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Snags and self-sabotage

'Yes, but ...' and 'if only'

Snags seem to operate when part of us is saying 'I'd really like things to be better, but ...' Or when we say, 'Oh well, I could never have a life like that,' or gaze very enviously at others and say, 'It's all very well for them.' We may also start to reminisce, 'If only I'd been allowed to do, be, have ...' Part of us has the desire to lead a fuller life, to have better relationships, to feel freer about ourselves, to be more successful, to be more imaginative, but it's as if we have been found guilty and sentenced to a life of snag.

Part of us is saying 'if only ...' while the other part of us counters with 'but I couldn't ...' or 'I'm not allowed' or 'something bad would happen if I were to be happy'. It's as if we carry an eternal rebuke for being alive and well, as if we were responsible for bad things that happened early in our childhood. This is called 'magical guilt', for it is guilt for something we wouldn't possibly have taken responsibility for or feel guilty about, hence the word 'magical'. The 'magical guilt' we carry may be for things that happened in the past. It becomes fixed as if 'true' and seamlessly woven into our everyday repertoire without our questioning it. The things for which we have taken on magical guilt may be external, such as having a handicapped sister, or a depressed mother to whom we may, or may not, be able to express our frustration or be cross with. If not able, we turn our more aggressive feelings into ourselves, as if it is we who are responsible for the difficult painful or lost lives of those in our early family.

As you read through this section, remember that I am sitting opposite you in the therapist chair as a third person in your inner exploration and dialogue. I am the mitigating 'judge' you didn't have when you were small, standing in for the new reciprocal role relationship you are trying to develop in yourself that does not blame or envy but understands the forces that formed you and forgives the past where it has become embedded.

Family myths

Sometimes this sense of 'yes, but' comes from powerful people in our early lives: 'She was always such a good child,' 'He was such a clever boy,' 'She was

Dilemmas

How do you know when you do get what you want? I feel:

- bad afterwards
- selfish
- guilty
- greedy
- too big
- secretive
- joyous
- triumphant
- satisfied and happy

If you get what you want, do you feel:

- I will have to pay something back
- life or someone will get even with me sooner or later

What myths, sayings or 'old wives' tales' about being satisfied and getting what you want can you remember from your early life?

Where do they come from? Whose voice do you hear when you remember them?

If you don't get what you want, perhaps because of any of the above injunctions against it, do you feel:

- angry
- sad
- depressed
- punished
- despised
- vindicated (i.e. the old messages that say 'you can't' are right)
- spiteful
- envious of others who seem to get what they want
- childish and want to cry
- murderous
- ill

Do you recognise a pattern of illness after disappointment? Look to see if any of the above feelings could be hidden within the illness.

Identify as clearly as you can the areas in which you believe you should deny yourself satisfaction. Notice the feelings you experience when you go along with something that you actually don't want, but have not yet developed a way of saying 'no' to. Note in your diary or notebook the times when this occurs and the feelings involved. Experiment with asking exactly for what you want in a direct, clear way and see what happens. When you have isolated the mistaken belief behind this dilemma, challenge it as best you can in your everyday approach to life.

the one that kept the family together.' These can be very powerful myths and often prove difficult for us to challenge. We may be helpful and good and kind, but it may not be the sum total of who we are. We may also want to be fun, frivolous, exciting, naughty, cross and so on.

Another powerful injunction may come from the family myths themselves: 'People in our family never ... smoke cigarettes ... wear loud clothes ... shout a lot ... go into that kind of business ... marry outside their kind.' This means that hanging over us, imperceptibly (because we may not have realised it), is this idea that 'I'm not entitled to be anything other than what my family has made me'. Under this injunction we repress ways of expressing ourselves which don't fit in with what is expected. One woman said to me years ago that although she went through a very difficult patch in her marriage she never considered divorce, because no one in her family had ever been divorced. It was a completely alien concept.

Our attitude to work, friends, religion, health, ways of proceeding are governed by our early family and what the family accepts. Obviously all have an impact upon us. They may suit us well, but when we find that we are snagging ourselves as we've described above, we may need to look at our family's myths about us and what is 'expected'.

