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Dealing with Projective Identification in Couple Therapy: The PACT Approach

Psychobiological Approach to Couple Therapy®

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Projective Identification

- Projective identification (PI) is a term introduced by Melanie Klein to describe the process whereby in a close relationship, as between mother and child, lovers, or therapist and patient, parts of the self may in unconscious fantasy be thought of as being forced into the other person.
- Projection is the unconscious act of attributing something inside ourselves to someone else. Usually, but not always, the "thing" we are projecting is an unwanted emotion or attribute.
- In R.D. Laing's words, "The one person does not use the other merely as a hook to hang projections on. He/she strives to find in the other, or to induce the other to become, the very embodiment of projection"
- Projective identification may be used as a type of defense, a means of communicating, a primitive form of relationship, or a route to psychological change; used for ridding the self of unwanted parts or for controlling the other's body and mind.

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Projective Identification

- The couple represents a projective system; one that employs both projection and projective identification.
- PI is considered a "low level" defense, esp if used frequently.
- Individuals with neurological deficits, developmental delays, complex PTSD, and disorders of the self commonly employ PI.
- PI cannot be "shoved back into the patient's mind" in individual therapy, family therapy, or group therapy.
- In most circumstances, the couple therapist can throw projected material back into the couple system with minimal negative blow back.

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Projective Identification

- The couple therapist must first capture their raw experience of PI in the form of feelings, thoughts, impulses, urges, and fantasies.
- The couple therapist must strategically decide where to throw their intervention.
- The couple therapist's intervention should be at the same level of amplitude/intensity as the raw implicit experience of PI.
- The litmus test for determining a successful intervention is
 - 1) Immediate relief in in the therapist's negative or positive experience of countertransference.
 - 2) Partners take up the as yet unexplored material exposed by the intervention.

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Projective Identification

- Projective identification is a primitive defense against feeling, thinking, doing, and talking.
- It is also a primitive form of communication.
- PI in couple therapy is more common due to issues around threat between partners.
- Skillful use of PI by the couple therapist yields discovery of unexplored, hidden material that is implicitly communicated to the therapist through thoughts, feelings, fantasies, impulses, and urges.
- Persistent use of PI can preoccupy, distract, and distort the therapist's perceptions of either or both partners.
- Putting this material back into the stream of the couple system should release therapist resources and neutralize therapist positive and negative countertransference reactions.

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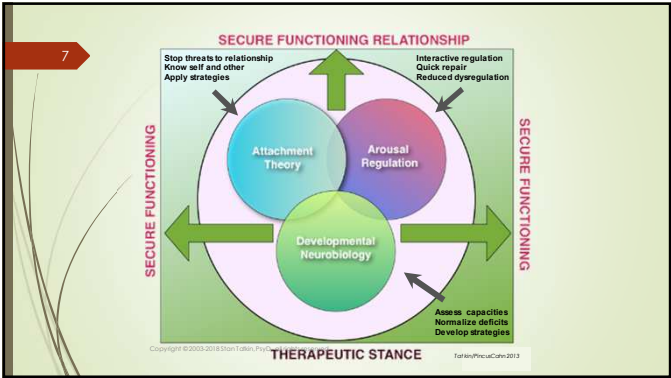
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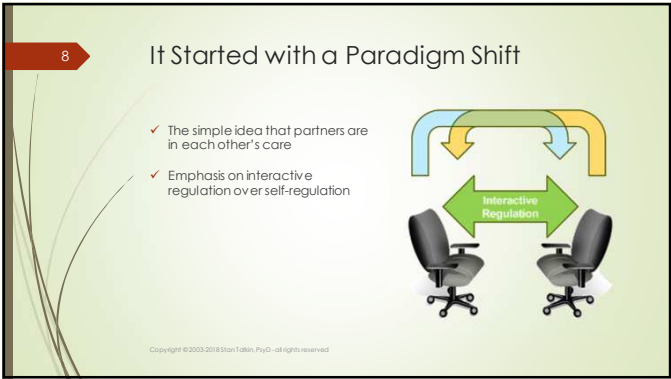
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Our Challenge As Couple Therapists

We need to find out what is actually going on!

- Who are these people?
- What do they really want?
- And what are they up to?

