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ANXIOUS IN LOVE:

5 Keys to Treating Couples when One Partner Has Anxiety

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Conflict of Interest Statement

- We will not discuss off label use and/or investigational use of drugs or procedures in my presentations.
- We have written books related to this presentation.
- Carolyn Daitch has recorded audio CDs related to this presentation.

Prevalence of Anxiety

- Anxiety disorders comprise one of the most common categories of psychiatric disorders present in the population today.

(Kessler et al., 2005; Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005)

Anxiety Doesn't Exist in a Vacuum....

- ▣ Research indicates a **link between anxiety and marital distress**, with anxious individuals reporting greater marital conflict and lower levels of marital satisfaction.

(McLeod, 1994; Whisman, 2007; Whisman, Sheldon, & Goering, 2000)

- People with GAD are more likely to divorce
- People with GAD report low relationship quality with their partners compared to those with other psychiatric diagnoses

(Whittchen, Zhao, Kessler, & Eaton 1994)

Anxiety's Impact on Relationships

- People with GAD are two times more likely to have at least one relationship problem than those without anxiety.
- In a recent survey, 70% of respondents indicated that their anxiety had a negative effect on their relationship with their spouse or significant other.

Overview

- Look at anxiety's impact on the experience of attuned connection between partners
- Identify the anxiety-based barriers to attuned connection and how to repair these ruptures
- Examine the over dependent bonds that result when anxiety disorders take center-stage in a relationship
- Learn 5 keys to potentiate treatment

Goals

- ▣ Increased empathy
- ▣ Attuned connection
- ▣ De-escalation of conflict
- ▣ Healthy interdependence

Obstacles

Affect dysregulation
and the *reactive communication*
and
over-dependent bonds
that result

Obstacles

- Re-opening of old wounds that occurs in painful interactions
- Reactivity to the partner when this occurs

How The 5 Keys Can Help

- Interrupts the destructive, automatic psychobiological reactions
- Enhances self-regulation, thereby diminishing escalation of conflict
- Increases sufficient safety; facilitates ownership of one's part without shame or defensiveness

How The 5 Keys Can Help

Relaxation response → internal safety

- Facilitates ownership of one's part of the conflict without defensiveness or shame

How The 5 Keys Can Help

Enhanced control →

- De-escalation of conflicts in relationships
- Allows people to become deliberate in their actions and gain control of their emotionality

How The 5 Keys Can Help

Facilitate shift from over-dependent to interdependent bonds

The Harm of Conflict

It is not the conflict itself that has a destructive effect on relationships, but rather the:

1. loss of connection and attunement
2. inability to resolve the conflict with positive affect (& re-establish attunement) that is injurious

The Harm of Affect Dysregulation

- When partners are unable to modulate their emotions (i.e. regulate their affect), loss of connection and inability to resolve conflict with positive affect occurs.

Conflict and Affect Dysregulation

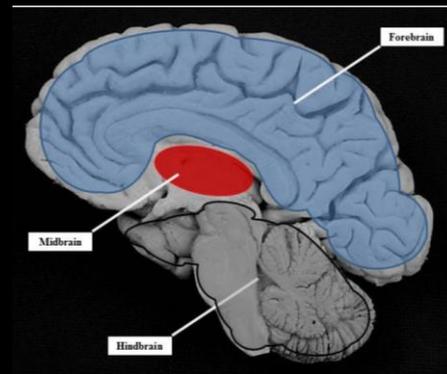
→ Flooding:



- When clients' systems become flooded, cognitive systems shut down
- 'Flooding' results from a stress response

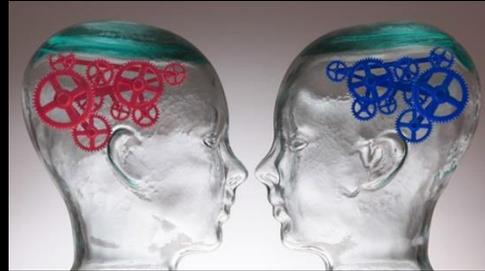
Flooding & Attunement

- When flooding occurs, the brain is incapable of experiencing attuned connection.