Families may also make judgements:

- people who think too much about themselves are self-indulgent
- people who don't have a proper religion and don't go to church don't have moral fibre
- our race never goes with white/black/oriental people
- don't let anyone see you when you're down, they'll only take advantage.

Start making a list of the myths in your own family, from the smaller concerns like dress and appearance to the more major questions of politics, religion and relationships.

It may also be that the snags in our life develop because important people close to us actually do not want us to change. This may not be obvious, but remain hidden within a relationship. Ask yourself if the 'yes, but' in your life is related to what you anticipate from others. Sometimes we think that if we were to improve ourselves, become more successful, happier or healthier the people around us might not know how to deal with it. They may oppose it, because they feel unable to cope with what our changing means to them.

An example of this might be when one person in a relationship begins to enjoy success, while the other – parent, husband or wife, for example – becomes ill or depressed. It's as if they can only thrive when the other person isn't feeling so good. Thus, we may have become unconsciously caught up in the life patterns of another. Our reciprocal roles may be *merging/special* in relation to *merged/safe*, and to separate them feels threatening and betraying. What maintains the relationship is interdependency, where one partner thrives because, and at the expense, of the other. It is as if there would not be enough 'wellness' or 'goodness' to go around for both people.

You may not be consciously aware of snags because they operate unconsciously. Having read this section and completed the questionnaire, allow the concept of

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being snagged to be part of your thoughts, so that if you are actually snagged you can become aware of it. Be aware of how often you think or say 'yes, but'.

Questionnaire: Snags

I recognise that I snag myself by saying 'Yes, but' or 'if only':

- every day
- in certain situations (name them)
- in certain relationships (name them)

I always feel that others are:

- luckier
- more successful
- happier
- more attractive
- better than I am

Name any past obstacles you feel have caused a snag and prevented you from being successful or happy:

- if it weren't for ... I would be ... now
- my parents never let me ...
- I never had the chance to ...
- if only I'd been allowed to ... I would be ... now
- other

Look at these snags honestly and ask yourself: have I contributed to making these events worse:

- by resentment, bitterness, anger, laziness?
- by using them as excuses for not taking up opportunities?
- by letting anger and resentment get in the way of trying for what I would really like?

How much do family myths about how to be and what is allowed live on and influence your choices, forming a snag? (For example: 'There's never been a divorce in our family'; 'We never wash our dirty linen in public' (i.e. talk about our feelings to others); 'No one from this family has ever gone on the stage'.)

Do snags operate because you believe that if you make your own free choice of how to be, someone important to you won't like it, or an important family value will be challenged? (For example: 'If I am assertive my marriage won't survive'; 'If I leave the job I hate and train to be a teacher my wife won't cope'.)

Self-sabotage

Other evidence of a snag operating is when we seem to arrange to avoid pleasure or success. Or, if we are successful and happy, we have to pay, either by depression or illness or our ability to spoil things. When success is within our grasp, we find we are not able to claim it. We may have achieved high marks in an exam, we may have got that important interview, we may have lost the weight we wanted, but we don't allow ourselves to fully have it – we miss the appointment, we immediately put the weight back on, we mess up the next paper of the exam – thus actually wiping out the good.

'Magical guilt'

Magical guilt can have a very powerful underlying effect on our lives. As we saw earlier it arises because in our families we felt more privileged than one of our siblings, or even one of our parents. We might be cleverer than them, or healthier. Magical guilt can also occur when a member of the family is ill or depressed or if someone dies when we are young. We may feel that this has something to do with us and it's our fault.

This is not a conscious thought, but a powerful undermining and unconscious process that can catch us like the undertow in an apparently smooth river. We then develop the unconscious, mistaken belief that 'I am strong at the expense of my brother or sister or my aunt, my grandmother, my mother or my father's weakness. I am healthy at the expense of their illness. I am well and fit and happy at the expense of their bad feelings and depression. I am not entitled to my good fortune or my good luck. My talent is at the expense of their misery.' 'If I am successful something bad will happen.'

