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ABSTRACT

Decent reports by U. Spiegel, Putnam, and others demonstrate that dissociation is a common response to severe trauma, serving to provide some degree of acute insulation against overwhelming stresses. This quite preliminary study explores certain of the consequences subsequent to the establishment of dissociative defenses, and illustrates that their successful employment is a two-edged sword, rendering those who develop an adaptation relying on dissociation vulnerable to rather than protected against overwhelming stressors. Of eighteen carefully studied incest victims who had developed dissociative disorders and had been successfully exploited by psychotherapists, 14 (78%) had been raped as adults. One hundred percent were found to suffer ongoing dissociative symptoms that disrupted their sense of mastery and control of themselves and their lives. One hundred percent demonstrated that the defensive ablation of memory of crucial information rendered them incapable of perceiving and reacting to actual danger situations appropriately. Ninety-two percent became frozen or withdrawn under-stress, and met situations best avoided by decisive action with passive compliance and learned helplessness. The same percentage had suffered a shattering of basic life assumptions. In all curses, traumatically-induced dissociative deformation of the observing ego and debasement of cognitive functioning had occurred, leading to a decontextualization of traumatic experiences. The outcome of these sequelae, which offer acute protection, is a syndrome of chronic impairment which, in severe cases, predisposes those who suffer it to repetitive revictimization. These findings are duplicated in a larger series currently under study. Therapeutic implications and useful strategies are reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

Dissociation is a widespread and essentially normal phenomenon, familiar to us from the most mundane of our everyday experiences. We often drive home, lost in thought, and, upon arrival have no recollection of either the trip itself or of the complex series of thoughts and behaviors that we know were necessary to bring its home in safety. Nonetheless, we can be confident that these mental activities have in fact occurred, despite our preoccupation with other matters and our lack of awareness of them.

Clearly separate and transiently segregated streams of mental activity have been at work. This quite pedestrian and familiar capacity has the potential to be employed in the service of defense. Conditions in which this commonplace propensity plays a prominent role in a patient's psychopathological adaptation are called dissociative disorders. In these conditions, important aspects of self-referential material with regard to memory and/or identity become segregated from the individual's otherwise relatively intact and continuous ribbon of experience and memory; i.e., from one's experience of one's own self and one's own life.

DSM-III-R (1987) defines dissociation as a disturbance or alteration in the naturally integrative functions of identity, memory, or consciousness. Putnam, after conducting an exhaustive review of the literature, defined dissociation as a complex psychophysiological process, with psychodynamic triggers, that produces an alteration in the person's consciousness. During this process, thoughts, feelings, and memories are not integrated into the individual's awareness or mentors' in the normal way (1985, p. 66). Spiegel observed that: 'In dissociation, specific subsets of material seen to contain rules excluding other subsets of material from conscious awareness, although these rules are not absolute and the boundaries can be breached' (1986, p. 129).

The intrinsic drama associated with conditions such as amnesia, fugue, and multiple personality disorder (MPD) often proves so compelling that attention is diverted from what drives these arresting phenomena. The ready induction of many dissociative phenomena with hypnosis has led many to trivialize the naturally occurring dissociative disorders and symptoms. However, the bulk of available data suggests that dissociation occurs most commonly in connection with severe trauma. With the exception of depersonalization disorder, all of the DSM-III-R dissociative disorders have proven highly correlated with histories of trauma (Putnam, 1985). This is demonstrated most persuasively by the findings that 97% to 98% of patients with MPD give histories that indicate that they are the survivors of child abuse (e.g., Putnam, Guroff, Silberman, Baraban, & Post, 1986; Schultz, Braun, & Kluft, 1985, 1989). Furthermore, many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are clearly dissociative; and dissociative symptoms are quite common in
victims of rape. In fact there is a sufficient number of acutely overwhelmed persons whose response is dominated by dissociative phenomena for a new classification to be proposed for inclusion in DSM-IV (Spitzer, R., unpublished materials and personal communications, 1989).

It is hardly surprising that dissociation would be such a common response to overwhelming events. By sidetracking unacceptable and/or intolerable aspects of life experience, either en bloc or along the cleavage planes of Behavior, Affect, Sensation, and Knowledge, as described in Braun's (1988) BASK model of dissociation, the ongoing executive apparatus of the mind is bull eyed in whole or in part from the impact of the trauma. The primary gain of dissociation becomes the diminution of some sort of dysphoria or the exclusion of some sort of information that was perceived as overwhelming. Secondary gain may follow readily if either desirable attention, the alleviation of stressors, or the mollification of responsibility follow as consequences.

