the unfortunate secret that all of us share. Like it or not, each of us falls short of being the complete, fully realized human being we can be. We fall short for all sorts

of reasons. We like to blame the situations that we find ourselves in for our failure to become all that we can be: if only I had been born with the opportunities other people had; if only other people appreciated me more; if only I had more money; if only, if only. One of the basic purposes of religion has always been to help us become fully realized human beings. In Christianity, the failure to achieve our full potential is called sin. In other religions it is described as failure to achieve a higher level of consciousness or understanding; in Buddhism, for example, the equivalent of sin is the failure to understand the true nature of reality. All religions are united in urging us to stop blaming others for our own failings (without denying the importance of those influences) and focus inward on our true self, and on what each of us can and should be doing to realize that true self.

For each of us, these underlying conflicts are expressed through more specific signs and symptoms. These include troublesome emotions like anxiety and anger. Feelings of shame, guilt or self-doubt may also be indicators of inner conflict. Other kinds of symptoms of inner conflict may be contradictory behaviours like excessive and obsessive drinking, smoking, gambling, and many others. These are behaviours that we compulsively continue to do even when our better selves are telling us that they are harmful and damaging. Symptoms of inner conflict may also include, dreams, nightmares, phobias etc. Finally, conflicts with others always involve some degree of inner conflict.

By becoming aware of the inner conflicts we have and by learning to deal with them more constructively, we can allow ourselves to be much happier living with our own thoughts and feelings. If we have the tools to work through our inner conflicts when we are confronted with them, we can be successful in responding to them just as we can be successful in working at conflict with others. A better relationship with our self can make us much happier in the same way that better relationships with others make us happier.

## Inner Conflict Resolution Strategies

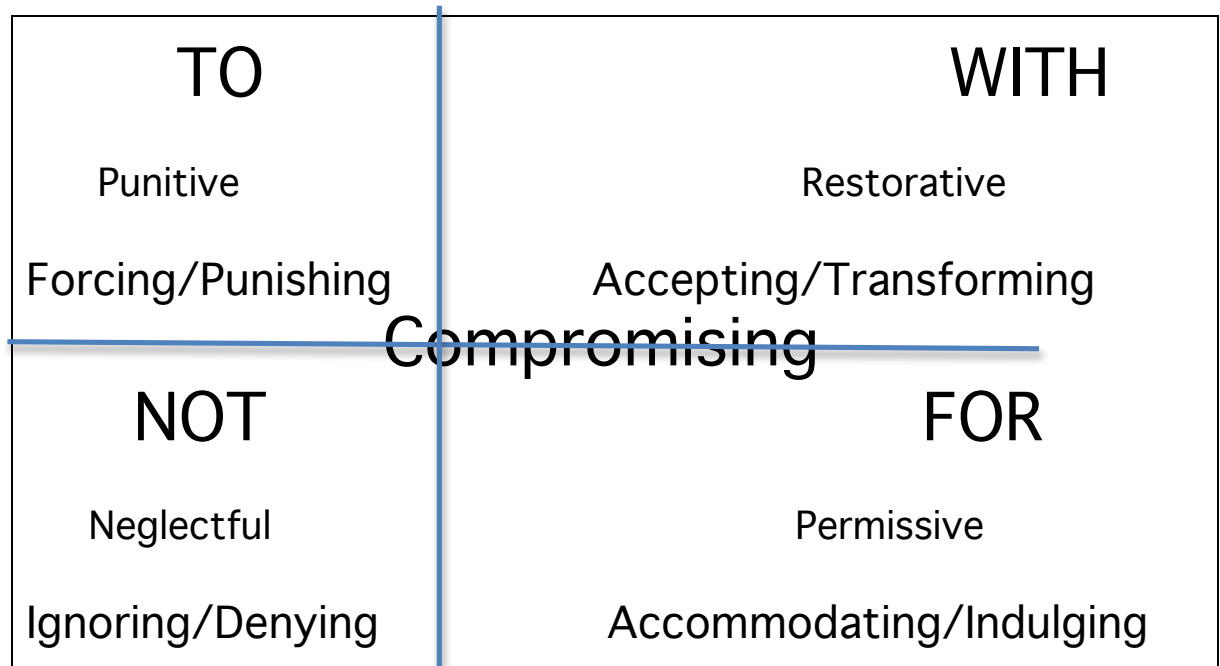


Figure 1 - Inner

### Discipline Window

In many ways our strategies for dealing with inner conflicts are like the strategies for managing conflicts in interpersonal relationships. The balance between achieving personal goals and maintaining the quality of our relationships with others is the focal point of strategies for managing interpersonal conflict. In our strategies for dealing with inner conflict, the focus is on the extent to which we see our self as a means to an end, or as an end in itself. On the one hand, our self is our social self, our connection to others. As the old saying goes: "All the world is a stage, where each of us play their part." We're given our parts to play, and we walk through them. We're expected to dress ourselves accordingly, both in terms of clothing and other aspects of appearance, and in displaying all the appropriate attitudes and values and motivations. Then we just have to learn our lines and establish who our fellow actors are, who our audience is, and away we go.