Because we want to be attached to those early figures who are important to us, it's actually very difficult to manage all this when we are young. We unconsciously take on the burden of guilt, and live feeling (magically) guilty for our successes or happiness. Our only way to cope is to deny ourselves in some way, to deprive ourselves of our success – we may reach the point of claiming a lovely friendship, a good career, or a marvellous travelling experience, and we suddenly spoil it at the last minute. We either miss the boat, or we get ill or depressed or we do something quite extraordinary which prevents us taking it up.

Envy

It's hard to acknowledge feelings of envy or that others may envy us. Envious attacks feel threatening and disorientating. But envy is a natural part of life and there is room for awareness of feelings of both healthy envy as well as malignant envy that wants to destroy.

A snag may operate in our consciousness because we've experienced envy from one of our siblings or a parent for our perceived good fortune, good looks, strength, sense of fun, freedom, abilities and skills. This may not be obvious and few of us are comfortable about actually acknowledging this. If you cast your mind back you may recall comments like 'I don't expect you to be able to do

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things like that', or 'A great girl like you! I would have thought you'd do a better job', or 'Trust you to do the most difficult thing there is', or 'I suppose with your skills you can have anything you want'. Such remarks are said in a slightly hurt, slightly belligerent way by people whose favours we want to keep. We then begin a process of learning to hide the skills and gifts we have, of jeopardising them rather than risking the wrath and envy of those people whose love we crave.

It can be quite upsetting when we eventually realise how much we are snagging ourselves in our lives and acting as if we aren't allowed to take up our gifts and skills. It can be quite painful to think that this comes from being actively envied in our early lives. We can only free ourselves from this pattern by making all the instances and all the realisations conscious, and seeing them clearly. We can then actually stop the pattern of self-negation and snagging.

Sometimes this is a hard task, because if we have taken on the idea that we were not entitled to what is in fact ours, it's quite difficult to start to claim to have something. When we do begin to claim our lives for ourselves we wake the previously unconscious fear we will be rejected or punished. We will **feel** the heaviness of guilt and the conviction that something really bad will happen. And some of those old voices that made us feel bad about our gifts will come back from the past: 'You're completely selfish', or 'You're a ruthless man', or 'No one wants somebody like that', or 'You give no time to other people' – all the kinds of accusations that originated from envy and jealousy that was not named.

Questionnaire: Self-sabotage

Make a list now of the times and ways in which you feel you sabotage yourself.

I fear the response of others if I:

- do well
- look good
- win anything

I fear most the response from ... (name the person or persons).

Because of my fear of others' envy through their (a) disapproval, (b) withdrawal, (c) sharp words, (d) criticism, (e) saying, 'It's all very well for you ...', I play down what I know and what I can do

- all the time
- in certain situations (name them).

I feel I'm not entitled to:

- success
- nice things

- happiness
- love
- freedom
- a good job

I feel that if I get things others will be worse off and suffer. Who will? Where does this feeling come from?

If something good happens for me I feel:

- it's just luck
- I don't deserve it
- it won't last
- I could never create it for myself
- I could never keep it going

Once the way you are snagging or sabotaging yourself is clearer to you, you can see how important it is to free yourself from these old patterns. They are magical injunctions: *It's not true* that we are responsible for the depressed, miserable, negative, unhappy lives of those who have gone before us; and *it's not true* that we don't care. *We can care and feel compassion and also live our own life!*

It is possible to claim one's gifts without feeling guilty for them. As we embark on this journey we can only become wiser, more fulfilled and more comfortable in what we are doing, and able to summon up the energy needed. We also become able to inhabit a space where we can look back on what's happened, and particularly on how we've been caught up in these magical guilt processes of the past. We can free ourselves and other people from being involved in them. And of course we are facing these magical guilts from a different place, because we are that much older and the defences with which we had to protect ourselves from the harsh words or the harsh judgements of those around us are much less.