- The **midbrain** becomes hyperactive, and does not maintain the communication with the **forebrain** that is necessary for attunement to occur.

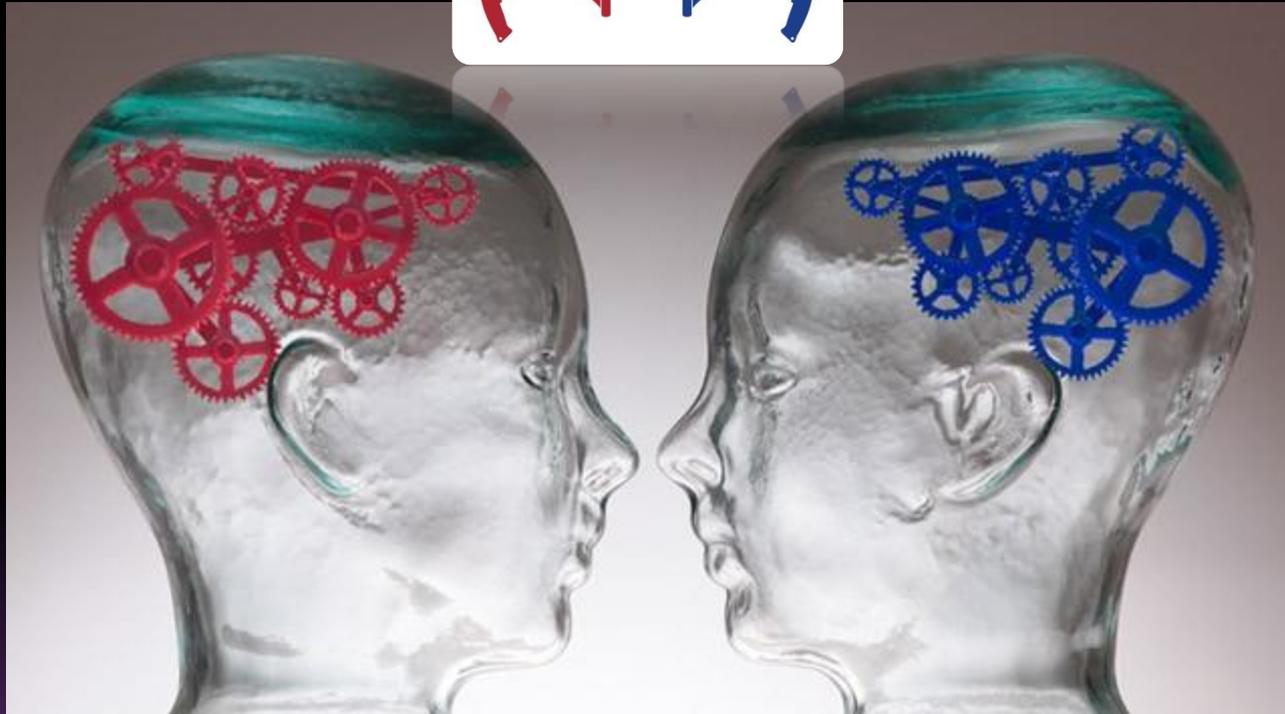
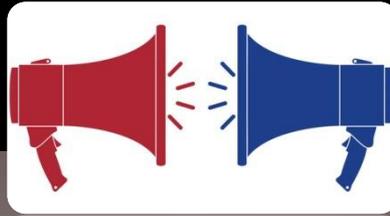
Exercise: Colors of Logic & Emotion



Goals:

- Enhance your understanding of brain-based communication barriers
- Understand yourself and your partner without judgment but, instead, with openness, kindness, curiosity, and even receptivity
- Honor and even appreciate your differences
- Allow connection to emerge from the disconnect

Exercise: Colors of Logic & Emotion



Reactions vs. Intentional Responses

▣ *Reactions:*

- rash, intense responses to your partner
- **affect dysregulation** dictates actions and words

