

Trauma, Psychosis, and Problems in Human Relationship: Exploring the Connections

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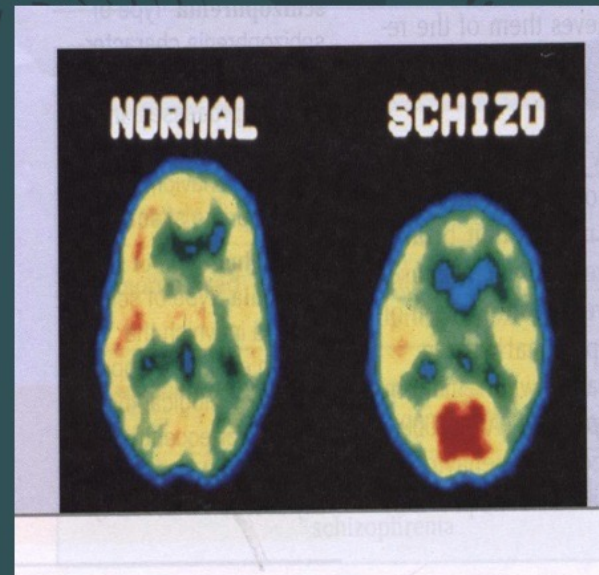
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The role of uncertainty:

- ▶ **“People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”**
 - ▶ RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “Circles,” Essays: First Series, 1841
- ▶ **“Real dialogue is where two or more people become willing to suspend their certainty in each other’s presence.”**
 - ▶ David Bohm

The brains of people diagnosed with schizophrenia often seem abnormal....

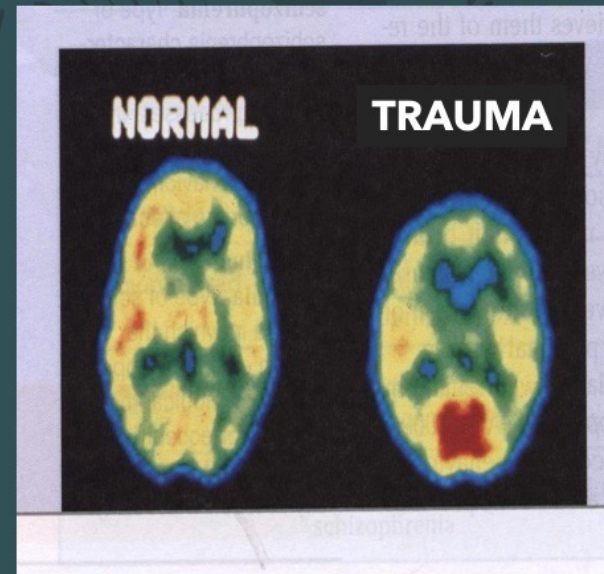
- Dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine irregularities
- Reversed cerebral asymmetry
- Hippocampal damage
- Ventricular enlargement
- Cerebral atrophy



© Schizophrenia-
Immagine

But maybe the problem didn't start with the brain

- Dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine irregularities
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Traumagenic Neurodevelopmental Model of Psychosis
(Read et al., 2001, 2008, 2014)

The Evidence that Trauma can Cause Psychotic Symptoms:

- ▶ The high incidence of psychotic symptoms in people who have been traumatized
- ▶ The high incidence of trauma histories in people who have psychotic symptoms
- ▶ Studies that show the greater the severity of the trauma, the greater likelihood of more, and more intense, psychotic symptoms
- ▶ Brain changes sometimes linked with psychotic symptoms and “schizophrenia” are also found disproportionately in children who have been abused
- ▶ There are logical and meaningful connections between psychotic symptoms and normal reactions to traumatic experience

Trauma Disturbs Relationships

- ▶ Both
 - ▶ Relationships with other people,
 - ▶ interpersonal
 - ▶ Relationships with parts of oneself,
 - ▶ intrapersonal

Trauma and Social Disconnection

Symptoms are more likely when trauma undermines valued social identities



Resilience is more likely when social identities can be maintained, or new identities developed

(Muldoon et al., 2019)

- ▶ In a traumatic experience, a person's focus & interests narrow to what seems necessary to survive
 - ▶ Possibilities are seen in black & white,
 - ▶ to aid sharp decision making and intense action
 - ▶ Some interests & needs must be sacrificed to carry out the survival strategy

Trauma
narrows the
focus

The Origins of Dissociative Splits

- ▶ Conflict between 2 or more strategies, each of which seems necessary for survival
 - ▶ And each strategy seems to depend upon excluding the other
- ▶ Instead of integration
 - ▶ Person feels torn as one side, then the other(s), vie for control
- ▶ A key dynamic in mental disorders generally, also in psychosis

Which Psychotic Symptoms Are Associated with Dissociation?