But then, what about our inner self? Our true self? The self we know in our hearts we could and should be? What kinds of thoughts and behaviours do we engage in that may seem necessary to maintain good relationships with others but end up being self-defeating and harmful to our relationship with our self? Do we deny our true self, or compete against who we really are, to please others, or to appear successful in the eyes of the world? Do we try to over-control ourselves, or try to compromise our true self for the sake of our social self and our

relationship to others? Or maybe we are inclined to indulge ourselves at the cost of not only our relationships to others but also our own ability to grow and develop. Let's look at some of the everyday strategies we use to manage our inner conflicts.

## Four Approaches to Relationship to Self

### NOT

NOT dealing with inner conflict is the equivalent of avoiding conflict in interpersonal relationships. Like avoiding conflict with others, ignoring or denying our inner conflict seems at first glance to be the easiest strategy, but is at the same time the least helpful. The thing about our own self is that we're stuck with it. We can't avoid it the way we can avoid other people whom we may be having conflicts with sooner than we can avoid conflict with ourselves. Therefore the best we can do to not deal with inner conflict is to deny it.

With this strategy, rather than acknowledging our inner conflict, we give up on our relationship with our selves. Think of the young mother who devotes herself totally to her children, giving little attention to herself and who she is as a complete person. This is certainly admirable, and deeply fulfilling for her, but eventually she needs to come back to those aspects of herself that are in conflict with the role of mother, and consider what she needs to do to fulfill them. When we deny our inner conflicts, we also give up on our own goals in relationship to our selves; realizing who we really are. We may seem very sociable to others, but we are in danger of ending up just going through the motions, playing our part – just doing what others expect of us but not being true to ourselves.

Some people just seem to never give their selves a thought. They are like the bartender whose head empties out as the last of the customer leaves the bar. We sometimes feel envy toward people like this. They don't seem to be troubled by the things that the rest of us know are there. But the relationship with self is so basic to human thought that ultimately it can't be denied. Our inner dialogue is as much a part of who and what we are as breathing, and just as impossible to live without. The best we can do is to temporarily block off the dialogue, ignore those troublesome feelings, shake off those unhappy dreams, shut down those unpleasant thoughts and pretend that none of that exists, at least for a time.

Denial is also an appealing option when we don't like ourselves very much, or maybe even fear and hate some aspect of ourselves. Denial of self is a strategy we fall back on in conflict situations with others, because we feel the need to protect ourselves. We all want to blame our own bad behaviour on external circumstances, and especially on other people. (see Jones and Nisbett, 1971) At the same time, we blame others' bad behaviour on their basic character flaws, that is, on their flawed selves. We

want to deny whatever flaw or inadequacy that might exist within ourselves that prevents us from responding to external circumstances in a better way.

We don't want to acknowledge to others, or to ourselves, that situations might be more than we can deal with. As a result, we deprive ourselves of the chance to achieve our goals in the external world through dealing with the conflict in a better way. At the same time, we deny ourselves the opportunity to grow and change through learning to address conflicts within ourselves more successfully.

Denial works hand in hand with projection, whereby we attribute the qualities we don't like about ourselves to others. It's not me – it's him who's got the problem. We may have got into a conflict with someone in the first place because we saw things in her that we were trying to deny in ourselves. Then the things we do and say often just help to reinforce the projections we started with. Denial of our true self also prevents us from acknowledging the reality of others as authentic selves. We tend to want to rely on denial because we want to believe that we're fine.

Real problems and conflicts come at us from outside ourselves, we think, and we have to deal with them there, in the "real world." We think that focusing on inner conflict is a way of avoiding the real conflict, and that to focus on inner conflict is to wallow in self-blame or guilt. There is a direct parallel here with those who avoid conflict with others because they fear it will lead to ugly confrontations and no-win situations.

