

Coping, Communication, Self-Care

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

Dr. James Bramson is a licensed psychologist and social worker with over 25 years of experience as a clinical director, trainer/supervisor of psychology interns, organizational consultant, neuropsychologist, forensic psychologist, and therapist. He is the director of [The Mindfulness Alliance](#) and co-founded [The East Bay Mindfulness Center](#). Dr. Bramson is also a featured speaker on the [Shrinks Rap](#) podcast. He spoke at the May 24 meeting about communication techniques, limit setting, mindfulness, and self-care.

He began with a quote from David Bowie: “Life is about accepting the chaos and accepting the fragmentation.” Everyone in the NAMI group, he said, has experience of this. Given that life can be unpleasant when we are dedicated to a loved one who is hurting, we can feel helpless, distraught, and as if we were going through gyrations. He compared the relationship between the caregiver and the cared-for as the vibrations between two G strings on a pair of guitars, each giving feedback to the other.

He then introduced the Internal Family Systems Model (IFSM) developed in part by Richard Schwartz (see [Introduction to Internal Family Systems](#)). The concepts here are based on neuroscience and Buddhist philosophy for developing self-leadership skills. When faced with something dangerous and fraught, our natural tendency is to fight and deny—but instead we should cultivate our sense of self-regulation, which can lead to co-regulation with our loved one.

In the IFSM, we are encouraged to look at our internal parts. Some, which are called “exiles,” we push away and try to bury. These are the situations and experiences that cause pain, guilt, and shame. Other parts called “protectors” try to keep the exiles at a distance. And the “firefighters” try to distract us from the exiles by, for example, resorting to alcohol and drugs or other harmful practices in an attempt to put out the fire.

A version of this model is found in the Pixar animated movie *Inside Out*, where the main character learns to befriend the parts of what she is inside. Or in *The Wizard of Oz*, where each of the characters is lacking something—a brain, a heart, courage, a home—and the wizard shows them that what they lack is already inside them. IFSM relates to dealing with what’s inside you and taking self-leadership to be in charge of your parts and yourself.

By developing self-leadership, you are dealing with the meta-self, the witnessing of self, and observing the self as struggle. You become the best version of yourself: self-confident, with clarity, curiosity, and compassion. Self-leadership allows you to look at but not judge the exiles, the experiences that create your current emotional state.

Dr. Bramson gave the motto: “In moments of despair, face everything and avoid nothing.” Listen to yourself, bring your experience forward, and listen to it and what

it has to say. Also, consider and remember the positive emotions, like joy, that you think you can't experience anymore.

He also introduced the process of [Acceptance Commitment Therapy](#) (ACT), which teaches how to accept and act on what is real. In this process, you need to be in the moment and not distracted. When you are in conflict—as in a disagreement with your loved one—you need to ask what are your shared values, where are you alike and aligned? When people feel united, the energy shifts. And then you can engage in value-committed action steps—that is, how can you commit to that value and express it in action? Dr. Bramson defined integrity as “I have a value, and my action aligns with that value.” And finally, you need to avoid “cognitive fusion,” or becoming so stuck in your distractions that you become bound to them but instead asking yourself what is real?

A further issue in dealing with a loved one who is suffering is [codependency](#), which is a lack of balance in a relationship. The question to ask, Dr. Bramson said, is “Am I over-functioning for someone who is under-functioning?” It's easy to look at a person and try to help them and then not do enough for yourself. Another question is, “Am I superimposing my will and values on them?” You need to find that balance, which you can do by having real tools in real time, and being centered, grounded, and purposeful—the core of self-leadership.

At this point, Dr. Bramson solicited examples of real-life situations from members of the audience.

One woman described dealing with her mother who has schizo-affective disorder. She said she can't make all her mother's choices. The chaos cannot be managed. And it was not just dealing with her mother but with a broken mental health system. She cannot save her mom, and the stress is causing her own body to break down; she can't sleep and has no energy. She was experiencing fear and uncertainty.

Dr. Bramson noted that fear and uncertainty are her exiles. He asked what her shared values were, and she answered, “Safety, dignity, and humanity.” He noted that the whole mental health system disrespects people. But he also noted that having guardianship of her mother gave this woman self-empowerment and a sense of agency. She had a stronger stance to face crisis when she could be an advocate and stay true to her values. “Understanding what we're doing and why helps us self-regulate,” he said. He asked her if, at the end of the day, she could say, “I have done the best I can”? And she answered, “Yes.” He asked her what gift she had learned from the experience, and she said, “Endurance.”

Dr. Bramson told the story of a 16-year-old boy with a brain tumor, who went from a studious kid to one who was struggling. His odd behavior made him the object of ridicule among his peers. His mother was worried and then panicked because the boy was in danger of developing hydrocephalus—pressure on the brain from cerebrospinal fluid—and needed emergency surgery. Dr. Bramson worked on reinforcing her self-advocacy and confidence by sticking with what she knew was right. The boy recovered and went on to become a psychologist himself. And when he felt clueless, he turned cluelessness into an exile and identified his self-leader as “Dr. Clue.”

Dr. Bramson described his own situation of codependency as a teenager to an alcoholic stepfather and incompetent mother. He worked four jobs through high school and learned to pay the family bills. “I couldn't trust anyone else, and if I

couldn't over-function, I felt everything would fall apart." He had to learn resiliency as a survival mechanism.

In terms of codependency, he referenced [*The Tao of Leadership*](#), which says that when you learn the right equation, you do no more than the other person needs. You put a boundary around functionality, because not teaching people to help themselves does more harm than good. And that means sometimes letting go of trying to control the uncontrollable.

He then opened the floor to further questions and comments.

Q. As a parent of a son with schizophrenia, I sometimes don't know where our values lie, because his brain doesn't work like mine does.

A. Even in severe cases, your loved one will sometimes have moments of clarity. People are not always in the same state all the time. And the values may be shared even when they are not stated in words. There can be a felt sense of values.

Q. When I'm feeling anguish from other people's problems, it's time for me to turn inward, to find something unrelated, to stop before going tilt, and to find energy. If we're not vital and healthy ourselves, we can't help others.

A. There is a Buddhist exercise of sending love and light to another person. Sometimes becoming self-regulating can also be co-regulating.