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A Strategic Approach

- We want to catch people in the act of being themselves
- Pay close attention to
 - Micro-movements and micro-expressions
 - Shifts and changes in arousal and affect
- Regulate the couple by
 - Tensing and relaxing
 - Shifting topics
 - Forensic-like interviewing process
- Create or stage experiences before interpreting
- Collect evidence and offer proof before confronting

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Narratives Lie

- There are reasons why words are NOT reliable
- People don't know what they are doing (most of the time) or why
- In the absence of knowing, people make shit up
- People also lie
- Memory and state interact
 - Memories are shaped by present state and state changes perception
 - Things are rarely what they seem
 - Even for us as therapists, we are shackled by the same limitations
 - We don't know what is going on and we are making shit up, too

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Understand Non-Verbal Cues

- Behavioral pauses
- Verbal/non-verbal disconnect
- Dis-synchrony between words and movement
- Sudden stopping, slowing down, or jerkiness in movement while talking
- Anchor point movements
 - Right after a question is posed
- Grooming gestures
- Freezing the face and/or upper body
- Too much eye contact
- Duping behavior (inappropriate smile)
- Hand to face movements (arousal going up)
 - Itching

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Baselines, Baselines, Baselines

- Face is THE primary signal system for emotion.
- Friendliness, rapport, meaningless chatter
- What does the face, body, and voice do when relaxed?
- Facial Withholders – Unwitting Expressers – Substitute Expressers
- Face reveals emotion, body reveals how emotion is being handled
- Reading faces requires visual attention
 - Even focusing on the face, words will grab attention

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Prefrontal Cortex

- Executive function
- Reality testing
- Error correcting
- Inhibition of impulsivity
- Attention and cognition
- Limbic regulation

dmPFC
action / inaction

vmPFC
self / other

OFC
upward / downward thinking

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High Resource Demand

dmPFC
action / inaction

vmPFC
self / other

OFC
upward / downward
thinking

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Tracking the Body

Start flagging:

- Facial expressions (over-expression, under-expression, *controls*, resting face, upper-mid-lower face, etc)
- Eyes (pupils)
- Heart rate (neck, wrist, ankle, nose)
- Skin color
- Breathing (chest, belly)
- Muscle faultiness (striated areas)
- Posture
- Gestures
- Voice (pressure, speed, volume, prosody)
- Movements (or lack thereof)

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Tracking the Body

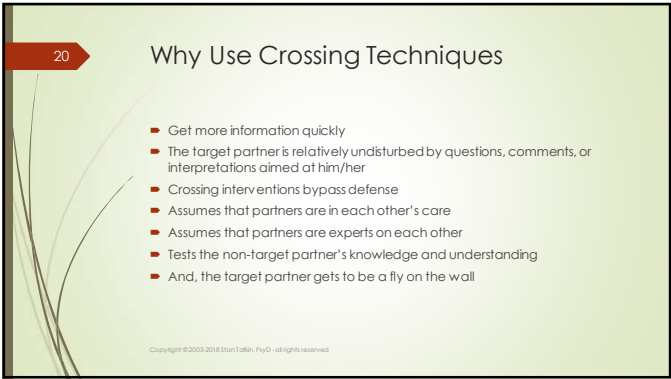
- Arousal regulation is different from *affect* regulation
- Track arousal over affect
- Resource demanding versus resource conserving structures
 - High right and left structures
 - Frontal structures (including the anterior cingulate)
 - affect muscle movement
- Hyper/hypo-arousal affects speech and prosody
- Your own brain can fool you