Every strategy for dealing with inner conflict has its value, and this is also true of denial. There are certainly times when we need to get on with whatever we are doing and never mind that we are denying our true feelings, at least until we get a chance to think calmly and quietly about the issues that are bothering us. There are many examples of situations where short-term denial is appropriate. We all take jobs at some point that are unfulfilling and force us to deny what we believe to be our God-given talents. This is all right, as long as we don't have to stay in those jobs. In the long run, a rich inner life is something to be valued, the ultimate source of deep inner happiness, so we shouldn't be in denial forever. Certainly denial should not be the strategy of choice just because we're afraid to deal with our underlying conflicts. We also need to recognize that complete denial of the self is impossible, short of self-obliteration, because our very consciousness is built on our inner dialogue with our self. By denying ourselves to protect ourselves from inner conflict, we deny the opportunities for growth, development, and self-discovery that that conflict can help to provide. At the same time, denial of self also denies meaningful goals in relationship to the world. If we don't know who we really are, we don't know what we really want. We end up drifting with others' expectations, or sliding into the pointless pursuit of sensation, through addictions of whatever kind.

Shania Twain, the great Canadian country singer who survived a difficult and painful childhood and then transcended the effects of that

childhood and her own denial of her true self to become hugely successful as an adult, makes some telling comments about denial in her memoir (Twain, 2011). She describes people as “freezing to death personally and emotionally.” “Sometimes,” she says, “during such episodes [when painful thoughts and emotions ‘start keeping you up at night and nesting in your very sanity,'] it may seem easier to just stay comfortably numb with drugs and alcohol. Many suffering souls take this route, but I don’t recommend it. Personally, I find it safer to face the pain and allow your self to feel it. It hurts like hell once you start to thaw, but freezing to death – spiritually and emotionally – is worse. Thawing a broken heart, spirit or mind is painful no matter how you became numb in the first place, but a wise friend’s advice worked very well for me” [“lean into the wind”].

## FOR

The second approach to inner conflict is one of doing things *FOR* our selves. A focus on doing things for others will involve the sacrifice of personal goals for the sake of the other person and our relationship with that person. A focus on doing things for self as a strategy is in a sense just the opposite – the willingness to sacrifice good relationships with others, along with other goals, for the sake of our relationship with our self. It reflects a kind of infatuation with the self, so that, in the extreme, every wish of the loved one (one’s self) is treated as sacred and no whim can be denied. This may show itself in what is called “poor impulse control,” wanting to be spontaneous and self-indulgent whether or not other people object, or whether or not we are in conflict with our real – or at least better – self. It may involve wanting to share the most minute personal details, displaying ourselves on the web, YouTube, or Facebook, twittering to the world what we had for lunch. On the other hand, the self-accommodator doesn’t pursue goals too vigorously if that involves putting the self on the line; that is, if there’s too much risk of having to acknowledge the views or the needs of others.

Infatuation with another means being willing to accommodate that person’s every wish. Infatuated lovers also love each other for superficial qualities, like appearance or style, rather than loving the real person, warts and all, and so the relationship cannot last. The same thing is true of self-infatuation. It’s an enchantment with the self that involves seeing yourself as the greatest, the most wonderful, best-looking, most talented, and so forth. “A legend in his own mind,” as the saying goes. An image of self that is unsupported by the views of others cannot be maintained. When the illusions eventually break down, the result will be anger against others who refuse to accept these images and depression within.

In its extreme form, this approach to relating to self is described as the condition of narcissism, or pathological self-love. The term is taken from the Greek legend of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection on the surface of a pool, falling into the water and drowning as a result; in other words, losing or destroying the self that he loved as a result of his



infatuation with that self. Stars and celebrities are often accused of being narcissistic. They seem to be people who thrive on being the centre of attention, being admired, flattered, and sought out without needing to pay attention to others. The painter Picasso is an example of a man who indulged himself for the sake of his art, based on a feeling that he had a great gift to give the world and that the expression of this gift demanded such indulgence. Picasso's form of self-indulgence was his relationships with women: he went through women the way he went through painter's smocks, as each new one (he lived with eight different women by one count) became a new inspiration for his painting.

Our society often encourages a pattern of self indulgence in conjunction with self-denial. We are expected to deny ourselves at work, to ignore the fact if our jobs are soul-destroying, boring, and repetitive, and don't really provide opportunities to develop our real talents for growth and self-development. As a reward, we're encouraged to indulge ourselves. "You deserve it!" the ads scream out, for all kinds of products that are intended as diversions, from fast-food hamburgers, to chocolates, to fast cars, to luxury travel, and so on. The joke is that we "deserve it" if we have the money to pay for it, since we've earned the indulgence through some kind of soul-destroying labour. But then we also "need it" if we're in a job that requires a great deal of self-denial. We end up getting by but never getting what we really want, and unable to ever experience any real personal growth and transformation.

Some degree of doing things FOR our selves is necessary for everyone. Studies of drivers consistently find that most people describe themselves as "above-average" drivers, which is of course statistically impossible. One good (and bad) thing about driving is that you don't get very definite feedback, even if you're a pretty bad driver. The odd honk or raised finger in traffic can always be seen as the other person's problem. Even if we have a lot of accidents, they can all be someone else's fault because of course we know that most drivers out there are worse than us (Vanderbilt, 2008, 61).

