



Cyberself Therapist: Bright Career Prospects

by the Sentinel-Observer Business Pages Staff

Formal title: cyberself therapist or psychologist

Educational background: M.S. or Ph. D. in psychology

Salary range: \$40-120K

Cyberself therapists (also known as cyberself psychologists or cybershrinks) are increasing in number every day, but there is no accepted definition for cyberself psychology. Recently, the American Association of Cyberself Psychologists was organized, and their first conference, to be held in Atlantic City this July, is expected to yield at least a tentative consensus on the nature of this new field.

At present cyberself psychology is seen as the study of the phenomenon of the cyberself. Cyberselves refer to the identities that people assume when they project themselves into cyberspace. While people assumed various cyberselves before the advent of self-projection technology, this phenomenon has become much more significant now that people can take definite forms and shapes in cyberspace.

The need for cyberself therapists arises because people are getting into various kinds of difficulties with their cyberselves. This article will describe some of those difficulties and it is hoped that this will help the reader to understand the both nature of the work of the cyberself therapist and the potential for the rapid growth and development of this new field. Even in the absence of a standard definition for cyberself psychology, people are getting into trouble, and the demand for cyberself therapy services is expected to increase dramatically. The incomes for cyberself therapists, which now start at a meager \$40K, are expected to increase rapidly during the next five to ten years. Even in today's market, where just about anyone can hang up a shingle in cyberspace claiming to be a cyberself therapist, the leading cyberself therapists, especially those with advanced degrees in psychology, can earn well over \$100K.

There are a lot of charlatans out there. In writing this report, we interviewed several of the cyberself therapists who played a significant role in creating the American Association of Cyberself Psychologists. These individuals, most of whom have advanced degrees in psychology, will probably have a great influence on the evolution of cyberself therapy as a career. In our interviews with several key members of the AACP Conference steering committee, we found a wide diversity of opinions about the nature of cyberself psychology.

Dr. Anita Tower, president-elect of the AACP, is a professor of psychology at Rice University in Houston, Texas. She characterizes the nature of cyberself psychology as follows: "We now have a situation in which people are losing touch with their authentic selves, projecting one, and usually more, cyberselves, as a form of entertainment and stimulation. In my clinical work, I am seeing many patients who spend almost all of their free time projecting into cyberspace as one cyberself or another. My patients invariably become addicted to these cyberselves and, consequently, they find it more and more difficult to function as real human beings in the real world. So, I would say that cyberself psychology is fundamentally about the relationship between the cyberselves and the real self, and the damage that cyberselves can inflict upon the real self."

A completely contrary assessment comes from Dr. Raul Natchez, professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Natchez is vice-president-elect for the AACP. He belongs to the school that believes that the development of one or more cyberselves can contribute to one's overall mental health. "I think that we are just beginning to appreciate the liberating and healing

properties of the cyberself. My book, *Nurturing the Healthy Cyberself*, teaches people how to use self-projection technology to explore their shadow, those aspects of themselves that might otherwise remain in the darkness." In many ways the opposing perspectives of Drs. Tower and Natchez summarize the basic schism among cyberself psychologists, between those who believe that self-projection technology is harmful and those who believe that it is potentially liberating and beneficial.

Dr. Tower discussed some of her clinical cases with a team of reporters from the Sentinel-Observer. She mentioned several cases in which a process called "transitioning" occurred. In transitioning, an individual assumes the identity of one of his cyberselves, abandoning his usual identity and personality. Transitioning is sudden and involves a complete change in personality. "It is almost like demonic possession," Dr. Tower explained. "The patient spends weeks, probably months, developing a vivid cyberself. Then, suddenly, without warning, that cyberself 'possesses' the real self, taking over that person's identity. The result is always disruptive and sometimes tragic, because the cyberself is often socially unacceptable, even violent. Consequently, many patients who experience transitioning need to be committed to a mental institution." "Transitioning is going to be the most talked about mental health problem in the 2030s," Dr. Tower added. "Transitioning is tragic and potentially epidemic."

