

Bonus 3

Advanced Master Program on the Treatment of Trauma

How to Work with Dissociation in Couples

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How to Use the Structural Dissociation Model to Ease Conflict in Relationships

Dr. Buczynski: Back in Module 2, we walked you through an overview of the concept of structural dissociation. In particular, we looked at the structural dissociation model, and how we might use it to help patients make sense of the tug-of-war that trauma can create between their attachment system and their defense system.

So now, let's get into how the structural dissociation model can help us in our work with couples.

Dr. Fisher: I love using the structural dissociation model in couples therapy because it allows me to widen the aperture. So, many couples come to couples therapy in the, "It's her fault" or "It's his fault" mode. And each of them has a very clear-cut perspective, and lots of data to back, "You know, it's his fault because he. . ." blah, blah, blah. "It's her fault because she does. . ." blah, blah, blah.

And so, it's really wonderful when I can say, "You know, actually, I don't think it's either one of your faults. I think it's your parts' fault." And then I teach them the model. I happen to have a very large version of the psychoeducational flip chart. So, it's easy to have a couple both looking at it. And I teach them, "You know, you each have a very strong going-on-with-normal-life self, right? You both go to work; you both have good relationships with your colleagues. Your colleagues may see you as very easy to get along with. But you come home, and your parts start being triggered."

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And then I describe the parts. "The attach/cry-for-help part is the part of all of us that wants to be loved unconditionally, that wants to be understood. And that part gets hurt very, very easily in couples or close relationships. And then we all have a fight part that isn't going to stand for anything that's unfair that hurts the attach part. And then we all have a submissive part that tries to pour oil on the troubled waters and make nice. And we all have a very fearful part, afraid of abandonment, afraid of getting hurt. And then we have a flight part. And the

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flight part is the one that's apt to say, ‘I'm out of here.’ Or, ‘I don't think this can work.’ Do you guys recognize any of these parts in yourselves?” And of course, they both say yes.

Dr. Buczynski: So, you might think of what Janina just explained as step one, in which you give the couple a sense of the structural dissociation model and break down each of the parts involved.

For step two, you want to help the couple see how each of those parts can lead to conflict, and also, zero them in on some specific patterns.

Here’s how you might do that.

Dr. Fisher: I say, "Okay, how does a fight usually start? What part gets triggered?" And usually, couples have two or three fights that they fight all the time. And so, it's usually easy to identify the pattern. If need be, I'll take whatever the last fight they had was, but I want to make sure that they don't give me a blow-by-blow — "He said. . . and then I said. . . He said something really mean, and then I started crying." I want to avoid that, because that really stimulates the fight that they had last night. What I want to do is say, "Okay, so what was going on before the fight?" And usually, it's something ordinary. "We were finishing dinner and the television was on. And I asked him a question, and he didn't answer me."

And I say, "Okay. And what part reacted when he didn't answer?" And of course, it's usually the attached part. "And then what happened next?" "Then I got mad at him, and I said, ‘Why are you ignoring me?’" "Oh, okay. So, your fight part reacted because the feelings of your attached part got hurt? And then what happened next?" "He started yelling at me." And then he'll say, "Well, I wasn't yelling. I was just saying, ‘Don't talk to me that way.’" And I say, "Okay, what part of you said, ‘Don't talk to me that way?’" "Well, I guess it was my fight part." "Yeah. So, notice, this is an argument that you guys are having not because you, the going-on-with-normal-life you, doesn't react that way. But when your little parts get hurt, your fight parts go at it. And it really breaks up that stuck, ‘He said. . .’ ‘She said. . .’ ‘It's your fault.’ ‘No, it's your fault.’" And that's really my aim. We don't necessarily work in-depth with these parts in couples therapy. My approach is more to help them stay in connection with the part of them that can tolerate conflict, that can recover from hurt. Because of course, our little parts

are more vulnerable in our intimate relationships. And our fight parts are much more easily stimulated.

Dr. Buczynski: Notice how deliberate Janina was in directing her patients to talk about their conflict without causing them to repeat the original fight. To do that, she targeted the events that led up to the disagreement.

And that's how she helped her patients identify which of their parts were involved in the fight. It's also how she helped them directly link their behaviors to each of those parts.

One Technique to Help Clients Who Instinctively Run from Conflict

Now sometimes, "flight parts" can dominate a disagreement. So, how can we help patients who might instinctively run away from conflict with their partner?

Dr. Fisher: Sometimes the flight part is stimulated. So, we have relationships in which the couple threatens to leave each other all the time. And I say, "Oh, your flight parts are causing havoc. No wonder you're here. Oh, my goodness." Right? "And every time, husband, your flight part says, 'I'm out of here,' how does it make your attach part feel, wife?" So that they can kind of get how these flight and fight parts are really the source of the conflict, and everybody is ignoring the fact that the attached part is feeling hurt. And sometimes, submissive parts are just trying to make nice after the fight. But it's not really resolved. So, I love to challenge and disrupt the very rigid ways of thinking about things that couples and individuals come in with.

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How to Help Couples Connect When Dissociation Threatens Their Ability to Be Intimate

Dr. Buczynski: Now, when one partner in a couple dissociates, not only can it lead to conflict, but it can also lead to detachment and issues with intimacy.

So, how can we help couples when dissociation is threatening their ability to be intimate as well as their capacity to connect physically?

Dr. Lanius: That's often a journey. That often doesn't happen overnight. And I think what's so important is that we work with the couple to, first, look at using nonsexual touch. So, a very neutral touch. For example, just applying some pressure on the hand or whatever part of the body the dissociative individual chooses. And then, over time, as both parties feel safe to do so, we move closer into more and more intimate touch and contact until the individual's able to be present. But of course, both parts of the couple need to know and understand what dissociation is about, and both need to track what happens as they interact with each other.

And I think what's also important in dissociative individuals — if the dissociative person feels very detached and they can't have loving feelings for their partner, that can also be extremely driving of guilt in that individual. And so, really helping that individual reconnect with their bodily sensations to start to be able to feel again, I think is also really important.

Dr. Buczynski: I hope you find these strategies useful for helping dissociative patients and their partners.

In addition, if you haven't already, please be sure to check out the bonus on how you might help dissociative parents as well as their children.

And next up, we'll look at Polyvagal approaches to dissociation. That's just ahead in your next bonus video. See you there.