The same self-accommodation happens in interpersonal relationships. Most people believe they are nicer and more reasonable than the average person. As with driving a car, the feedback we get isn't always that clear. Even with a lot of negative feedback from others, it doesn't prove anything except that **they** are making themselves hard to get along with. When I was a smoker (admittedly at a time when smoking was more acceptable than it is now) and people would complain that they found the smoke unpleasant or that they were allergic to it, how easy it was to dismiss them as cranks, or "overly sensitive." Now, of course, I know exactly what they meant about the smell being unpleasant to a non-smoker. If we do have a lot of conflicts with others, it's easy to see these as the result of other peoples' self-accommodations, while seeing ourselves as merely responding to circumstances beyond our control in the most reasonable way possible.

However, self-accommodation can be very easily overdone. None of us is perfect, obviously, and all of us could stand to improve, not only in our driving but in many other ways. Some self-accommodation helps us to feel better about ourselves, which we all need at least some of the time. But over-accommodation of self stifles growth, because it requires that we close ourselves off from helpful as well as unhelpful feedback from others, and from their challenges to our own inflated self-images that we all need in order to become the people we were meant to be.

## TO

Doing TO others involves putting our own goals ahead of whatever they might or might not want for themselves. The classic example of someone who does TO others is the driven career person, who is very competitive with and very hard on others, focusing on power and control to achieve the external symbols of success like money, status, and power. These same kinds of career persons may drive themselves just as hard

A controlling, competitive approach to self involves putting our goals in relationship to others ahead of the relationship with our true self – what that self could and should be. With inner conflict, competition takes the form of being very critical of self and suppressing our own self for the sake of external goals or expectations. In a sense, this is the opposite of the strategy of accommodation of self. The same ruthless careerist who is so tough on others may be just as ruthless with himself, suppressing all those inner qualities that might interfere with the achievement of those career goals.

This kind of approach to inner conflict is characterized by a tendency to suppress any personal qualities or inclinations that are in conflict with specific career or achievement goals that we have set for ourselves, or that have been set for us by others. As such, it reflects a very conditional kind of self-love. Of course we continue to love ourselves but we are always judging and evaluating at the same time. It is as if we have internalized that stern father figure who is not inclined to show affection but stands back assessing, evaluating, judging.

Or maybe the internalized figure is a “tiger mother,” as Amy Chua describes herself in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). Ms Chua, who as a law professor at Yale University is a very competitive and successful woman by any external standard, advocates that children be trained from an early age to be self-competitive. This is what she did with her own two daughters. Chua imposed a rigid schedule on her daughters as they were growing up. She says: “Here are some things my daughters were never allowed to do. Attend a sleepover, have a play date, be in a school play, complain about not being in a school play, watch TV or play computer games, choose their own extracurricular activities, get any grade less than an A, not be the no.1 student in every subject except gym and drama, play an instrument other than the piano or violin, not play the

piano or violin.” She notes that one of her daughters has already played at Carnegie Hall and both are doing well in general, although there have been moments of tension along the way. They appear to be people who have learned to gain strict control over themselves and whatever their “natural” impulses might have been. Such self-domination does have its rewards. It can certainly lead to a measure of happiness through the recognition we get for achieving external goals and rewards that follow.

The recognition of others can go a long way toward making us happy. However, there are some issues with the self-competitive approach. First of all, you can’t make a mountain out of a molehill, to paraphrase the old saying. If a child lacks natural talent, then all the hard work and practice and denial will only lead to pain and frustration. I was made to take piano lessons for quite a few years as a boy but never got beyond a slow, ponderous style. My brother was also made to take lessons about the same time, without much joy at first, but then he got the feel of it and eventually became quite a successful musician. I never did, no matter how hard I tried to force myself to learn.

Another issue has to do with whether the achievements that others, including our parents, admire are really the best reflection of who we are. Another example of someone raised by a “tiger” parent is Andre Agassi, one of the greatest tennis players of all time. Young Andre was expected by his father to practise four or five hours a day when he was six years old. Now, despite all of his success, he confesses that he always hated tennis “with a dark and secret passion” (Agassi 2009). He now devotes his time to a charitable foundation for at-risk children. So while tennis brought Agassi great success, who knows what else he could have done with his life or how much happier he could have been if other aspects of his self had not been so rigidly repressed for the sake of becoming a great player.