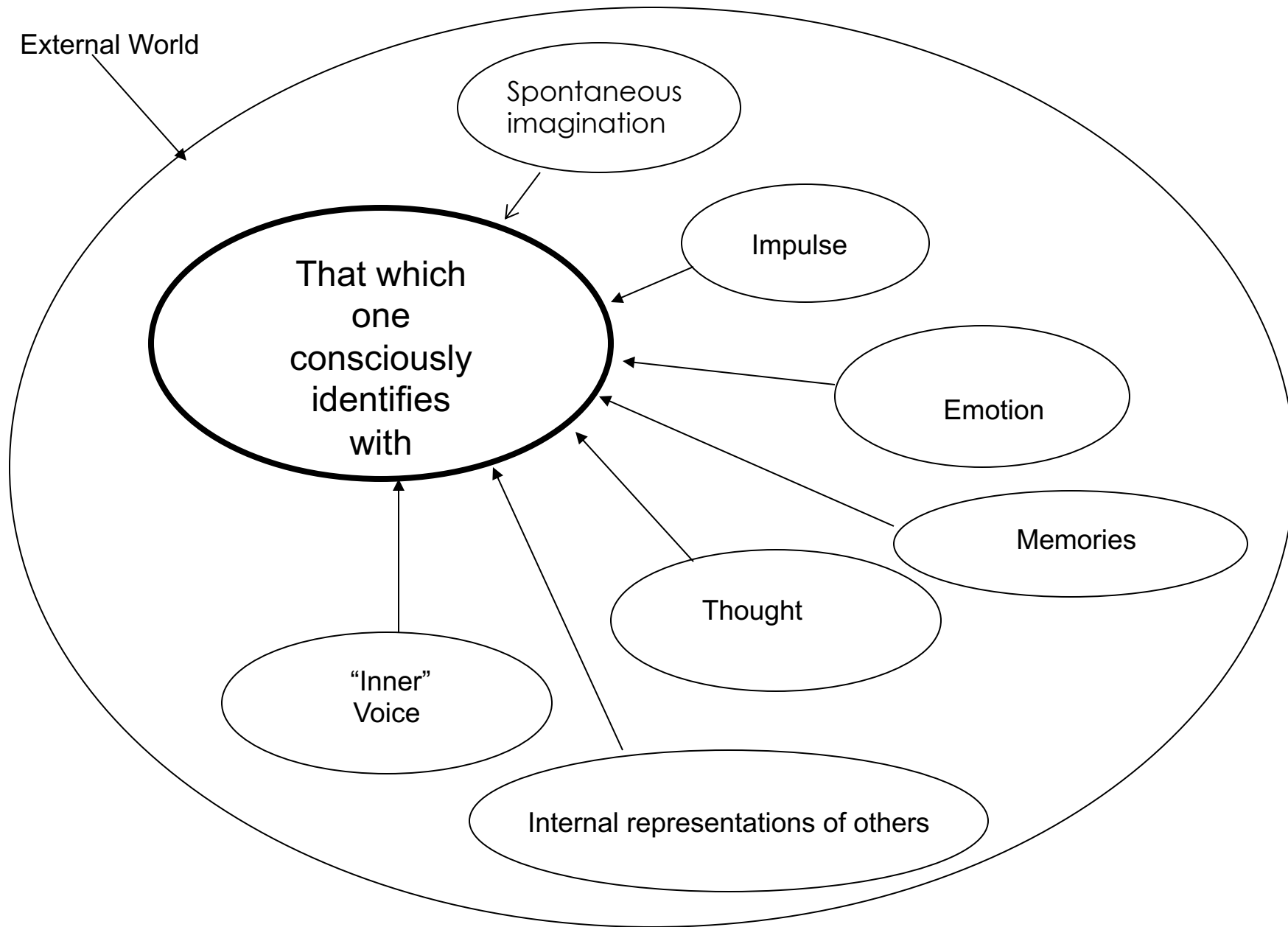
Most researched: strong links with hallucinations

