

# The Separation Method

EMPOWERING CLIENTS WITH EATING DISORDERS

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*Always move toward your demons; they take their power from your retreat. TR*

We all know that eating disorders are about so much more than our clients' behaviors with food. It is about the loss of self-esteem; it is about constant self-criticism; it is about painful, unrelenting perfectionism; it is about feeling cut off from the rest of the human race; it is about believing oneself to be a freak, or defective, or stupid, or gutless. It is about facing (or hiding from) one no-win-situation after another. And that does not even touch the etiology of this deadly condition.

Before all of that can be addressed with any success, we must first help our clients find a way to separate from the eating disorder (in metaphor, an inner-culprit named Ed). Only when they can perceive a "Self" beyond Ed can they discover the hope that is such a necessary ingredient in the motivation to recover. What follows is a very basic exercise to introduce the method of separation to clients. Please keep in mind that this method is deceptively simple and there are many nuances to be understood and mastered in order to maximize its effect with clients.

The following will be described as it might be presented in a group or workshop setting. It is also workable in office settings with individual clients. That application will not be addressed here.

## Introducing Separation from Ed

1. Ask each participant to write down 3-5 "Ed messages," messages they "hear" as coming from their eating disorder. Each message must be written in the second person, with the participant's name preceding each message. The pronoun change --- form "I" to "you" is essential to creating the experience of separation. Ex: "I am as big as a house," becomes "Thom, you are as big as a house." "I need to binge and purge," becomes "Thom, you need to binge and purge." (Note: the pronoun "I" will sometimes appear in these messages, but only when it refers to "Ed," as in, "Thom, I can keep you safe if you just stick with me.")

2. Break into groups of three (3). It is okay if some groups have four (4) participants. Each member will take a turn at 3 roles: Self (recipient of the messages), Ed (the personified eating disorder), and a "Recovery Voice." (The recovery messages will not be explored in this exercise, but it is helpful to have a person in this role to represent hope for the future. Recovery messages to counter the Ed messages will obviously become the focus of this work.

3. When a participant takes a turn (and people can be encouraged to do this exercise, but given the choice not to), she sits facing toward 2 other members of the small group. One enrolls as

“Ed,” by simply saying, “I am going to role play Ed.” Another enrolls as the Recovery Voice in the same way.

3. The recipient is encouraged to *not respond verbally* for this exercise, but to simply pay close attention to her internal responses --- cognitive and emotional. Responses to the messages can be (should be) discussed in a process session following the exercise. (For such a simple exercise, it is very powerful in evoking deep emotion.)

4. The person role-playing Ed will simply read the messages the recipient has written for herself. This is NOT psychodrama. The messages should be read slowly without any “acting” on the part of the reader. After each message is read, the person role-playing the Recovery Voice, looks at the recipient and says, “Ed is lying to you. I am here to help.” (The impact of this voice, especially in early recovery, is likely to be slight. That’s okay. We are simply representing hope with this messenger.)

5. Once all the recipient’s messages are read, the two role players de-role by saying, “I am no longer role-playing Ed,” and “I am no longer role-playing your Recovery Voice.” This may seem like small matter but it is very important (for reasons I won’t go into here) that participants specifically “de-role” from the voice they were representing.

6. Each participant takes a turn hearing her messages read to her from outside of her in the form of the role-played Ed. Once this is completed, a group discussion about the experience will reveal many things for participants, not the least of which is that she is not alone, that Ed messages are quite universal.

As I mentioned previously, this exercise is deceptively simple and likely to evoke powerful emotional response. Proceed with caution and always emphasize that there is no wrong way to do the exercise; that it is only intended to raise awareness about how the eating disorder succeeds in being so controlling. At the very least, you want to emphasize that for each participant there is a Self who is *not Ed*.

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