It is sometimes said of self-competitive people, as a kind of justification, that they are, after all, as hard on themselves as they are on others. Ms Chua grants that she is as hard on herself as she was on her daughters, and as her parents were on her. The attitude seems to be that harm to our selves somehow balances out harm done to others. But it is just as likely to make things that much worse. We end up harshly suppressing our own feelings, especially the ones that do not support our ambitions, or aspects of our self that remain unfulfilled by the pursuit of success, and hold a generally critical evaluative attitude toward self, much as toward others, and even suppress personal relationships with significant others that are most rewarding to self. Many a mid-life crisis is focused on rediscovering those aspects of self that have been suppressed for far too long.

These are the problems of self-competition when people are relatively successful. We are often far more critical of ourselves when we are not successful. This struck me the other night when I attended a meeting that included ex-offenders and ex-prison inmates who were reporting on their experiences. They talked about how negative an

environment the prison was, and how critical and doubtful they were toward themselves while in prison. How do we explain this? Wouldn't this be the time, while in prison and labelled as a criminal, when a person would tend to self-accommodate? Paradoxically, this is often not the case. One reason for self-criticism in such circumstances is that it is a way of meeting our social obligation. When others are hard on us, they expect us to take it on to ourselves. This is the supposed purpose for imprisonment, for prisoners to contemplate the wretchedness of their lives. Really, it is the purpose of any form of punishment – to make us think badly of ourselves. However, there is more to it than that, since we are fundamentally social beings and therefore can't help taking on the attitudes of our communities. So we often take the negative attitudes of others onto ourselves. It can be a way to take control of our lives: we try to adopt as negative an attitude toward ourselves as others take toward us, matching or even exceeding their negativity, as I did when I was younger. We may even try to anticipate others' negativity and be critical of ourselves before they are. It's a way of defending ourselves. We say, "You can't hurt me because I've already called myself all the names that you can think of."

Self-criticism and self-hate are at the heart of the major mental problem of our time, depression. People get "down" on themselves, perhaps first of all as a reaction to criticism from others. But then the negative thoughts and self-criticism quickly spiral out of control, regardless of the kind of external feedback one gets. There is a range of depression experiences that people may have. At one end a person can have the more "realistic" kind, where most people would agree that there are good reasons to be depressed, such as when we are facing apparently hopeless circumstances. At the other extreme is the experience of deep depression, when to all intents and purposes we have a great deal to feel good about.

While we tend to think first of self-competitive people as those who are highly competitive toward others, I see another kind of example of this kind of self-critical and self-controlling style coming, paradoxically, from people who are involved in peace and conflict studies: mediators, counsellors, and others. With others, they may be conflict avoiders or be very accommodating and accepting. But this will often come at the expense of their own selves. They try too hard to control angry, selfish feelings in order to meet the expectations of others and prevent conflict, and to never be competitive with anyone. As a result, they tend to lose spontaneity as well as other qualities of self like love, joy, and compassion that the best conflict resolvers display. This form of self-suppression may be less obvious than that of the driven career person. But it can be just as harmful to relationships to self and other. It may also hinder efforts of mediators or counsellors to help others with their conflicts because they will tend to encourage people to suppress their conflicts rather than deal with them in more constructive ways.

Cultural expectations also have their own built-in conflicts and contradictions that individual members incorporate, which then become inner conflicts for the self. A classic example is the idea of the self as essentially wicked, untrustworthy, and evil, as held by some conservative Christian groups who believe in an originally sinful, fallen self. Those who are a part of such a culture and accept these ideas will distrust themselves and seek to suppress their “true” selves on principle, very much in keeping with the suppression and distrust of aspects of self that tend to characterize a self-competitive strategy. In contrast, contemporary North American culture encourages the cycles of self-denial and self-accommodation that we talked about earlier, which, as self-competitive people like Ms Chua correctly point out, are no more likely to lead to self-fulfillment than her approach does, and don’t usually bring the same kinds of rewards

Not least of the rewards that come with the self-control fostered by self-competition is greater self-awareness. As individuals become more self-aware, they become more able to recognize the person they really are – to recognize their true selves and their own real priorities and be able to tell them apart from the goals and priorities that society imposes. However, this level of self-awareness brings with it new challenges, and new temptations arise to take the competitive approach to self to new levels. We become increasingly aware of aspects of the self that we can’t accept. Nobody’s perfect, after all. We want to go back to a state of denial or simple self-accommodation, but can’t forget what we know about the self.

This more in-depth understanding of self doesn’t cause problems in relationship to others, at least not directly the way that self-accommodation can, for example. But it can lead to withdrawal from others, depression, and dissatisfaction with our inability to relate to others fully as an authentic self. There may also be a growing dissatisfaction with others around us who seem so obviously even less authentic selves than we are. These thoughts limit the possibility of real growth because they divide the self against itself, even as the person may appear from the outside to be successful and achieving her goals. The more profound dissatisfaction with the self can undermine the relationship with self on an ongoing basis, just as a competitive approach at the interpersonal level undermines relationships with others in the longer term.