Also strong links with paranoia and delusions

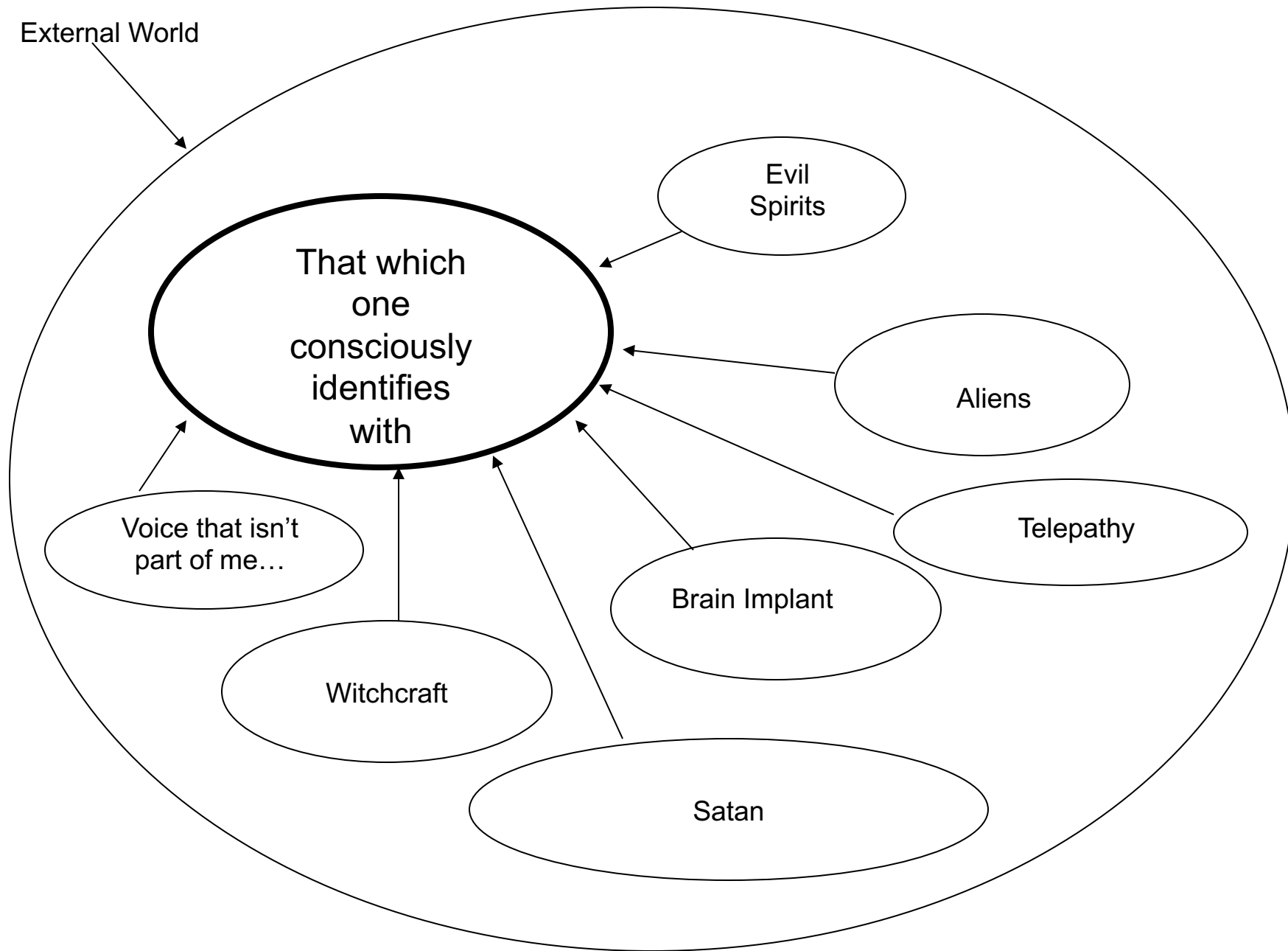
Significant but weaker links with disorganization