Dr. Tower mentioned one case in which a staid housewife and mother of three small children, whom she called Mary, developed a cyberself that was into violent virtual sex and various forms of cyber pornography. She developed this

cyberself over several months and she began to spend more and more time in cyberspace projecting as this licentious cyberself. Suddenly, last summer, her normal personality transitioned into this cyberspace personality, that she called "Linda". In front of her children and with her husband looking on in disbelief, she stripped naked and performed an obscene erotic dance. She needed to be institutionalized. "There are now thousands of cases of 'transitioning' on record in this country and overseas," Dr. Tower explained. "Transitioning is just the most vivid psychological difficulty that is associated with self-projection technology, but it is likely to become a serious problem. Many of my colleagues believe that this will become a full-blown epidemic, a situation that could have serious consequences for our civilization. People are not aware that there are dangers involved in deciding to live out one's fantasies in cyberspace. People cannot dissociate their everyday personalities from their cyberselves that easily." Dr. Natchez admitted that transitioning was becoming a serious psychological problem. But, according to Dr. Natchez this disorder results from a lack of understanding concerning the proper way to develop, nurture, and manage diverse cyberselves.

"In the case of the patient that Dr. Tower called 'Mary', I would say that Mary had this other personality within her, as part of her undeveloped self, her shadow," Dr. Natchez said. "Mary was so repressed in her sexuality, that once that shadow personality emerged, she could not accept it as part of herself, yet she had this attraction for that shadow personality. Because of this split, she essentially became schizophrenic. And this is the danger in cyberself psychology, that cyberselves that are not accepted as an aspect of the self can split off and run out of control." According to Dr. Natchez, cyberself psychology should focus on the shadow personalities and how one can come to a peaceful reconciliation with them. "With the proper understanding and awareness, one can develop cyberselves in the service of the ego, and when this happens, transitioning will not happen. The key element is one of acceptance."

Indeed, according to Dr. Natchez, the development of shadow personalities in cyberspace with understanding, awareness, and acceptance is an effective path for spiritual growth and psychological integration. "I conduct workshops around the country where I help people to contact their shadow selves," Dr. Natchez said. "I help them to develop

cyberselves that express these undeveloped aspects of their personalities. I help them to accept these shadow selves, if they are disturbing to the ego. Eventually, these cyberselves become instruments for the enlightenment and progress of the person's true personality. It yields a personality that is more accepting and loving, a personality that is willing to explore, to experiment, and to experience life more fully." Dr. Natchez arranged for us to interview one of his patients, Harry Planck, via televue. Mr. Planck described how he carefully nurtured three distinct cyberselves, under the guidance of Dr. Natchez and his associates, for the express purpose of achieving self-understanding and self-acceptance.

"When I was a child, I always wanted to have things my way," Mr. Planck said. "I lusted for power and control, but in the dynamics of the family, I was the low man on the totem pole. My parents and my four older siblings made me feel guilty whenever I wanted to have things my own way, which I rarely did. So, I became a complacent, but frustrated, individual who was eager to please everybody. All the while, I suppressed my desire for power, and it became part of my shadow, a repressed part of myself that expressed itself in unfortunate ways."

When Mr. Planck was asked to explain how his repressed self expressed itself, he said that it expressed itself not only in neuroses, but more tellingly, in unhappy and unfortunate life circumstances, mostly negative events that seemed like mere accidents, "Now, I realize that those events were not mere accidents. I did those things to myself because I had split myself off from important aspects of who I am."

Mr. Planck then went on to explain how he got in touch with this shadow self using cyberspace. "Dr. Natchez encouraged me to develop a cyberself that could express and realize its desire for power. We did this using true cyberspace, but we also used virtual reality to help me to become more assertive. The cyberself that I developed was obnoxious, aggressive, and over-bearing, the sum total of everything I had repressed during my childhood. Dr. Planck created a bunch of non-entities that I could dominate completely. I became like a dictator, bossing them around with ruthless abandon. In addition, I found some actual people in cyberspace who wanted to be bossed around, so I could fulfill my fantasies concerning power and domination by ordering them to do this or that. Over the course of nearly six months, several things happened. First, I experi-

enced extreme discomfort when this obnoxious personality emerged, but then, I realized that it was a part of my self that had never been expressed properly. Eventually, after my lust for power had been satisfied somewhat, I came to see that what my cyberself yearned for was not real after all, but I needed to experience this truth in cyberspace. A purely intellectual understanding would not have been enough. Seeing and experiencing all of these things with respect to this one shadow self, helped me to change my personality. I became both more assertive and more open to other people. The transformation in my personality was nothing short of miraculous." Mr. Planck then recounted several other of his cyber identities, and how the development of these identities in cyberspace helped him to reach a higher level of integration and awareness.