One alternative to suppressing our own flaws is to give up and deliberately indulge them instead, even exaggerating and encouraging them, as a kind of descent into self-accommodation. This is the attitude of the classic villain: the man with the moustache and the black hat, tying the virtuous maiden (who symbolizes all that is good) to the railway track and laughing at his own villainy.

A competitive approach to self is often a necessary strategy. We need a measure of control of ourselves just to survive in a social world. Very often we will have to will ourselves to do certain things that we don’t

really want to do at the moment. It may be a real struggle for me to get up in the morning, and I may really have to force myself to do it. I may have to force myself sometimes to talk to certain people that I'd rather not talk to, or even pretend to be someone I'm not for a time. The problem is that we can't keep doing this kind of thing forever, and after a while we find the collateral damage just gets to be too much. It is better to move away from the competitive strategy sooner rather than later. And while all of us would like to control others and change our behaviour, the fact is that it is usually much easier to control ourselves than to control others.

## COMPROMISE

Compromise represents a transition zone between and among the four basic approaches described in our adaptation of the personal discipline window. When responding to inner conflict, compromise with self means meeting external expectations of others to some extent while partially realizing our inner goals for ourselves as complete human beings. Given the ultimately intractable nature of the basic conflict of human existence between our selves as unique individuals versus our selves as entirely products of society, compromise is a necessary kind of transitional phase. In practice, we compromise with our self all the time. Beginning when we wake up in the morning, wanting nothing more than to accommodate our desire to roll over and stay in bed a little longer, through all the compromises we make every day with the demands of work, family, friends, and the dictates of our own physical and mental functioning, we waver between accommodative and competitive responses. So we push the snooze button on our self-realization, get a few more minutes of sleep without feeling fully rested, give enough of ourselves to spouses, friends, and bosses to keep them happy. The extent to which we are able to do these things demonstrates our success at self-compromise on a daily basis. Furthermore, our ability to compromise regularly has a cumulative effect that helps us to feel good about our relationship to ourselves and to others.

We all need to find a comfortable place between complete self-indulgence and complete denial or suppression of self, and between self-competition and self-accommodation. So compromise is always necessary. At the same time, to assume that self-compromise is the best one can expect is to give up hope for a more fulfilling relationship to self. Pushing the snooze button on your alarm may work in the morning, but as a life plan, "you snooze, you lose." To be our own best friends we should avoid compromising ourselves too easily in order not to sell ourselves short. Just as an overreliance on compromise in interpersonal relationships can hide underlying conflicts with others and limit our relationships with them, so dependence on particular compromises can undermine our relationship

with our selves and stunt our growth, our ability to challenge our selves to realize our full potential..

In terms of doing for or to self, the compromisers are neither inclined to indulge their selves fully and completely, nor to really demand the best of their selves. It is a kind of lukewarm friendship with ones' self. We can compare it to a friendship of convenience, or the kind of marriage where the initial glow has gone out of the relationship but the couple stays together because its convenient and they don't feel they've got a choice. Still, compromise is probably the most stable strategy day in and day out. I can still get up in the morning, but stay in bed just maybe fifteen minutes more. I can put my feet up in the evening, but leave my phone on just in case someone from the office really needs to talk to me. I can see people I don't really want to see, but give them just a little less time. I can stay in a job that's boring and tedious, but count the days until retirement. I can force myself to act in ways that go against my true nature, but maybe not as much, or not to the same extent as a truly self-competitive person does.

However, it's important to remember that compromise is a transition zone, and eventually we need to either move forward to being more WITH our self, or fall back into NOT recognizing our self, or into doing things TO our selves and alternatively doing things FOR ourselves.

## WITH

As a response to conflict with others, working WITH others directs our energies toward getting at the roots of the conflict through active listening and communication. A transformative strategy with your self involves active listening and communication with your self. Getting in better touch with yourself provides the basis for bringing your relationship with your self to a new level, both in terms of who you are and what it is you both want and need, given your place in the world and the special gifts and insights that you bring. It means taking yourself more seriously by respecting yourself, loving yourself more fully, unconditionally, and yet remaining aware of your shortcomings and doing your best to get beyond them. It means more than denying your inner conflicts, more than just indulging yourself, more than beating up on yourself, and even more than managing a decent compromise in relation to your inner conflicts.

Just as a transformative approach to conflict with others requires much more time and effort than other strategies, so does a self-transformative strategy. We need first of all to take the time for reflection. In both outer and inner conflicts, a transformative strategy may seem more difficult at first; more troublesome and more time-consuming. The difference for inner conflict, though, is that our self is always with us, so we don't have to make a special appointment, although we might want to wait until we find a quiet place free from distractions.