Realising how much we have snagged our lives or stopped ourselves being happy may be rather a depressing task at first. It's important to remember, however, that the way we coped was not stupid or bad, but the only way we were able to manage difficult feelings. But having recognised how this way of coping lives on and gets in the way, it's vital to understand that we don't have to keep on doing it.

By no longer 'snagging' we learn control and this also changes the way other people behave towards us. We learn to stand up to those who, because of their own difficulties, do not want us to change. Sometimes others do resist the changes that we want for ourselves, particularly those who are closest to us. They might say things like 'You're not as you were', or 'All this psychotherapy is making you too inward', or 'I don't like what it's doing to you', or 'I think it's dangerous'. It's important not to underestimate them. Something quite important happens when we stand up consistently for who we are, and this

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can transform our relationships with others. If we're firm about our right to change, those who care for us will usually accept it. If they cannot accept, however, then we often do have to make a painful choice. Once we have faced the ghost, the ghost is never so frightening again.

Having completed this section, name those people in your life who wish you well. Begin to allow yourself an equal freedom and to allow yourself to claim your own life freely.

8

Difficult and unstable states of mind

The emotional roller-coaster

We all recognise quite different states of mind at different times but sometimes the way we feel about ourselves can be very unstable. We may switch from one state of mind to a completely different one often without knowing why. Until this is pointed out to us we may not know it is happening, because when we are in some of the states the feelings are intense and all-consuming and we have no memory of the others. We will also not know how we got into such an intense state.

We saw in the earlier chapters that if we have internalised harsh reciprocal roles such as the neglectful abuser in relation to deprived victim our inner and outer world of relating will reflect this defensive pattern. It is in response to emotionally unmanageable experiences that we may develop patterns of cutting off, or dissociation. There are two forms of dissociation. One is cutting off from feeling and is often experienced as going blank/detached and unreal. The other is called structural dissociation, or fragmentation; this is the way we protect ourselves from unbearable and unmanageable feeling. The result is often a rather fragmented sense of ourselves, as if we were built out of lots of different but separate pieces. These pieces are described in CAT as **dissociated states**. The shifts between the states are often abrupt and confusing to oneself and to others. They may appear unprovoked but usually follow perceived repetitions of threats of abuse or abandonment or the failure to get the desired response from the other person. Stressful situations and also just remembering past abuses can also provoke state switches.

Some people describe switching from one state into another as being on an emotional roller-coaster. If you imagine the tramlines of a series of separate roller-coasters in a park, it's as if we swing up or down one tramline and then find ourselves right on the other side of the park on a different tramline, with no idea how we got there. All we know is that we end up feeling either confused or overwhelmed or intensely upset with things going wrong around us.

All of us can experience intense and split-off emotional states when we are under extreme stress or have been traumatised by an event. But some of us

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can identify always living as if on a series of mini roller-coasters. This may be illustrated in our outside life by lots of unconnected movements – many different jobs and relationships, never staying in one place for long or completing anything. Inside we may have volatile mood swings – extremes of idealised longing or reckless abandon and utter despair and self-harm. Each of the different states of mind is governed by a, usually harsh, reciprocal role internalised from early life. If our early care was experienced as neglectful, abusive or violent, our experience of ourselves will be fragmented and unstable. We may have internalised ways of relating that could be described as being powerfully neglecting, absent and unpredictable in relation to feeling powerless, fragmented and neglected. In adulthood it may have been too frightening for us to make relationships with other people and so our main search for safe attachments may be with objects or substances such as food, sex, drugs, overwork or alcohol. Or with groups or causes which give us a sense of containment and meaning without risk. Because we have not been able to internalise a sense of continual self – the ‘me’ that sees all the ‘me’s’ – our sense of ourselves remains fragmented, and our longing for real care is idealised. Whenever we try to seek connection and therefore risk intimacy, or of being safely close or loved by another, we tend to raise hope and expectation to impossible levels – as if this person, object or substance will save or transcend all our suffering.