▣ *Intentional responses:*

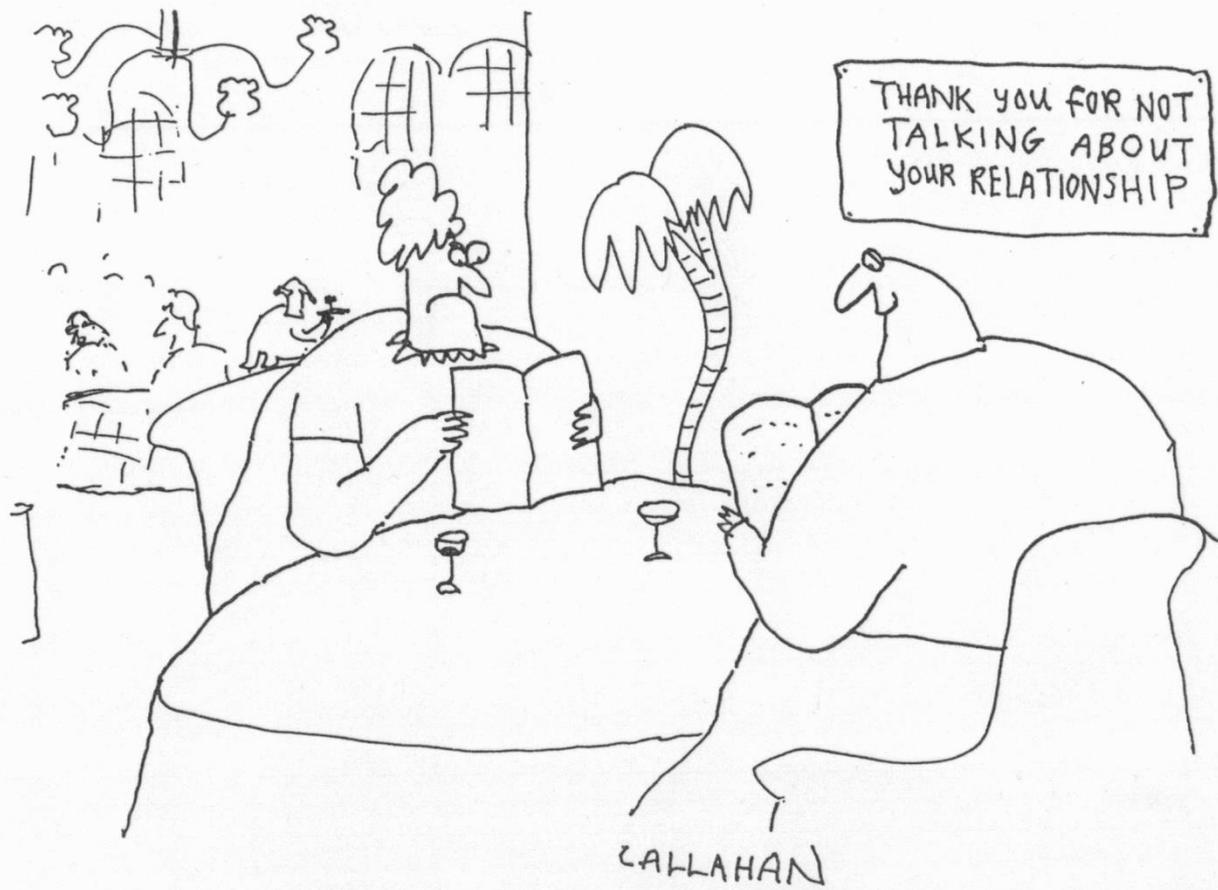
- not governed by a tidal wave of unrestrained emotion
- both the emotional and cognitive systems are online and communicating fluently with one another
- *emotionally grounded and neurologically balanced state*

The Benefits of Intentionally Responding vs. Reacting

- Interpersonal communication can flow freely
- Attunement can be felt

The Fallout of Reaction-based Communication

- Anger, frustration, disappointment, and sadness (to name a few emotions) escalate
- Emotional flooding occurs for both partners (but the flooding is not just anxiety-based)