We carry our inner conflicts with us wherever we go. The advantage is that we can carry on our negotiations with our self wherever we are and

whenever we need to. The disadvantage is that we never entirely get away from our self. It is a common belief that we have to go off to be alone, to a monastery or a mountaintop or a desert retreat, to find our true self. This is not a bad idea, especially as we begin a journey of self-transformation – it is a way to remove ourselves from the everyday distractions that take us outside of our self. However, once we have reached a certain level of self-understanding, we can continue our process of self-transformation anywhere, whether alone or in the company of others. The key is to achieve better communication with self as we work toward conflict transformation. When we have learned how to communicate with our self more fully and more openly, we can do it anywhere, any time.

Another problem with always being with our self is that way we can get locked into cycles of closed-circuit thinking, where negative emotions seem to rule as our thoughts so that we keep going around in the same circles. In the short term we can deal with these conflictual patterns through other strategies of denial, accommodation, repression, or compromise. However, a transformative approach with the self will eventually be the best way to get past this kind of closed-circuit thinking, because reliance on any of the other types of strategy will always leave us going around the same circles. We can try to deny our inner conflicts, but they will still be there. We can try to suppress or dominate aspects of self we are in conflict with, but they keep seeping back in. If we get stuck in a compromise zone in dealing with our inner conflicts, we will never be completely happy, and so the nagging dissatisfaction will continue to be a part of our lives. These kinds of patterns can cause us much grief and become the basis for what are labelled as psychological problems, requiring “professional help” or medication. Or else these habits just continue to interfere with our ability to grow and develop as autonomous and fully realized human beings.

At first, the time and effort involved in a transformative strategy may appear to be a major challenge. Another challenge is the need to be completely honest with ourselves, just as being genuinely with others in our interpersonal relationships requires us to be as honest as we can with one another. We need to develop a clear perspective on our self, without either being much too hard on our self, much too easy. The rewards of effective transformation of inner conflict will make the effort to overcome these challenges more than worthwhile in the end.

Probably the most important major life transition is the transition from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. As children growing up we are very much a product of our upbringing, shaped by parents, schools, and the community. In adolescence we begin to realize ourselves as unique and separate beings; that is, as each of us having our own self. As we develop cognitively, we begin to be able to think about the self in the abstract, as a separate and distinct entity. We begin to be able to define this self separately from parents and others as a unique self.



At the same time, we begin to form goals and values of our own. This process doesn't happen overnight, nor should it – it may not be fully concluded until we get into our thirties. Along the way, it may involve a great deal of experimentation with alternative values, priorities, and identities.

At one time, this transition was considered to be the end of the process of growth and development. Once adulthood was reached, a person might accumulate more knowledge but no further transformation was required. However, writers such as Erik Erikson (1950) have identified major challenges in adult life that require further transformations if we are to avoid falling back into isolation, stagnation, and despair. In addition to establishing our basic identity, these challenges involve the achievement of fulfilling intimate relationships as adults and of a sense of generativity, defined as the will and desire to pass on what we have learned to the next generation. Finally, we should be moving toward a sense of ego integrity, the feeling that our life has had purpose and meaning. Erikson sees each of these challenges as calling for self-transformation, an observation that is reinforced by the negative alternatives he describes if the challenge is not met. The failure to achieve an adult identity results in role confusion and identity confusion. Inability to find intimacy leads to isolation. Lack of a sense of generativity leads to stagnation. Failure to find an overarching meaning in our life leads to bitterness and despair.

These are the predictable challenges in adult life that call for major self-transformations, but they are not the only ones. There are a whole range of events and challenges we might face, either separately from or maybe in conjunction with these expected challenges. Job or career changes are one example. The average person nowadays changes careers at least a couple of times, and these changes often call for dramatic transformations of identity. Changes in relationship status, such as going from being married to becoming single, are another example.

## **Conclusion**

Becoming more aware of our own inner conflicts and how we respond to them represents an important step toward a better understanding of the nature of our relationship to our self. We've looked at the different ways we relate to our selves, that parallel the ways in which we relate to others. We can now understand how each of these ways of relating may be appropriate at a particular moment.

There will be times when you need to just not deal with your inner conflicts. You need to put them aside and ignore them in order to meet the immediate challenges that the world places on each of us. At other times, it may be best to just do whatever you can for your self; indulge your self as much as you can. At yet other times you may need to get tough with your self. Exert some self control to force your self to do things you really don't want to do but know you have to do.

Over-reliance on any one of these ways of relating to self will eventually lead to grief, however. In the long run you want to move toward self-transformation, as the natural movement of life is toward growth and development, and growth and development demand change. While a relationship of being with your self can be difficult, and while you may at times want to resist it with every fibre of our being, it is the only way to go.