Of course, no one person or substance can do this and so we are continually plunged once again into feeling neglected, abandoned, abused, and the violence we have internalised will be directed both at ‘other’ and toward ourselves. Impossible idealised hope is raised only to be dashed over and over again.

When we are on an emotional roller-coaster our different states of mind are accompanied by intense, extreme and uncontrollable emotions such as feeling intensely guilty or angry with oneself or being unreasonably angry or hurtful to others. In some states we may feel intensely angry towards ourselves, wanting to hurt ourselves, and sometimes this intensity can be projected out toward others, wanting to harm them. We may sometimes find that we feel blank or unreal, feeling muddled and confused. Sometimes the only way to cope with confusing feelings or ‘forbidden’ anger is to blank off and feel emotionally distant. Quite often there are headaches or other physical symptoms.

If you find yourself identifying with the description of different state switches, our first shared task is to notice them. That is all at first. Then we will find creative ways to describe them. Then we will make a map of them. In this simple process we are already creating a witnessing ‘other’ inside us. This is the beginning of a new and helpful reciprocal role that could be described as *helpfully witnessing and caring to being seen and cared for*. This new self state we will be building over the next few pages has our general co-ordination at heart and wants to help find a way for all the parts of us to live together consciously.

To help this process, on page 125 is a list of descriptions of states, some of which might apply to you. The list is only a beginning. It's good if you can add your own from your experience of just noticing what happens to your mood through one day and finding words to describe it.

DIFFERENT STATES. Everybody experiences changes in how they feel about themselves and the world. Sometimes these are extreme, sudden and confusing. Learning to recognise them, and the shifts between them can be very helpful. Identify any of the above by putting a ring around the item and deleting or adding words. If any state you have circled leads on to another, join them with a line.

zombie – cut off from feelings or from others, disconnected	feeling bad but soldiering on, coping	raging and out of control	extra special – looking down on others, unrecognised genius	control freak – in control of self, of life, of other people	cheated by life, by others, untrusting	hiding secret shame
provoking, teasing, seducing, winding-up others	clinging, frantic, fearing abandonment	frenetically active, too busy to think or feel	agitated, confused, anxious, panicking, desperate	feeling perfectly cared for, blissfully close to another	misunderstood, rejected, abandoned, desolate	hurt, humiliated, defeated, always in the wrong
contemptuously dismissive of myself, worthless	vulnerable, needy, passively helpless, waiting for rescue	envious, wanting to harm others, put them down, knock them down	protective, respecting myself, respecting others	hurting myself, hurting others, causing harm or damage	resentfully submitting to demands, a slave, under the thumb	frightened of angry others
secure in myself, able to be close to others	intensely critical of myself, and of others	cheating others, cheating the system, lying, hiding the truth	feeling hopeless, no one can help, life is pointless, suicidal	spaced out – distanced from others, as if acting a part, double-glazed	flying away, running away, escaping	overwhelmed by grief and loss
seeking revenge, stalking, harassing, murderous	knight in shining armour rescuing others, righting wrongs	as if poisoned or contaminated	like an unexploded bomb	watchful, suspicious, jealous, paranoid		

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exercise

Get some index cards or bits of paper and choose five of the states you most identify with (from the list or ones of your own) and use one card for each state. Carry them around with you for a few days and when you recognise you are in one of these mind states take out the card or bit of paper with the description on it and write what is happening, what you are feeling and thinking or sensing in your body. Every time you notice a mood or state switch, write something on the card that best describes it, such as 'blanked-off zombie', 'got-at victim', 'raging monster', 'useless bitch'. If you can, record what provoked it.

Over time see if you can add other words that describe this state of mind. Perhaps: furious, confused, upset, lost, afraid. There may also be colours, pictures or images. Sometimes when we do this actual memories arise of earlier times when you felt this way. Don't be alarmed. Just record them in your notebook and return to them when you are ready.

Any time you find yourself becoming overwhelmed, turn to the exercises in the Appendices which are designed to help you maintain stability whilst you do this work. The Grounding Exercise and Mindfulness of Breathing are two good ones to practise in a short time. When you have got your breath back and your heart rate is steady, return to your task. Be the best observer of all the different states and their content that you can. You are doing important work of becoming a co-ordinator.