The Forms of Reaction-based Communication

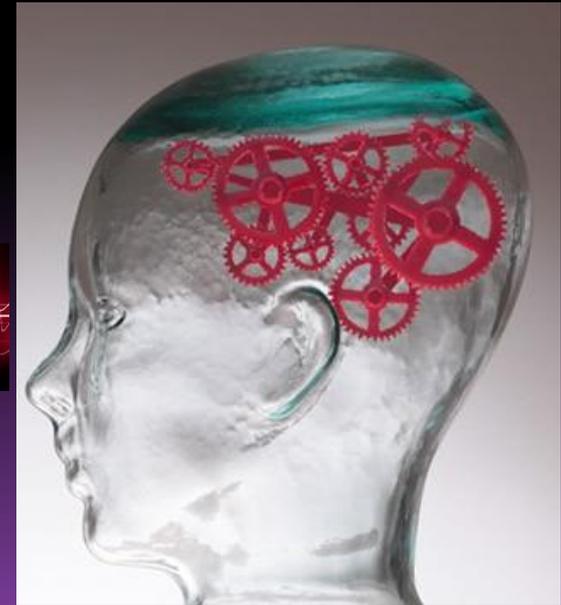
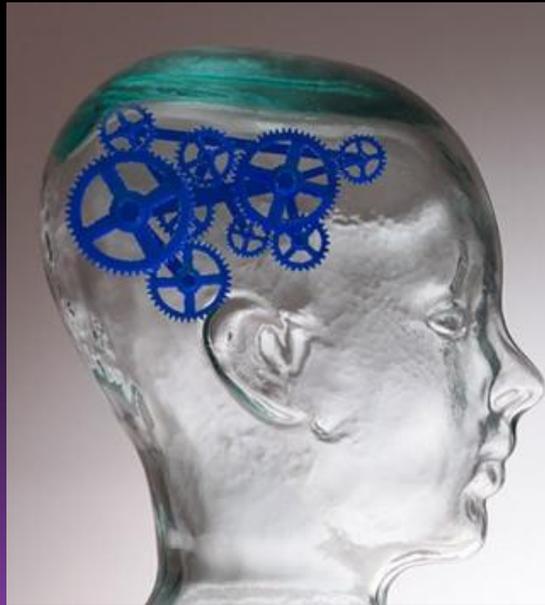
Partners' reactions typically take one or *some combination* of three modes:

- *the appeal*
- *the attack*
- *the retreat*

The Appeal

Speaking the language of reason

- The non-anxious partner attempts to connect and problem solve by offering a rational analysis of the situation



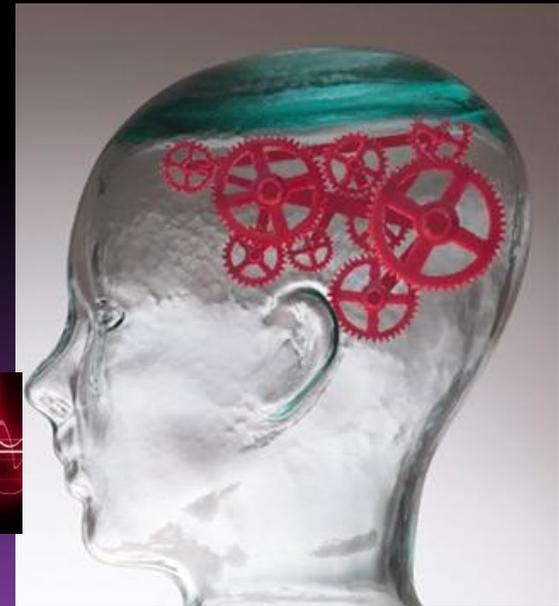
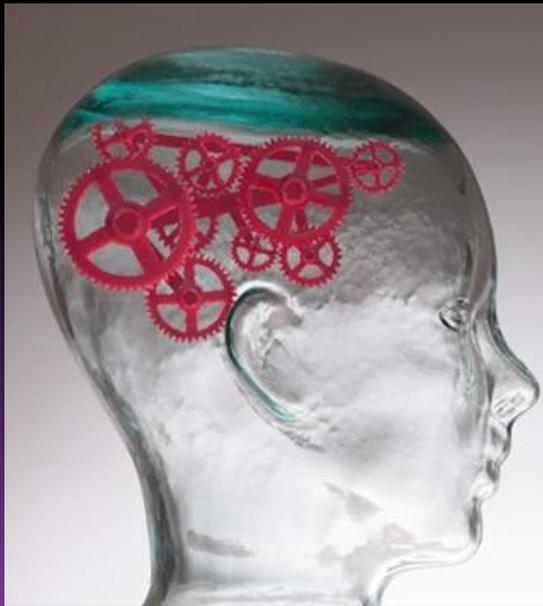
The Attack