The next step toward achieving a more peaceful and integrated relationship with your self is to learn to listen to your self more actively and effectively – to identify your inner conflicts and find their root causes. Having gained some understanding of the nature of the self and of your own inner conflicts, you can now enter your inner world with more confidence.

## REFERENCES

- Agassi, Andre. *OPEN: An Autobiography*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.
- Bradly, G.W. "Self Serving Bias in the Attribution Process: A reexamination of the fact or fiction question," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36: 56-71.
- Charon, J.M. "The Nature of Self," in Charon (ed.) *Symbolic Interaction* (5th edition) Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall 1997
- Chua, Amy. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, New York: Penguin, 2011
- Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton, 1950
- Fisher, Roger and Ury, James. *Getting to Yes*. New York. Penguin 1982
- Iommi, Tony. *Iron Man: My journey through heaven and hell with Black Sabbath*. De Capo Press, 2011.
- Jones, E. E., & [Nisbett](#), R. E.. *The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behavior*. New York: General Learning Press, 1971.
- Killingsworth, Mathew A, and Gilbert, Daniel T. "A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind," *Science* 12 November 2010: 932  
Penguin, 2012
- Kohn, Alfie. *Punished by Rewards*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993
- Mead, George Herbert, *Mind, Self, and Society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist* George H. Mead ; edited and with an introduction by Charles W. Morris. Chicago, Ill. : The University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Thomas, K.W. and Kilmann, R. "Developing a Forced-Choice measure of Conflict-Handling Behavior: the MODE Model." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 37:390-395 1977
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The path of mindfulness in everyday life*. New York: Bantam, 1991
- Tomkins, S. (1987). Shame. In D.L. Nathanson (ed.). *The Many Faces of Shame*. New York, NY: Norton, pp. 133-161.
- Twain, Shania. *From This Moment On*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 2011
- Vanderbilt, Tom. *Traffic* 2008
- Wachtel, Ted. "What is Restorative Practices?" IIRP Website: [www.iirp/whatisrp.php](http://www.iirp/whatisrp.php)

## APPENDIX

---



---

### Inner Conflict Strategies

*Think of a context where you experience a sense of conflict, cognitive dissonance, argument, or disappointment with yourself. This may involve the experience of unpleasant or unwanted emotions, difficulty controlling unwanted thoughts or behaviours, or the experience of conflict with others that leads us to question ourselves. Then, using the following scale, fill in your scores for each question.*

### Scoring

1 = never   2 = seldom   3 = sometimes   4 = often   5 = always

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I avoid thinking about conflicts with myself.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I generally try to satisfy my own needs before I start to  
worry about \_\_\_\_\_ what \_\_\_\_\_ others want.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I use self-control to hold to the ideas I think are most  
important.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ I usually try to “split the difference” in order to come to  
a decision.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to think through all sides of an issue to find a  
solution which is totally acceptable.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ I usually avoid thinking about things about myself I  
might find troubling.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ I know how to take care of myself.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ I use will power to make sure I keep following my goals  
for myself.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to find a middle course to resolve any conflicting  
expectations I might \_\_\_\_\_ experience.

10. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to integrate all of my ideas of who I am.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to stay away from disagreeable thoughts and feelings.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ I usually give in to my own desires.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ I control my thoughts well and avoid contradictory ideas.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ I hold on to a middle ground when I'm not sure which way to go.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to find ways to satisfy all of my different expectations of myself.
16. \_\_\_\_\_ I don't think I really have any disagreements with myself.
17. \_\_\_\_\_ I often follow my spontaneous wishes and desires.
18. \_\_\_\_\_ I generally pursue my goals without considering other ways of looking at things.
19. \_\_\_\_\_ I negotiate with myself to reach a compromise.
20. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to be as honest I can with myself so that I can get at the roots of any conflicts I might have.
21. \_\_\_\_\_ I am usually able to distract myself from any unpleasant thoughts or feelings.
22. \_\_\_\_\_ I generally enjoy being the centre of attention.
23. \_\_\_\_\_ I use my will power to keep myself from questioning my goals.
24. \_\_\_\_\_ I use "give and take" so that I can compromise with myself.
25. \_\_\_\_\_ I try to be as open and honest as I can be, with myself as well as with others.

**Scoring:** Add up your scores for the following questions:

1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____	5. _____
6. _____	7. _____	8. _____	9. _____	10. _____
11. _____	12. _____	13. _____	14. _____	15. _____
16. _____	17. _____	18. _____	19. _____	20. _____
21. _____	22. _____	23. _____	24. _____	25. _____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>Totals</b>				

NOT  
COMPROMISE

FOR  
WITH

TO

-----

-----