Dr. Tower is not opposed to Dr. Natchez's work. She admits that it has enormous potential for helping people to understand who they are. She did, however, voice the following reservations: "The problem is that transitioning and other mental health problems are being caused by cyberselves. This is a documented fact. These problems are increasing. Only a few people have benefited from Dr. Natchez's approach. It is somewhat esoteric. The much larger reality is that people are either losing themselves in cyberspace, barely able to function in the real world, while others are transitioning, which is a mental condition that is closely related to schizophrenia."

Dr. Tower and Dr. Natchez represent two influential voices in a new and growing field. Despite the enthusiasm that Dr. Natchez expresses for the use of cyberspace for therapeutic purposes, there is growing evidence that more and more people are getting into trouble with the cyberselves that they are projecting.

Dr. Aaron Mann, a cyberself therapist here in Silicon Valley, is cataloguing a host of ailments that he has observed in patients that result from their inability to handle their cyberselves effectively. "One problem we see," Dr. Mann explained, "is a new form of depression that results from the conviction that more and more people seem to have that ordinary reality is boring as compared to cyberspace. We see people who develop exciting cyberselves and then come to see their actual lives as empty and boring. When they are not in cyberspace, when they are confronted with the prospect of actually going to work, for example, they fall into a depressed state.

They find it difficult to garner much enthusiasm for the hum-drum activities of ordinary life. That's a phrase that I hear a lot: 'I cannot stand ordinary life. It's so boring.'" Dr. Mann also described patients who developed an intense self-loathing because their real selves do not measure up to their cyberselves. "These patients project various forms of perfection, and then, seeing their own imperfections, become deeply depressed. They came to hate who they are because their cyberselves are perceived as being so much better." Dr. Mann seemed eager to share his observations with the Sentinel-Observer. "Another problem is that people become attached to their cyberselves, in the same way that a person might become attached to anything else in this world, like one's family, or even one's own identity. Some people become as attached to their cyberself as to their actual self. Consequently, they become subject to all sorts of disorders, including phobias, anxiety, and paranoia. For example, I had one patient who was fairly normal in real life, but he developed an intense paranoia that related to his cyberself. He was sure that someone out there in cyberspace was plotting to kill his cyberself, and this caused him to have tremendous anxiety attacks. Other people suffer from insomnia because they worry so much about how their cyberself is fairing, as if it were a real self, with real problems. These psychological problems are just beginning to emerge. After all, this is a fairly new technology." Dr. Mann also described patients who practiced hideous and grotesque crimes in cyberspace or in virtual reality, and then actually committed those crimes in reality.

Dr. Mann criticized Dr. Natchez's book and his research on the grounds that the shadow aspects of the self, an acceptance of which could be helpful in terms of achieving psychological integration, are quite accessible without going through all the effort and risk of developing a cyberself.

Dr. Mann commented that cyberspace was an enormous business, a growing part of the global economy. "Just as the tobacco industry had a difficult time coming to terms with the dangers inherent in tobacco, so the cyberspace industry is not likely to admit that there are dangers inherent in cyberspace. Since self-projection technology was introduced just a few years ago, I do not think that we have seen even the tip of the iceberg in terms of the psychological damage that is being done." It seems clear that cyberself psychology is going to become a significant field in the years ahead. Our team of reporters came to the conclusion that Dr. Natchez's approach may not become the dominant way of looking at cyberselves and cyberspace. Most of the work for cyberself psychologists in the years ahead is likely to relate to treating the kinds of psychological problems that Drs. Tower and Mann mentioned. It is clear that the new field of cyberself psychology must develop a description of how alternate cyberselves can be nurtured and developed without harming the real self. There is a need to develop a concept of what constitutes a healthy cyberself. Otherwise, the kinds of psychological ailments discussed in this article are likely to become more prevalent. If transitioning does become epidemic, as Dr. Tower suggests, then the social consequences could indeed be catastrophic. ♦

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