However, the price of this type of relief is costly. One can easily infer the primary loss incurred—shattering of the cohesion of one’s life experience and one’s sense of self (Putnam, 1985; Spiegel, 1986; Ullman B: Brothers, 1988) are clear consequences. However, there is secondary loss as well. Individuals attempting to function after the have dissociated important data must attempt to comprehend themselves, their lives, and their environment deprived of crucial information. Consequently their efforts to do so often are ill-informed, and build in systematic biases that further compromise their efforts to cope. This would appear to lead to the potential for those who have had dissociative responses to trauma not only to fail to learn from experience, but also to remain impaired and/or to become more impaired in that connection.

There is an increasing body of data to the effect that certain groups of trauma victims, far from learning from experience to protect themselves more effectively, are di
differentially vulnerable to revictimization. Elsewhere (1989, 1990) I have summarized observations from numerous original sources that incest victims, for example, are di
differentiallyvulnerable to rape, masochistic behavior, involvement with abusive partners, participation in prostitution, and becoming substance abusers and psychiatric inpatients. More unsettling still are data to the effect that they are differentially vulnerable to sexual exploitation by mental health professionals (summarized in Muff, 1989, 1990). Feldman-Summers and Jones (1984) found that the experience of incest is the most powerful predictor of therapist-patient sexual exploitation, and the presence of severe symptoms was the second most potent predictor. Hence, the incest survivor with dissociative psychopathology has a double loading for further mishap.

In an earlier study (1987, 1989, 1990) I studied a group of incest survivors who had been sexually exploited by a psychotherapist as well, and attempted to characterize a constellation of features that appear to be associated with revictimization, the sitting duck syndrome. The sitting duck syndrome consisted of (1) severe symptoms and dysfunctional traits which frustrated therapy and led to regressive dependency; (2) individual psychodynamics that favored revictimization; (3) socialization to atypical object relations and family dynamics; and (4) the deformation of the observing ego and the debasement of cognition.

The current study enlarges the previous data base to 18 subjects with dissociative disorders who had endured both incest and sexual exploitation by prior therapists. It is preliminary in form, and admittedly utilizes a rather distressed group of individuals. Therefore its findings may not apply to all traumatized populations. However, this cohort is ideal for the exploration of the impact of extreme dissociative responses to trauma.

METHODS

I searched my files for the records of patients who had developed dissociative disorders in connection with incestuous experiences and had suffered sexual exploitation by at least one psychotherapist. All files in which the patient requested not to be included in any research or publications were excluded. With that exclusion criterion, thirty-one such patients were identified, and their records studied for evidences of connections between the phenomenology of their dissociative disorders and their subsequent revictimization. Twelve of these patients are part of a series reported elsewhere (Kluft, 1987, 1989, 1990), but the remaining 19 are among those who have been sect subsequently, many having being referred or having sought me out subsequent to my making presentations on the subject of therapist-patient sexual misadventure.

Of the 31 such patients, 13 had been seen in brief consultations and could not be studied in depth and at length. This left 18 patients who had been evaluated thoroughly and observed over a period of therapy. The definitions used in this study have been specified elsewhere (Kluft, 1990). The thrust of this study was clinical in nature, and decidedly preliminary in scope. The documentation of the phenomena in question consists of no more than the author’s clinical observations. Since I usually take verbatim notes early in therapy and periodically thereafter in order to monitor the flow of core conflictual relationship themes (CCRT) (Luborsky, 1984), these materials were available and served as valuable resources for appreciating the patients’ stated perceptions of their circumstances and relationships.

FINDINGS

The patients included 17 females and one male. They averaged approximately 33 years of age at first assessment. Seventeen were caucasian, one woman was black.

They reported sexualized situations with 32 therapists, or 1.8 per patient. Although half had had a single such event, the other half had more than one such experience (seven with two, and one each with three and six). Over three-fourths of these liaisons resulted in consummated intercourse. As reported elsewhere (Kluft, 1990), for the patients seen longest, confirmation of the patient’s allegations often proved possible, but there was no documentation for the six most recently seen patients. Eighty-two percent of the wont-
en had been raped as adults.

With regard to diagnosis, Table 1 conveys the data with regard to major Axis I diagnoses in this group. Seventy-eight percent fulfilled criteria for borderline personality disorder, but it is quite likely that the overlap of the diagnostic features of this condition with those of dissociative disorders and PTSD artificially inflated this category. This is an area that requires considerable additional research.