Reacting emotionally

Failed attempts to calm anxiety with reason



anger, disappointment, frustration, rage



The Attack

The fallout:

▣ For the anxious partner:

- Continuing to feel misunderstood & unmet
- Feeling belittled, judged, or criticized for struggling with anxiety & failing to get it under control

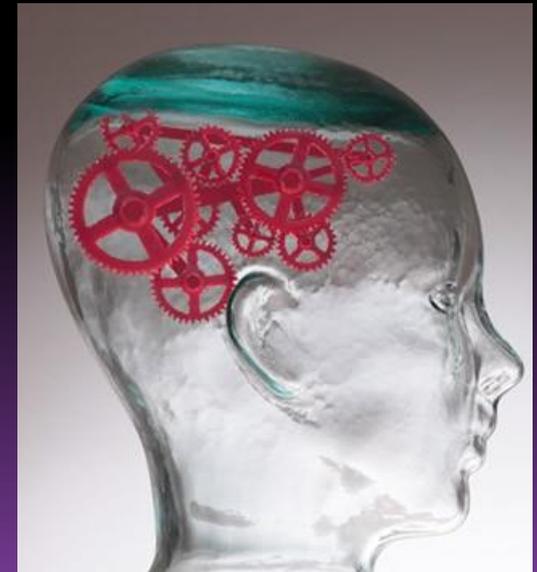
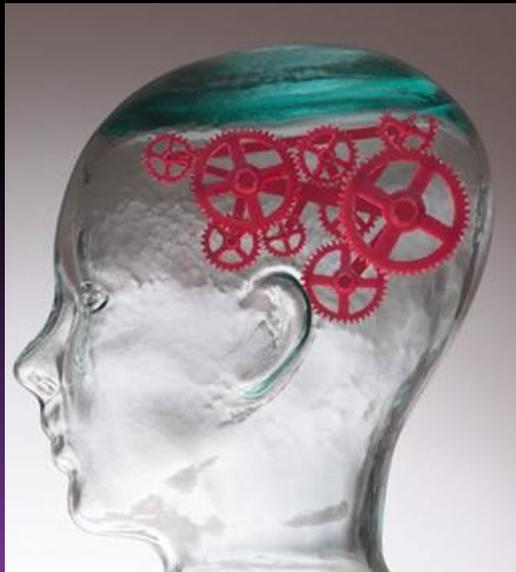
▣ For both partners:

- Increased sense of isolation and hurt

The Retreat

Sensing defeat & seeking isolation

- marked by a *lack* of interaction.
- the isolation and loss of connection experienced by both partners can be just as devastating as the more active conflict of the attack.



Faulty Expectations

- The expectation that the non-anxious partner could and should talk the anxious partner down gets relationships in hot water
- Deprives the anxious partner of the opportunity to develop self-soothing and self-validation skills, and to realize one's own strengths and abilities

Faulty Expectations

- Sets the couple up to endlessly enact various combinations of the attack, the appeal, & the retreat
- Places responsibility for de-escalation of anxiety on the non-anxious partner (*when this is beyond the non-anxious partner's control*)
- Creates and maintains an *over dependent bond*

Over-dependent Bonds & the Continuum of Dependency

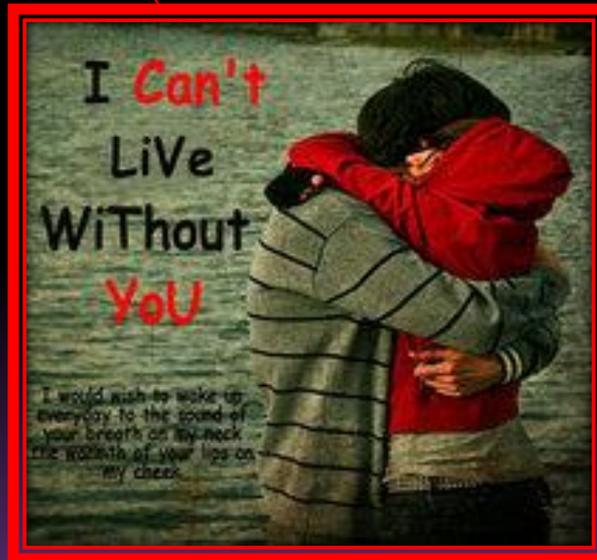
Continuum of Dependency



Overdependence

Healthy
Interdependence

Extreme
Independence



The Typical State of the Union in Anxious Relationships:

Overdependence

- Reliance on the partner's emotional support rather than internal resources to regulate anxiety →
- Making the partner, rather than self, responsible for one's emotional well-being.

Overdependence in Anxious Relationships

- ▣ Rigid roles: one partner is “the rock,” the other is more needy
 - Unidirectional emotional support replaces bidirectional emotional intimacy
 - Emotional climate of withholding information in order to “protect” or not trigger anxious partner

→ *True emotional intimacy does not exist*

Overdependence in Anxious Relationships

- Anxiety dictates division of responsibilities
 - Ex: panic disorder → non-anxious partner grocery shops
 - Ex: needle phobia → non-anxious partner takes the kids to doctor appointments
 - Ex: OCD → non-anxious partner earns majority of income because workplace environment is too triggering for anxious partner

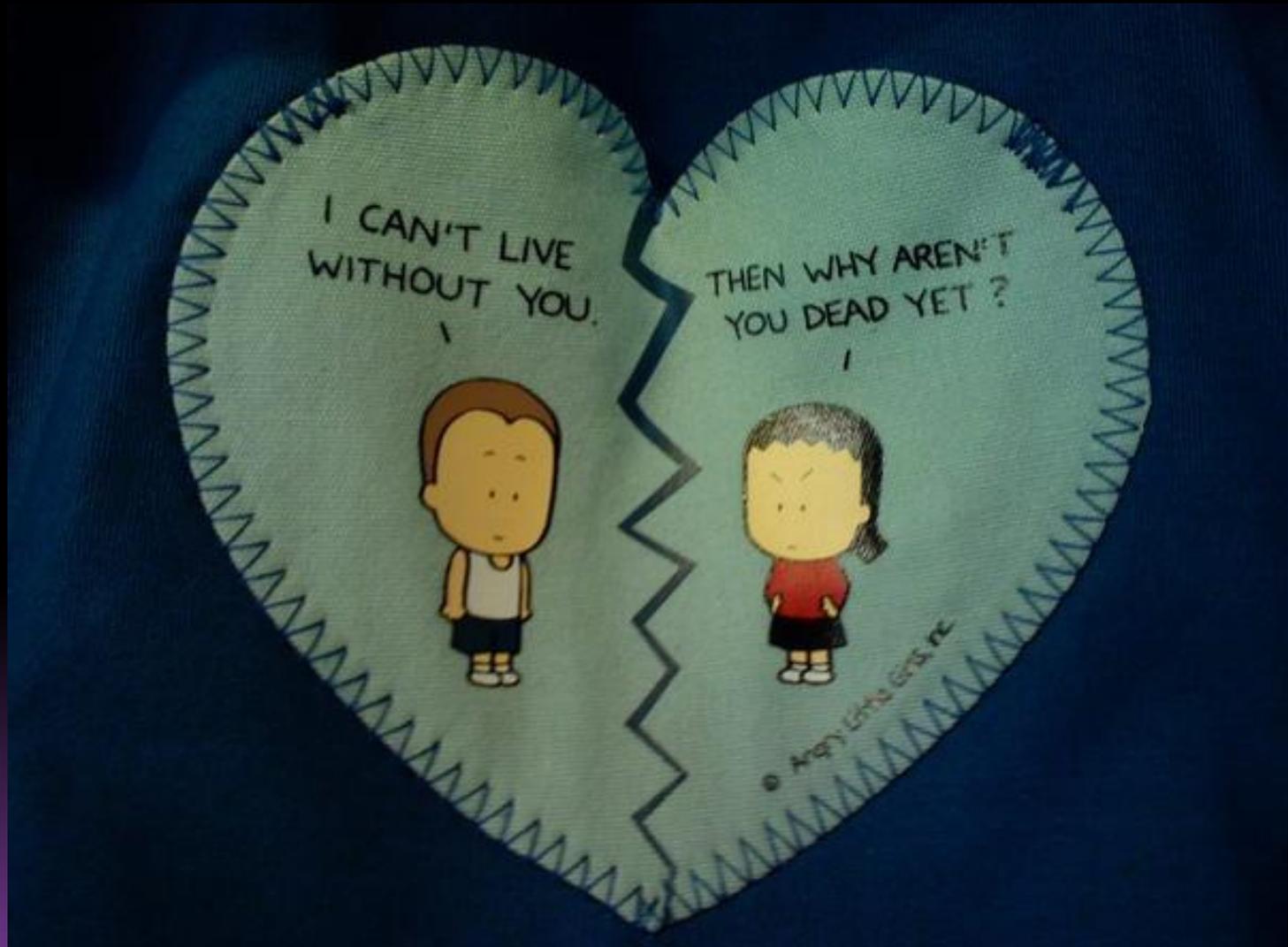
The Ideal: Healthy Interdependence

- Exists in the sentiment: “I have the innate ability to live a rewarding and fulfilling life, *and* my life is wonderfully enhanced by my partnership with you.”

Continuum of Dependency



Finding a healthy medium...



Interdependence

- The partnership greatly enhances one's sense of well-being, satisfaction, and security *without* diminishing one's sense of self/autonomy.

Shifting to Healthy Interdependence

- Self-regulation tools/techniques
- Self-validation & self-soothing
(Daitch, 2012, pp. 113-114)
- Embracing role flexibility

The 5 Keys

5 Keys Applied to Don & Karen

- Karen has a dx of GAD
- Don is an engineer and approaches all interaction with logic
- Anxiety-based conflict follows Appeal, Attack, Retreat stages

Key 1

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation

- ▣ Affective flooding
 - tripartite brain
 - understanding the midbrain gone rogue
- ▣ Anxiety-based ruptures in attunement
