Increasing Intimacy in Wounded Couples Through the Fertile Ground of Secure Attachment

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About the Presenter
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Ann Smith is the Clinical Consultant and Founder of Breakthrough at Caron, a residential 5 day program to help adults overcome obstacles that may have previously blocked their efforts towards developing healthier relationships, positive connections and emotional stability. In 2011, the innovative Breakthrough program was featured on Dateline NBC.

Ann has a master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and is licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist in Pennsylvania. For over 30 years, her focus has been on family systems, healthy relationships, experiential group therapy and most recently Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples. She has lectured at numerous conferences and conducted workshops on topics ranging from addiction in the family to healing relationships.


Her Psychology Today blog, “Healthy Connections”, is frequently listed as an “essential read” with over 800,000 views to date.

John Bowlby (1959)
Viewed human beings as inherently relationship seeking, naturally oriented to seek “contact comfort” and naturally inclined to seek proximity to familiar, comforting figures in times of threat, pain or need.

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Through the Fertile Ground of Secure Attachment - Ann W. Smith MS, LMFT

WHAT IS SECURE ATTACHMENT?

Secure partners are programmed to “expect their partners to be loving and responsive and they don’t worry about losing their partner’s love.”

“Secures are attuned to their partner’s emotional and physical cues and know how to respond to them. Their emotional system doesn’t get too riled up in the face of threat but doesn’t get shut down either.”

“One secure person can create a buffering effect on the relationship which raises the insecure partner’s relationship satisfaction”


ATTACHMENT THEORY PERSPECTIVE

It’s all about love

• Human beings are hard wired to attach for our physical and emotional survival.

• Every human being adapts to some degree in an effort to sustain emotional attachment.

• As children we will do whatever we must to keep a connection whether it is good for us or not. In infancy and early childhood our lives depend on attachment.

• Secure attachment and comforting in childhood creates the ability to self-soothe later in life. (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2004)

• Adult attachment is equally important. The lack of loving contact creates distress and the need for adaptive measures to compensate for the absence of connection. This is true for both adults and children.

The Codependency Perspective

Early Definition in 1989

Codependency is a pattern of painful dependence on compulsive behavior and on approval seeking, in an attempt to gain safety, identity and self worth. Recovery is possible.

Defined at the 1989 National Conference on Codependency in Scottsdale, Arizona by a committee of experts in the codependency field, including Ann Smith and Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse.
CODEPENDENCY AS INSECURE ATTACHMENT

- "Emotional dependency is not immature or pathological, it is our greatest strength.”
  ~ Susan Johnson, Love Sense, 2013
- "Attachment security is not only an important component of healthy love but also a major foundation for self actualization.”
  ~ Mikulincer and Shaver, Attachment in Adulthood, 2007

INSECURE ATTACHMENT

Anxiety increases when we don’t have a secure and consistent connection with a loved one.

Cyclical patterns evolve in an attempt to increase connection while also protecting us from further hurt.

Common Attachment styles have been characterized as:
  - Anxious - pursuers
  - Avoidant - withdrawers
  - Disorganized or Fearful Avoidant

INSECURE ATTACHMENT (Cont.)

“Insecure people, whether they have an avoidant, anxious, or disorganized attachment style, are less likely to be able to call upon mental residues of past positive experiences.”

Insecurity causes us to focus on potential threats thus creating vigilance and mistrust.

~ Mikulincer and Shaver, Attachment in Adulthood, 2007
INSECURE ATTACHMENT (Cont.)

• Monitoring and appraisal of threats is conscious and unconscious
• “Attachment security is a state caused by a person’s not needing (except on rare occasions) to use a hyper-activating (anxious) or deactivating (avoidant) strategy.”

Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007

ROADBLOCKS TO RELATIONSHIP RECOVERY

• Attachment Injuries
• Shame
• Fear of the Future
• Rush to Healing

ROADBLOCKS TO RECOVERY

Attachment Injuries
Shame
Fear of the Future
Rush to Healing
• Seemingly insurmountable wounds become an obstacle to healing
• Injuries may include betrayal, dishonesty, deception, hurtful words, blame, humiliation, or even silent abandonment at a critical moment.
Shame also keeps the couple isolated from much needed support.

In wounded couples a pattern of Pursue-Complain-Criticize in one partner is often followed by a reaction of Defend-Withdraw-Shut Down in the other.

• Fear of relapse into addiction or recurrence of past betrayal
• Fear of never forgiving or being forgiven
Fear of the Future (cont.)

- Fear of being manipulated or deceived into trusting again
- Fear of judgments of family and friends

ROADBLOCKS TO RECOVERY

Attachment
Shame
Fear Of The Future
A RUSH TO HEALING

- Unrealistic demands for forgiveness before its time
- Unbearable pain – guilt, shame, anger, when questioned

A RUSH TO HEALING (Cont.)

- Injured party gives in - longing to trust and put it behind them
- Unmet attachment needs – impatient longing for touch, sexual connection, approval, partnership
HEALING WOUNDS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING SECURE

• Highlight Positive Intent
• Focus on Attachment Needs
• Leaning Toward
• Creating Intimate Moments

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HEALING WOUNDS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING SECURE (Cont.)

Highlight Positive Intent by reframing the cycle of protest

Example: During reactive responding a partner may withdraw or persist in an effort to deescalate conflicts or protect the relationship that are perceived as indifferent or dismissive by the other.

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HEALING WOUNDS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING SECURE (Cont.)

Focus on Attachment Needs and emotions hidden beneath the dance. Slow down and deepen the experience.
HEALING WOUNDS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING SECURE (Cont.)

Lean toward
With therapist guidance each partner reveals deeper emotional experiences and with guidance and support the listener tunes in and responds.

Create Intimate Moments
When a couple feels safe and is able to risk openness moments of connection appear spontaneously and begin to reveal the path to healing.

USE OF BRIEF INTERVENTIONS TO DEEPEN INTIMACY
- Enactments
- Hearing attachment language changes one’s emotional state.
- Closing eyes and holding hands.
- Group couples work – Reducing shame and learning from the healing moments of others.
“The greatest gift a parent has to give a child - and a lover has to give a lover - is emotionally attuned attention and timely responsiveness.”

Susan Johnson, Love Sense, 2013

REFERENCES


Thanks for attending!

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