Table 2 recounts the types of dissociative disturbances of memory that were encountered in the study population. All subjects experienced amnesia both for periods of time and for certain aspects of periods that were otherwise recollected. In addition, all experienced what I have chosen to call source uncertainty (a construct borrowed from the work of Evans and Thorn [1966] on source amnesia). They would recount a remembered experience, and wonder how it had come to their minds—was it a dream, a fantasy, something that they had read, etc. This was encountered even in patients whose abuse allegations had been confirmed by ancillary sources. Object-coercive doubting was described in 1983 by Kramer. In essence, the patient retrieves a recollection or describes a feeling, and attempts to place the burden of its validation upon the therapist, allowing him/herself to maintain a detached and skeptical stance toward his/her own material, and to disavow its implications. In derealization, a recollection is present but not accorded validity. Instead it is considered ego-alien and doubted. Resequencing and omen formation, described by Terr (1979, 1983) occur when a traumatized individual does not recall an event as it occurred, but instead comes to feel that some later events occurred earlier than they actually did, and should have constituted omens of what was to occur. By self blame for riot having reacted appropriately to such warning’s to avoid harm, the individual retroactively takes responsibility for what befell him.

Table 3 indicates what percentage of patients’ memories of incest was dissociated at the onset of their current therapy. Since different incidents of incest and different aspects of the incest were dissociated differently, most patients had several patterns of dissociation. In brief, these individuals, by blocking out their incest histories or regarding them as unlikely to have been real, were unable to approach life experiences consciously in light of what had befell them. It is also worth noting that some patients had also blocked out their sexual exploitation by therapists. It would appear that these patients’ tendencies to disavow what had befell them impacts unfavorably upon their capacity to assess ongoing events.

It was characteristic of these patients that they experienced extreme difficulty in perceiving and reacting to danger signals appropriately. It was heartbreaking to find that many of those who had been raped had in their minds useful but inaccessible data that would have allowed them to perceive the circumstances under which they had been raped as dangerous, and appropriate to avoid. However, these data were dissociated along with the recollection of the incidents in the course of which they had been learned. This was most dramatically apparent, of course, with regard to the patients with classical MPD, in which one element of the mind would

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<td>Number and Percentage of Patients Meeting DSM-111-R Critical for Selected Axis I Disorders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression NOS</td>
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<td>Anxiety Disorder NOS</td>
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<td>Dissociative Disorder (Total)</td>
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<td>Post-traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
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<td>Psychoactive Substance Abuse</td>
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<th>TABLE 2</th>
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<td>Prevalence of Selected Dissociative Disorders of Memory in Eighteen Survivors of Incest and Therapist-Patient Sexual Exploitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychogenic Amnesia</td>
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<th>TABLE 3</th>
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<td>Patterns of Dissociation of Incest Experiences in Eighteen Patients who Also Suffered Therapist-Patient Sexual Exploitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychogenic Amnesia</td>
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<td>Derealization</td>
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<td>Resequencing; Omen Formation</td>
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The Presence of Cognitive Distortions in Eighteen Patients with Dissociative Disorders Who Suffered Both Incest and Therapist-Patient Sexual Exploitation

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<tr>
<th>Cognitive Distortion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Dichotomous Thinking</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<td>2. Selective Abstraction</td>
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<td>3. Arbitrary Inference</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Overgeneralization / Undergeneralization</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
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<td>5. Catastrophizing/Decatastrophizing</td>
<td>77%/100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Time Distortion</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<td>7. Distortion of Self Perception</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Excessive Responsibility; Irresponsibility</td>
<td>00%/50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Circular Thinking</td>
<td>77%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Assuming Causality</td>
<td>100%</td>
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It is difficult to characterize the cognitive lesions that follow in the wake of the use of dissociative defenses. Fine (1988, 1990) has inaugurated the fledgling study of these phenomena. Nonetheless, a tentative effort was made to do so after the model of Fine (1988) noted the presence of the cognitive distortions enumerated by Beck, Rush, Shaw, et al. (1979) in the CLR'T episodes identified in the patient's verbatim process notes. In brief, I made the assumption that the presence of such distortions in a patient's description of their object relations and interpersonal interactions might be indicative of the actions that the patients might take or fail to take in their dealings with others. Table 4 indicates the percentage of the patients who made the various types of cognitive distortions during the sessions for which there were verbatim notes. Observe that no effort was made to enumerate the relative frequency of such distortions. This was an unsystematic and preliminary effort, which could only hope to indicate if the types of distortions seen in depressives might also be seen in dissociators. The presence of co-existing depression argues against drawing any firm conclusions. It is my experience that the presence of the cognitive lesions described by Beck and his colleagues is not specific to depression but is more the thrust of the distortions that are more indicative of particular mental disorders. For example, a depressed person's cognitive distortions usually reveal a preoccupation with loss and negativity, while the patients in this series usually distorted along the themes of betrayal and anticipation of harm, or the negation of such concerns.