Inconsistent and weaker links with negative symptoms

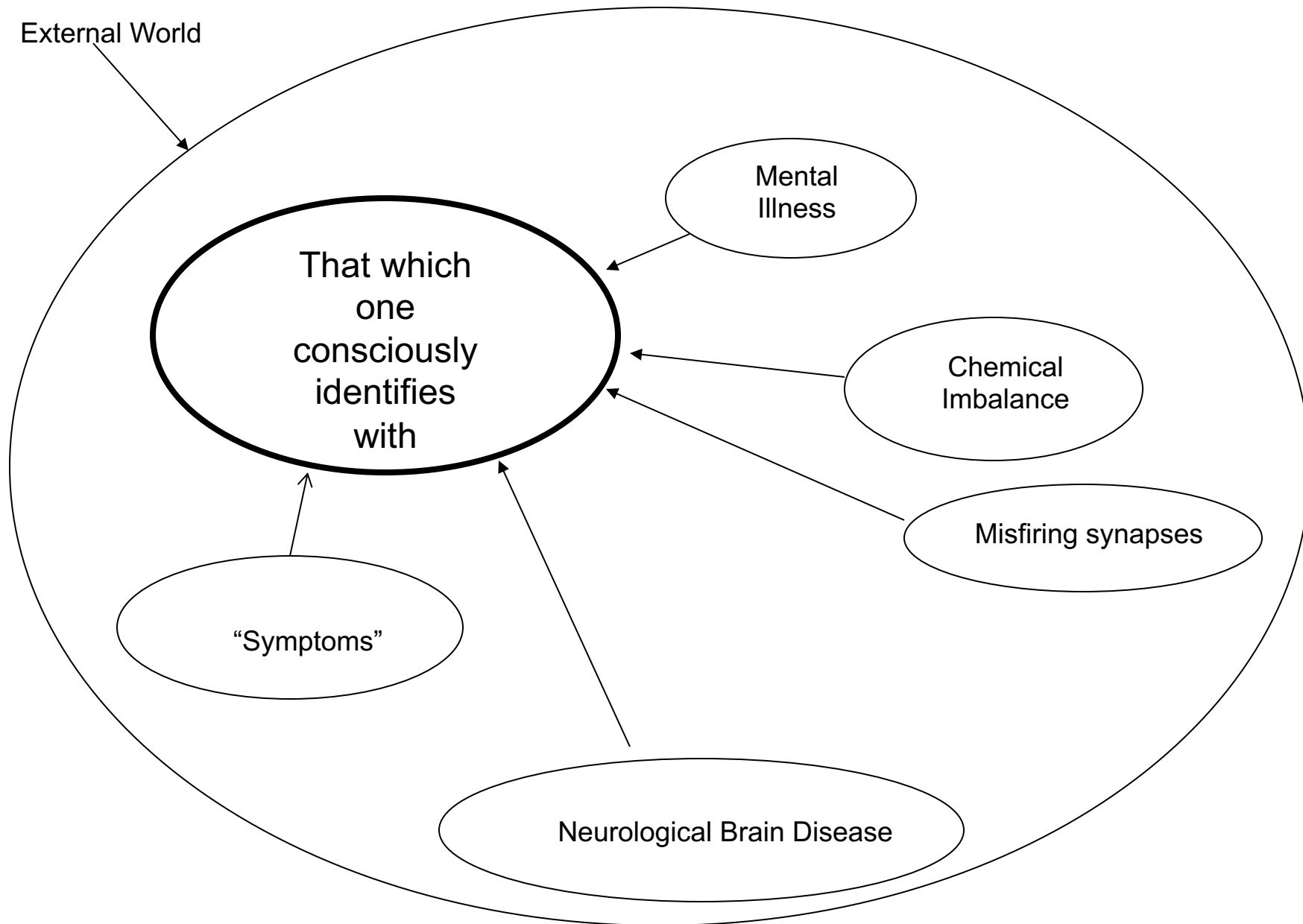
- (Longden, Branitsky et al. 2020)



Our culture expects us to define anything that is not "the external world" as part of our wider self, even if we didn't choose it and it was triggered by the external world.

