

Process Work with Extreme States of Consciousness

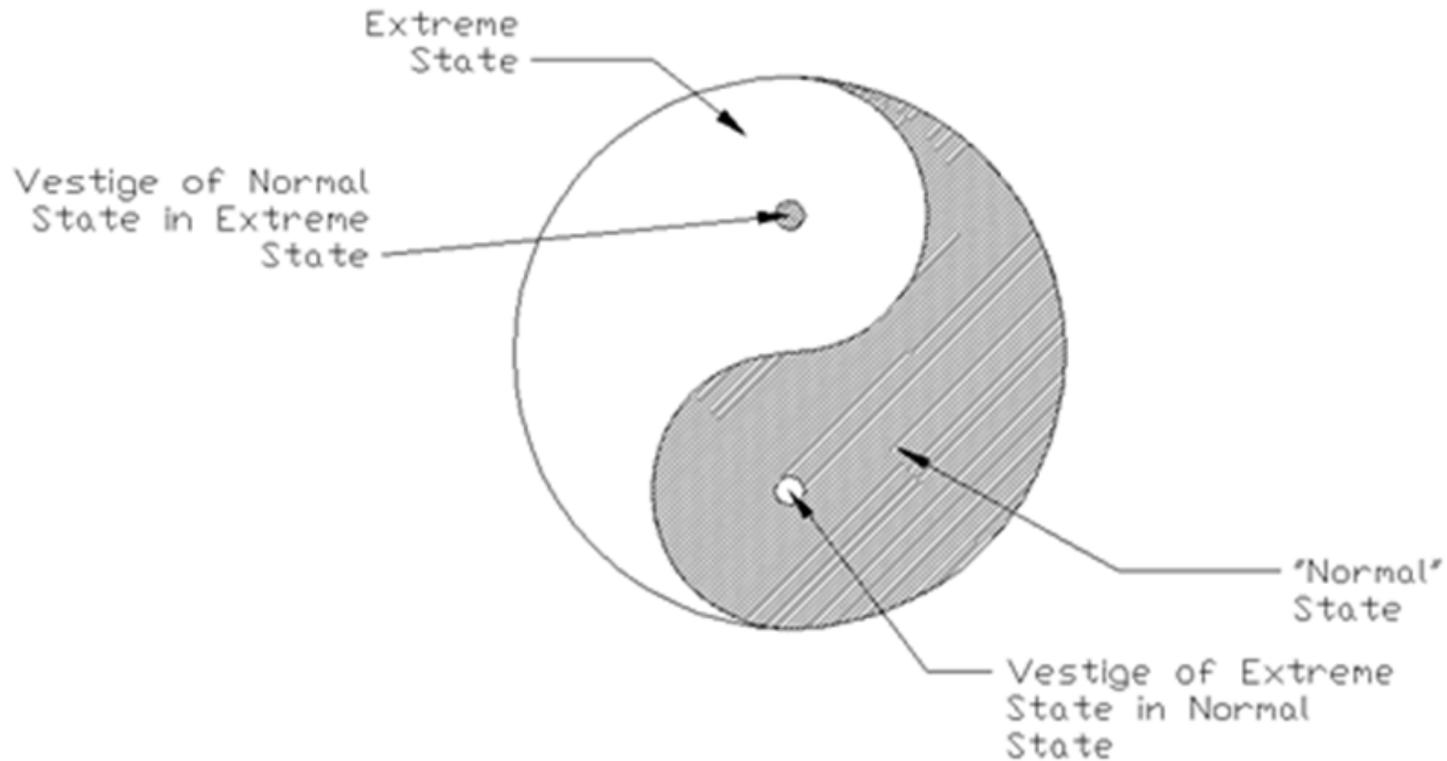
“Human states of consciousness occupy a spectrum of breathtaking diversity. Despite the temptation to label those that are disturbing to individuals and their relationships as “pathological”, careful observation reveals mental life to be fluid, creative, and meaningful, no matter how troublesome it may become. Process Work, developed by Arnold and Amy Mindell and their colleagues, gives us tools for facilitating and unfolding the layers of meaning and potential development that lie beneath the surface of difficult and unusual states of consciousness. In this workshop, we will explore, through a brief theoretical discussion, experiential exercises, and examples from clinical practice and everyday life, a viewpoint that can bring “frozen” or static-seeming processes once more into motion, to help them reveal their meaningful core. “

Views of Extreme States

- As medical disorders
- As aspects of a broad range of diverse mental states
- As part of a transformative experience: Laing, Perry
- As a spiritual emergence/emergency: Groff
- Phenomenological: Mindell et.al.

- States of consciousness occupy a spectrum from “normal” (= oriented toward consensus reality) to “extreme” – referring to a parallel world of experience to which not all observers have easy access.
- States of consciousness appear troublesome to the degree that they are not accessible to outside observers
- States of consciousness are meaningful regardless of whether they are troublesome or not

Extreme state as process



"Yin-yang model" of extreme state

Inner Work Exercise: Inventory of states of consciousness

- Reflect on the spectrum of states of consciousness that you experience. Even though you may be tempted to focus on the most troublesome, take some time to embrace all of them with which you are familiar
- What is the most pleasant or intriguing of these states? What makes it attractive? What do you do to help get into that state?
- For one of those states that you find interesting or attractive, ask yourself:
 - When do I typically get into that state?
 - How easy or difficult is it to get out of that state when I've had enough?
 - What is my usual strategy for getting out of that state?
- Take a few minutes to share your experience with someone else.

What makes a state of consciousness troublesome?

- Difficulty communicating to others *about* what we are experiencing (“metacommunication”)
- Others cannot understand our experiences – they appear to lack coherence or meaning from a consensus reality viewpoint.
- I am not in a position to react to feedback from others in a way that makes sense from a consensus reality viewpoint.

Strategies for making states of consciousness less troublesome – focus on the individual

- Believe in the potential meaning of the state of consciousness – the essence that lies behind the surface difficulties
- Help person unfold the meaning/goal of the state of consciousness
- This often has the result of the person being able to metacommunicate about her or his state.

Making states of consciousness less troublesome: focus on the system

- Apply Mindell's "City Shadows" principle: that a person in an extreme state is occupying a meaningful role that is missing but necessary in mainstream consciousness.
- See the person's state as a potential resource for the mainstream

Finding and alternate reality in which a difficult state of consciousness is a resource

1. Remember a state of consciousness that you'd like to explore a bit more deeply. Please don't take the most troublesome state – take one with which you are relatively comfortable experimenting.
2. Describe the state to your partner – what makes it interesting, what makes it troublesome, what you feel would make it less troublesome if only you, the people around you, or the community in which you live would change.
3. Now reflect on the wild world of real and imaginary characters to find some human, deity, mythical beast or the like that had similar states – in fact, for whom those states were their source of strength, power, and super-abilities. In what way was that state or energy an asset or a resource? How did it sometimes become a liability? How did the character cope with that liability? What advice could that figure give you to help you use your own superpower more effectively, and with disturbance to yourself and possibly others?