1. Dichotomous thinking is a response set in which there is a tendency to classify experiences into one of two extreme categories. Approximately 83% of the patients demonstrated this trait. Furthermore, they found it very difficult to move beyond such polarization. In the vast majority of these patients the perpetrator of the incest was subjected to defensive idealization, and data to the contrary were not entertained. Likewise, if a therapist had shown kindness, he or she was decreed to be good, and data to the contrary (such as sexual advances) often were rejected. This was most pronounced in patients with formal MPD.

2. Selective abstraction occurs when certain elements or characteristics of an event are taken out of context. Other salient features are not integrated into perceptions of the event. Therefore, meaning is derived from incomplete data. One hundred percent of the patients showed this tendency. Bereft of the full context of events, dissociating patients let the part stand for the whole, and often confabulate to obscure discrepancies. One result is that many of these patients give idealized histories that have relatively little connection with actual events. One patient, long before she recalled sexual involvement with her prior psychiatrist and...
he admitted as much to me, had given me a glowing endorse-
ment of his care of her during a long and difficult hospital-
ization. "Ile never gave up on me!" she exclaimed. With the
amnestic gaps removed, it became clear that he had repeatedly
violated her in her room, and, when she had protested, he
threatened to have her committed to a state hospital. His
"dedication" really was to the perverse activities in which he
persuaded the patient to participate.

3. Arbitrary inference involves the drawing of specific
conclusions without having evidence in support of them.
This was aers common finding (83%). It might be regarded
as the cognitive expression of confabulation. These patients
experienced a strong pressure to make their lives meaningful
and to render their sense of the world cohesive. Their efforts
were often quite data remote.

4. Over-generalization occurred when responses were
drawn from a restricted sample or non-existent data. These
patients routinely did so, perhaps to avoid dealing with the
uncertainty that would have to be faced if their limited
awareness of their lives was confronted. Legend general ization
was ubiquitous at times, when other cognitive distortions
apparently prevented the patients from drawing the appro-
piate conclusions from available information. It often was at the
core of episodes of profound helplessness, when available
information simply was not applied toward the resolution of
the problems at hand.

5. Catastrophizing and decatastrophizing occur when
dire consequences are inappropriately assumed to be im-
minent and, conversely, when important warnings are not
accorded appropriate weight. The presence of decatastro-
phization was universal. A common expression of this was an
incest victim's allowing his or her victimizer to baby sit for his
or her own children. In this series it was of note that
decatastrophizing usually was done vis-a-vis the perpetrators,
and catastrophizing with regard to dealings with others.

6. Time distortion in cognitive terms means that individu-
uals think they are in a different time and/or place and
behave accordingly. While this was universal in flashbacks, in
terms of its presence in interaction, it was ubiquitous in
patients with a formal MPD diagnosis, but seen only in one
other patient.

7. Distortion of self-perception was universal. It is part of
the MPD constellation, and all of the other patients reported
feeling at times like a little child and briefly acting accord-
ingly. They varied widely as to whether, at such times, their
cognitive functioning was affected. Many felt and acted as if
young, but clearly expressed themselves in a more mature
manner.

8. Excessive Responsibility/Irresponsibility are response
sets in which there are excessive self blame and guilt and,
conversely, their absence when such self-critical self=assess-
ment would he in order and might possibly mobilize more
adaptive behavior. The former was ubiquitous, the latter
noted almost exclusively in the cohort with formal MPD.

9. Circular thinking occurs when the premise for a con-
clusion becomes the conclusion and conclusion can
become the premise over and over. This was very common,
and associated most clearly with the patients with the most
severe histories of abuse.

10. Nils-assuming causality maintains a fallacious con-
nection between putative causes and events. It was universal
in this patient group, and usually followed in the pattern of
what abusers had said to the patient about why the patients
had been exploited. It was highly correlated with excessive
responsibility and circular thinking.