The next step is to see if you can recognise the reciprocal role within the state itself. For example: if you are wanting to hurt yourself whilst feeling hurt and humiliated you may recognise the reciprocal role of *violently rejecting/dismissing* in relation to *abused/rejected/crushed*. If you recognise craving, wanting to be lost in bliss, you might describe a *perfectly admiring* in relation to *specialty held* reciprocal role.

In the rage and hate of 'monster' you might find *belittling/punishing* toward others or yourself in relation to *punished/humiliated/shamed*. The reciprocal role of *judging/blaming* in relation to *blamed/put down* may have kept your natural anger repressed and feared as 'monstrous', leaving you unable ever to express natural anger and only either turn it on yourself as self-harm or threaten others in distorted ways.

The diagram from GRAHAM, who had a long history of drug abuse and self-harm, illustrates the internalised reciprocal roles at the beginning of therapy and, in bold lettering (which represents red used by Graham in his diagram), the new roles he learned to develop through self-observation and reflection. As his self-observation grew, he started to feel more in charge of the different states and their sudden switches. The pull of the dissociated

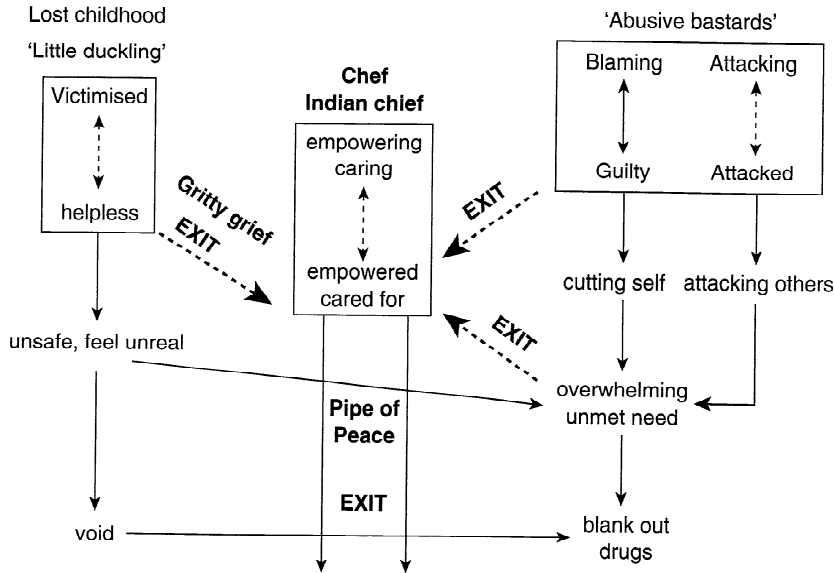


Figure 8.1 Graham's diagram

states felt less extreme. There were fewer episodes of blanking off and feeling unreal and fewer episodes of cutting himself. In their place there came lots of very painful and difficult feeling. He called this 'gritty grief' – a mixture of longing, despair, rage, loss of innocence and hope for good things. He wanted to kick out at the helpless little ducklings in the park in spring, squeaking and following their mother. He longed to cry 'a normal bucketful' for his own helpless little duckling but was too scared at being overwhelmed. He wrote about his lost childhood spent in numerous foster homes.

In the centre of his diagram in bold type is an Indian 'Chief'. This figure, an image representing a new self-state, is made up of one of the few good figures in his life, an institutional chef who once befriended him and taught him snooker, and an Indian Chief in full head dress who appeared to him in a dream. In the dream, toward the end of therapy, the 'Chief' showed him how to ride through a herd of buffalo. He understood this as an indication that he could learn to ride amongst his roller-coaster states with greater consciousness and also be in charge. This was the beginning of the creation of his 'healthy island'.

The energy of this dream figure also allowed us to talk of different 'pipes of peace' from the crack cocaine that had long been his habit. At follow-up he was finding some benefits from meditation and had joined a group that met weekly.

