

THE ACADEMY  
FOR COUPLES  
THERAPISTS

# **SELF-REGULATION: A VITAL SKILL FOR THERAPISTS WHO WORK WITH COUPLES**

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Couple therapists are humans too and as such, get triggered into lower brain survival mind states and become dysregulated, just as couples do. Like our clients, we get in and out of emotional regulation, oscillating between collaborative, adversarial, and withdrawn states. Effective couples therapy may be the most rewarding activity but it sure is also the hardest on the therapist.

Anticipating that therapists working with couples will get into "lower brain" and trigger their survival mind state is an important aspect of the awareness of an effective couple therapist.

When we get into survival, lower brain mode we may "forget" our own theories about how to help couples get better, and become less creative and more confused about how to proceed in a session.

Therapist's self-regulation is a must, is good modeling, and is needed to repair breaches in the alliance that inevitably occur when we work with couples. When couple therapists are in survival mind states, they have lower brain reactions, similar to the ones their clients experience, avoiding discomfort (freeze) and connection (flight) or "arguing" with clients (fight).

When therapists don't experience themselves as confident, competent and creative with a case or in a session, that probably means their lower brain mind state has been activated.

The following are some examples of a therapist who has entered a survival, lower brain state of mind.

## **LOSS OF CREATIVITY**

"I don't know what to do", "I've tried everything with this couple".

## **LOSS OF EMPATHY FOR ONE PARTNER OR BOTH**

"He's so defensive, I don't understand what she sees in him!", "They would be better off divorced", "There is no hope for them".

## **LOSS OF CLINICAL SELF-ESTEEM**

"Where are we going?", "What are we doing?" "What were we talking about right before?".

## **LOSS OF FOCUS**

"This couple would be better off with someone else", "I should have taken that training, read that book, attended that workshop."

If losing the ability to get back into higher brain functioning is a normal and expected by product of the work with do, how do we get it back?

Each of us will have to figure out how to a) become aware that we have entered a lower brain state and b) use the techniques that are known to us to put our higher brain back online prior to, and during a session.

Once I become aware that have entered a lower brain mode, I can implement some of my personal favorites techniques, and not surprisingly, they are the same ones I try to teach my clients. Most of the techniques I mention are designed to put a break on the reactivity of the mind in lower brain.

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## **HERE ARE MY FAVORITES**

### **PREPARING FOR SESSIONS**

Preparing for sessions is important for couple therapists. Some therapists who work with couples think they can wing it. Winging it may work with individuals but it doesn't work with couples. It puts the therapist at risk of losing pre-frontal cortex control, plunge into "lower brain" reactivity, risking ruptures in the therapeutic alliance.

I need to know where my clients have been, where they are now, and where I want to take them next. I also need to know how and when each partner triggers me. I don't know everything that's going to happen in a session, but I do want to have some clarity about the direction based on my theoretical frameworks and what I know about the clients.

### **BECOMING AWARE OF BREATHING**

When I become aware of my breathing during a session, I can take a deep breath. Taking a deep breath creates enough space between what the clients are saying, and what I want to say next. That pause is helpful so I don't say the first thing that comes into my mind.

## **BECOMING AWARE OF THINKING**

Introducing a pause between my thinking and my talking. I can say the following to my clients: "I am not sure which way to go now, I need a minute to think about what I want to say or do next". "I feel like I don't fully understand your experience from your point of view, what I am missing that will help me get there?"

I can also say to myself: "Part of me wants to do this, and another part of me is thinking that, I wonder which one will I will choose?"

## **TAKING AN ACTUAL BREAK**

Whether in person or virtually, interrupting the session for one or two minutes, leaving the room and coming back. If I am doing a virtual session, I say: "I need a minute or two, I'll be right back". I stop the video and mute myself so I can either stretch, go to the bathroom, get a glass of water, or breathe. When the minute is up, I turn the camera back on and unmute myself and say: "I am back". If in person, I do the same and usually go to the kitchen and get some water. That is enough to bring the higher brain back online.

## **REPAIRING RUPTURES IN THE THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE**

Inevitably, sometimes there are ruptures in the alliance that have to be repaired. You can repair the alliance in the moment, via email, or during the following session.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

When we self-regulate and get our higher brain back online, we recover and remember our theories about how to help couples, and we **regain our confidence, creativity, focus and sense of direction.**

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