DISCUSSION

The individual who dissociates in the lace of difficulty is
spared the short-term dysfunctional confrontation of unpleasant
reality or is able to palliate an intolerable affective burden.
However, a review of time long-term consequences of disso-
ciative coping would appear to suggest that the exclusion of
subsets of material from conscious awareness sets the stage
for the development of faulty cognitions that, by failing to alert
the sufferer of possible dangers, facilitate subsequent revictimizat.ion. The patients in this study entered exploitive
relationships with therapists whose advances they usually
failed to assess appropriately. Without a solid appreciation of
their prior exploitation and its consequences, they were
prone to minimize and distort in myriad ways the full scenario
in which they had become involved. In Piaget's (1970)
forunulation, the growth of the human mind requires both
assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation means the
incorporation of new experiences into existing schemes and
structures. Accommodation occurs when the assimilated
structures are modified and changed to correct for the
differences between what is assimilated and what, is present
in reality. When info-1lation is not assimilated, the data
cannot be processed with existing mental structures, nor can
those structures be modified to reflect the impact of new
information. When information remains dissociated, a cohesive
and reality-based view of the world and an experimental
or "always learning" model of human experience is forfeited.
Reality may be distorted in the service of defensive processes.
To use the words of Cartten and Ricker (1989), persons who
have this problem remain in a decontextualized world. Their
minds adopt cognitive strategies that are not informed by all
of the data to which they have been exposed, their strategies
often replicate the dissociative defenses' exclusion of unset-
tling materials. It many cases, these patients' attitudes and
notions of their life histories represent confabulations in
which the gaps of excluded material are replaced or evaded with
rirroe pleasing versions of events and relationships.

By the dissociative obliterating or disconnecting of
knowledge that relates to his or her abuse, the incest victim
who copes in this manner remains able to maintain powerful
attachments to those who had abused him order. In addition,
he or she is likely to form affectionate ties with persons who
resemble the abuser(s), and to block out or minimize informa-
tion that might give reason for caution. By systematically
failing to process and respond appropriately to evidences
that could correct the initial faulty cognitions and assess-
ments, the incest victim whose dissociative defenses remain
robust is often condemned to repeat rather than to learn
from painful experiences. With the decontextualization of
significant materials and events, there is pressure to accom-
modate to a more palatable pseudo-reality, and to reconfig-
ure both perceptions and cognitions in that light. The use of
dissociative distortions of memory, from frank amnesia
through resequencing and object-coercive doubling, etc.,
leaves the incest victim without the accurate information
with which the world may be more accurately assessed.

The remarkable proclivity for incest victims with such
defenses to suffer further exploitation at the hands of un-
scrupulous therapists is evidence of their ongoing vulnera-
bility to danger. Small wonder that such individuals are likely
to interpret the warning signs that most of us would appreci-
ate as ominous and menacing as attracti e and reasonable.
Small wonder as well that the unscrupulous practitioner's
inappropriate advances and demands may be experienced
as a reasonable and even compelling invitation to comply
with a redefinition of reality that most of its would take
vigorous steps to avoid.

What can be said of the treatment of such individuals in
the light of these and other findings of asinillar nature (Fine,
Clearly cognitive lesions secondary to or associated with
dissociation are not the only problem facing the trauma
victim. Therefore, the observations made below should be
understood as referring to steps that might be considered in
the context of an overall therapeutic approach rather than
as overall therapeutic strategies.

In my work with such patients I have not been impressed
that such distortions ‘come out in the wash.” Although there
have been some exceptions, the majority of the patients in
this study and elsewhere to repeat their distorted ways of assessing
the world and to suffer the consequences thereof. I found
that it usually required direct efforts to challenge and modifi-
these patterns. The frequent, confrontation of the distortions,
the interpretation of the functions they serve, and the re-
construction of their origins is effective within the psycho-
analytic/psychodynamic paradigm. Formal cognitive therapy
is often of use, although the addition of some cognitive strategies
to an ongoing therapy of another sort appears
equally productive in most instances.

It is often helpful for the therapist to verbalize his or her
problem-solving efforts within the therapy (riot from his or
her personal life) in order to model an experimental and
data-oriented approach to the patient's difficulties. I find
that many such patients, accustomed to thought processes
that are circular and data-excluding, are impressed in a
constructive way by my forcing them to work with me on
collecting enough information to offer a reasonable answer
to questions and concerns. The therapist who has come to
value the distortions and story-telling techniques of the
Ericksonian movement within hypnosis must be particularly
careful lest these techniques further obfuscate the situation.

Hypnosis, despite its known potential for distortion and
the formation of pseudomemories, is the most valuable tool
for the accessing of segregated data banks and facilitating
their blending. It is often capable of effecting dramatic and
lasting resolutions of many of these debased cognitive styles.
A certain number of these patients can make substantial

- gains in groups that focus on their issues of concern, and

- teach as well as demonstrate the skills that they are trying to

acquire.

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