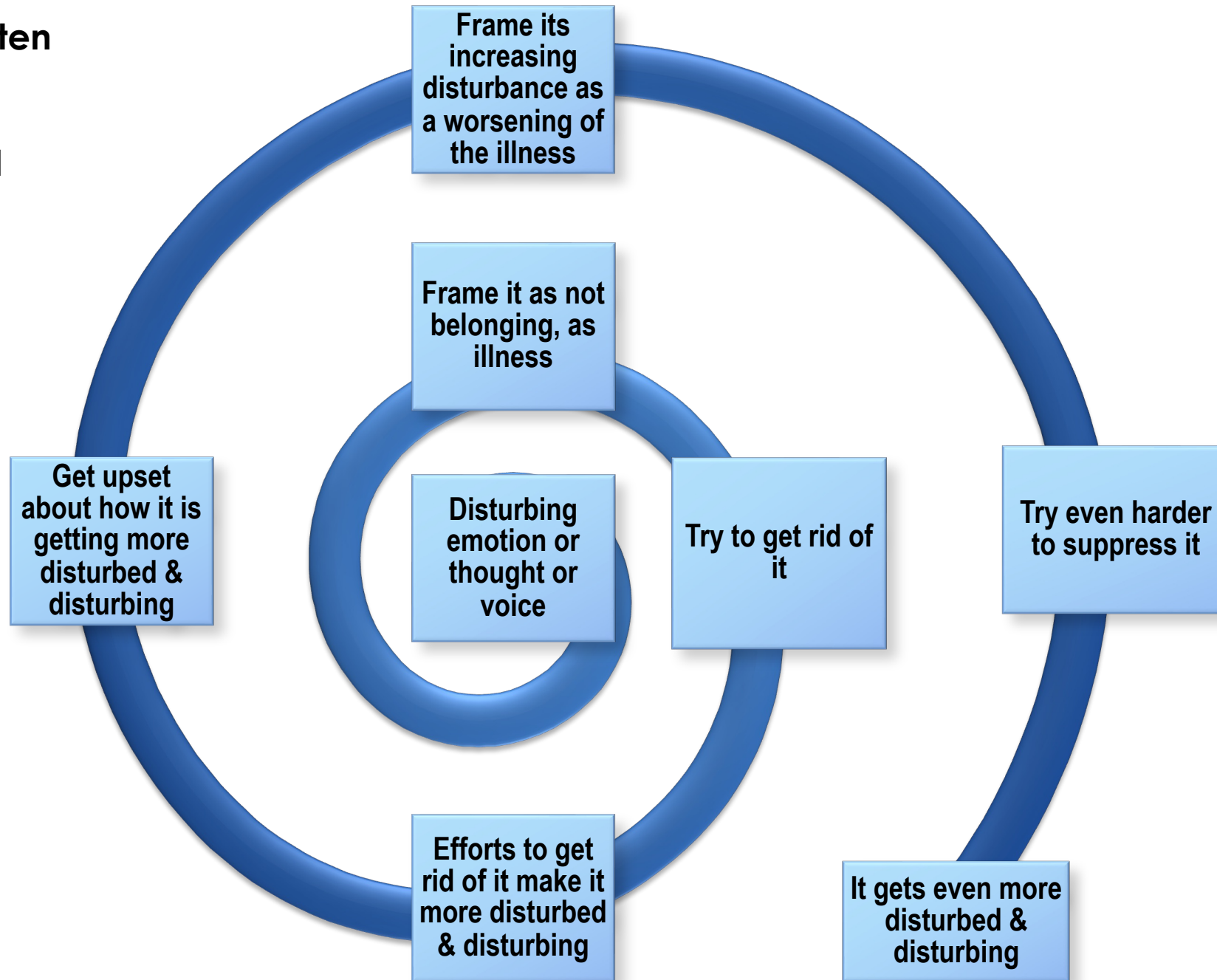


Examples of interpretations of inner experiences as being sourced in something other than the self



“Mental illness” explanations continue the trend of defining experiences as not belonging within the self, but with different names and categories.....

**Vicious circle often
caused when
attempting to
suppress mental
disorder**



Three Positions on “Psychosis”

1

Letting the altered state take over: being possessed by it

- Can lead to bad things!

2

Seeing the altered state as the enemy: fighting it

- Ongoing conflict, “psychic civil war”

3

Integrating the altered state, with discernment

- Peacemaking
- Can access the value of the altered state while avoiding its excesses



Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) suggests accepting (and basically ignoring) the “passengers” while steering in one’s preferred direction.

What's the emotion or concern behind the scary voice or apparently fixed belief?



"Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain..."