 - Appeal, Attack, Retreat
 - lack of brain-to-brain attunement
- ▣ Bringing it all together:
 - Exercise: Colors of Logic and Emotion

Key 2

Time-out

The Time-Out

1. Identify and interrupt the start of a reaction
2. Initiate time-out
3. Focus and calm
e.g. Eye Roll, breathing, safe place, Autogenics
4. Engage additional affect regulation interventions (taught later)

90 Second Rule

- ▣ There's a 90 second chemical process that happens in the body that maintains anger.
- ▣ Time out should ideally start within 90 seconds of recognizing an overreaction.

Key 3

Enhance Positive Affect

Juxtaposition of Two Feelings

- Facilitates the elicitation of dual perspective to enhance positive affect
- Identify multiple parts of self
- Call upon “strong self” as an internal resource when partners are in conflict, mitigating the part of self that identifies more strongly with ego states that are more easily triggered

Juxtaposition of Two Feelings

- Demonstration

Key 4

Differentiate

The Basics

- ❑ differentiate between the concept of shared *connection* and shared *perspective*
- ❑ Establish a template of relationship in which differing perspectives are not only expected but *validated*

I'm sorry we fought.

I hate it when
you're wrong.



your  cards
someecards.com

Psychoed. on Validation

- ❑ Partners can validate one another even in the absence of an understanding of the reasoning behind the other partner's perspective.
- ❑ Partners can validate one another even when they strongly disagree with the other partner's perspective or appraisal of a situation.
- ❑ Engaging in validation is crucial when a lack of understanding, strong disagreement, or both arise.
- ❑ The act of validation does not require or imply agreement with the partner's perspective.
- ❑ The act of validation acknowledges the innate value of the other's perspective, as well as the validity of the other partner's emotions.