From the MGM movie, the "Wizard of Oz"

Helper's Job in the Conflict Model

Not to “eliminate
symptoms” of
“mental illness”

- But to mediate the conflict

When the goal is
seen as eliminating
symptoms

- There is a good chance the helper will take sides with one side or part of the person's process & try to suppress the other side
- Resulting, often, in entrenched conflict

When all sides are
valued, including
the side that is
most seen as
producing the
“symptom”

- Then there is a better chance of finding a constructive peace

Working Toward Balance

Need

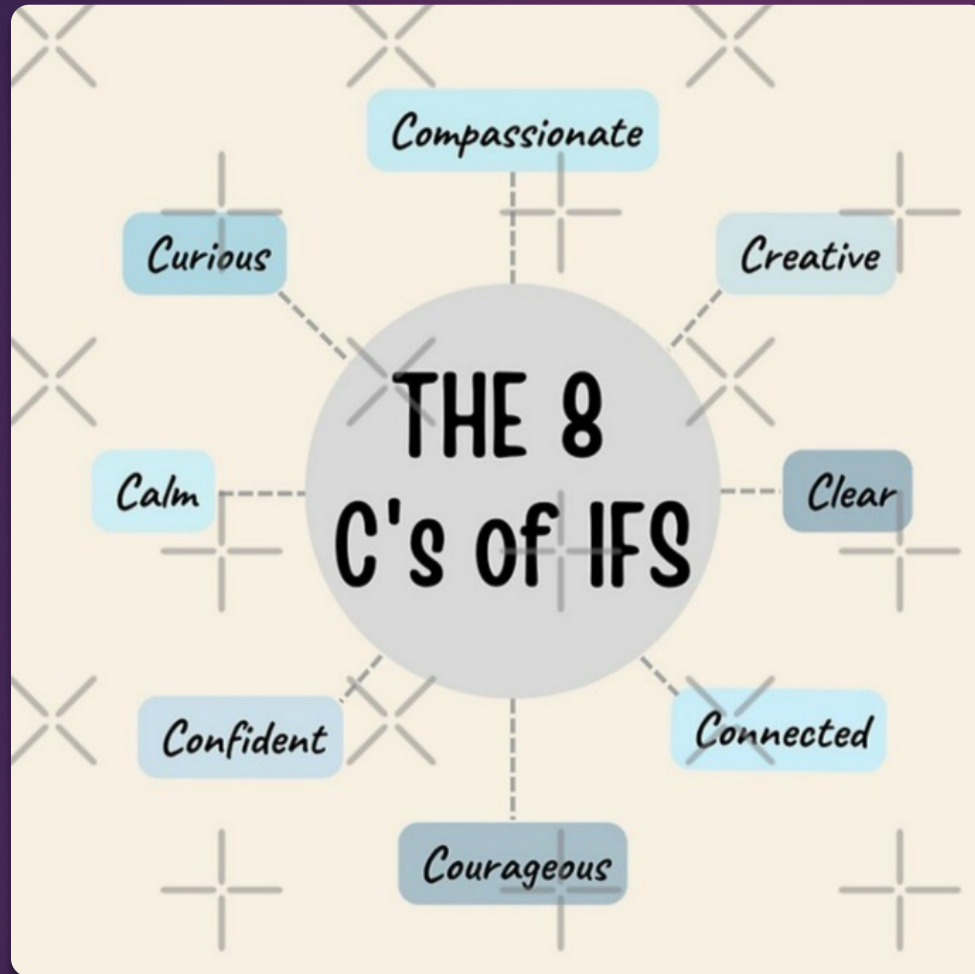
Need to set limits with intrusive, disturbing, or polarized parts of the psyche



While

While also being open to hearing about, and addressing, the underlying concerns that those parts represent

- Note that the second step will seldom be taken if the disturbing part is seen just as a “symptom” of an “illness”



The qualities
of our mind
when it is
balanced...

Storytelling and Freedom

- ▶ *“Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless.”*

— Salman Rushdie (1991)



Blowing up
the Story

Blowing up
the Self

Indigenous Psychology

First, I'd like to point out some of the essential aspects of the elders perspective on narrative psychiatry:

- ❧ 1. There are no bad people, only bad stories.
- ❧ 2. Bad stories can be replaced by good stories.
- ❧ 3. The more people tell and hear good stories, the more likely they are to stick and to have an impact.
- ❧ 4. Miracles are always possible so we mustn't succumb to the story that we are hopeless. Hope is perpetual.



Indigenous Psychology

5. New stories that we are learning must be lived within community, which is what makes them real, makes them manifest, and makes them able to replace the old stories of suffering, isolation, and woe.



Slide by Lewis Mehl-Madronna (2022)