Facilitating Validation: An Exercise

- Demonstration

Promoting Empathic Responses with Parts of Self

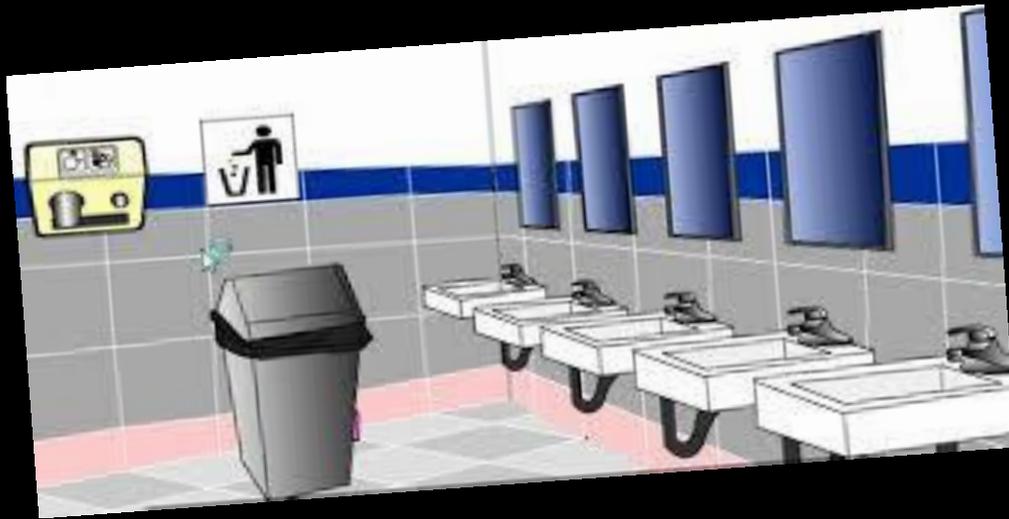
- Interact from adult parts of self



Key 5

Shifting Overdependent Bonds

Shifting into Healthy Interdependence



On a wall in a ladies' room:

“My husband follows me
everywhere”



Written just below:

“I do not!”

Why Overdependent Bonds are Hard to Break

- Power of the anxiety itself
- The focus of the relationship (relieving one partner's anxiety) is narrow and rigid → paradoxically, makes the relationship stable and predictable.
- The lack of role flexibility gives the relationship consistency

Why Overdependent Bonds are Hard to Break

- Depending heavily on one another can be deeply gratifying
- Cultural “ideal:”
 - Romeo & Juliet ideal “can’t live without you”
 - Jerry Maguire “you complete me”

Why Over dependent Bonds are Hard to Break

Response to early relational wounding

▣ For the anxious partner:

- Perhaps your partner is giving you the care and nurturing that you never got as a child.
- Perhaps this caretaking relationship recapitulates the overprotection you received from an anxious parent.

Why Overdependent Bonds are Hard to Break

Response to early relational wounding

- ▣ For the non-anxious partner:
 - Perhaps this caretaking relationship recapitulates a caretaking role you fulfilled as a child (i.e. the parentified child).

The Wise Relationship

Redefining the rules of engagement:

- ▣ Shifting your *attitudes* and *actions* so they support what you value: a healthy, solid relationship.

Attitudes

- Acknowledging and demonstrating agency in one's own affect regulation
- Finding satisfaction in the “not perfect but good enough”
- Letting go of the illusion of fairness
- Letting go of the need to be right.

Actions

- ▣ Refraining from Hurtful Communication
- ▣ Accessing Inner Wisdom
- ▣ Seal the Deal with Gratitude
- ▣ Practice Makes Permanent
 - Remember: with repeated practice, we retrain our neural pathways to respond differently

Replacing Old Response Patterns with Intentional Behaviors

- Experience the trigger in trance; use cue for calming; practice responding from a calm, centered place (with and/or without partner present in session)

Rehearsal and Transfer



*"The work being done on your marriage—are you having it done,
or are you doing it yourselves?"*

Challenges of Transfer and Maintenance of Skills

- Skills mastered in the therapeutic setting often do not transfer into the home
- Long lasting changes of interpersonal patterns in couples are hard to effect

(Jacobson and Addis, 1993)

Rehearsal, Maintenance and Transfer

Direct clients in your office to rehearse both
ideal behaviors/states

(Daitch, 2007 p.114)

Wrapping It Up

Don & Karen

- ▣ Outcome of TX

▣ “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”

— Rumi

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