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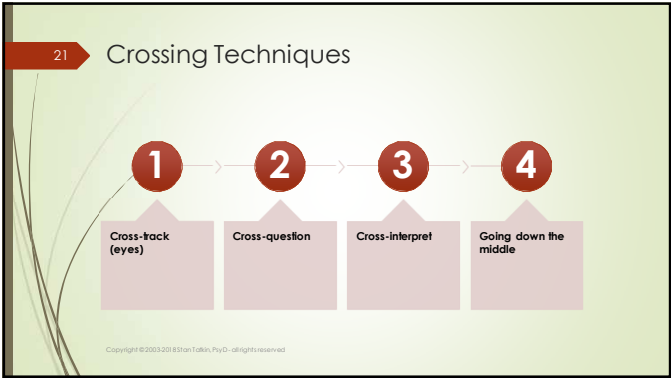
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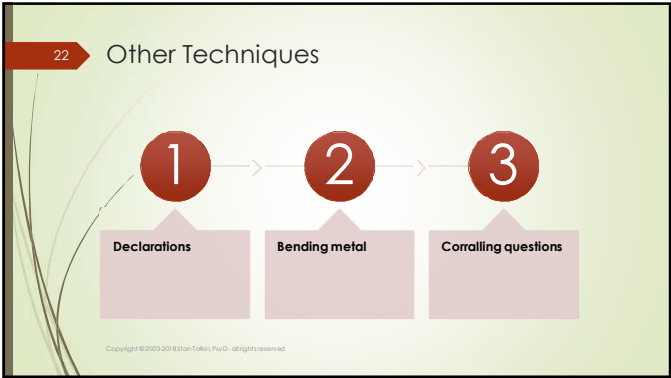
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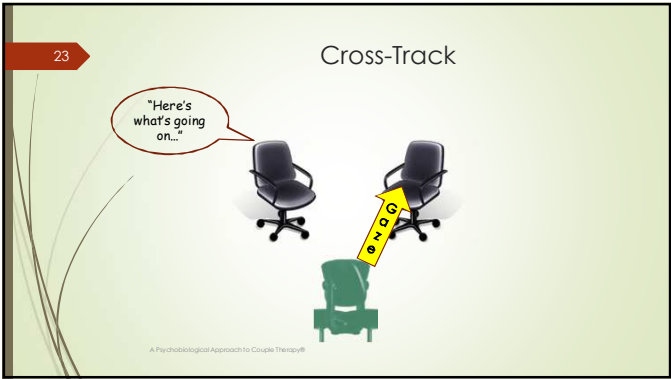
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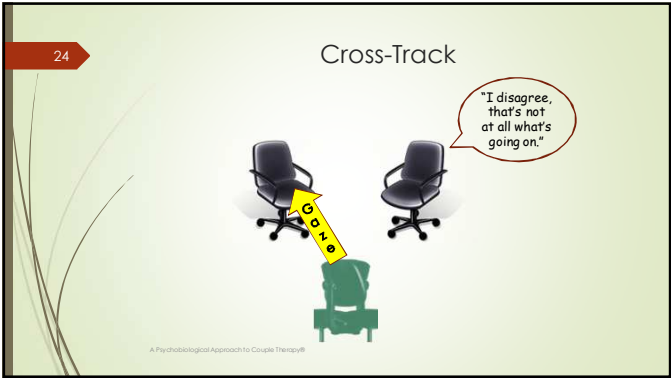
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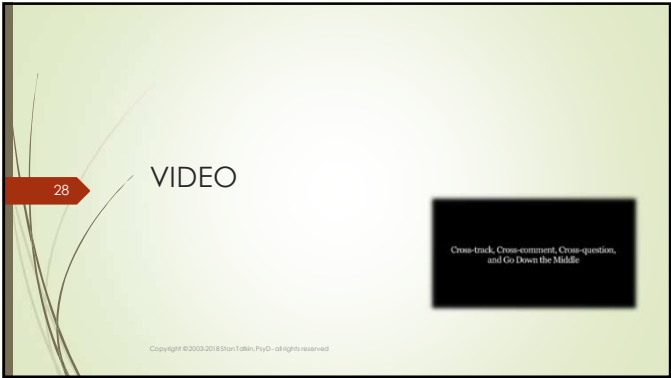
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Working with Projective Identification in Couple Therapy

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Working with Projective Identification in Couple Therapy

- Opening Pandora's Box
- A most advanced way to work with implicit material
- Only move on *inspiration* not pressure
- Think strategically
- Use supportive confrontation, interpretation, by crossing or going down the middle
- Watch, wait, and wonder what they will do next
- Intervention is working if you (therapist) feel immediate relief AND the couple takes up the as yet unexplored material exposed by the intervention

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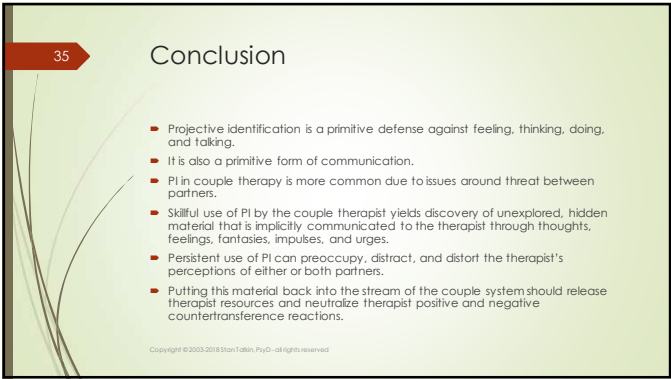
Positive and Negative PI

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for
LOVE

HOW UNDERSTANDING
YOUR PARTNER'S BRAIN ^{55th}
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for
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HOW UNDERSTANDING
NEUROBIOLOGY and ATTACHMENT
STYLE CAN HELP YOU
FIND YOUR IDEAL MATE

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How People
CHANGE



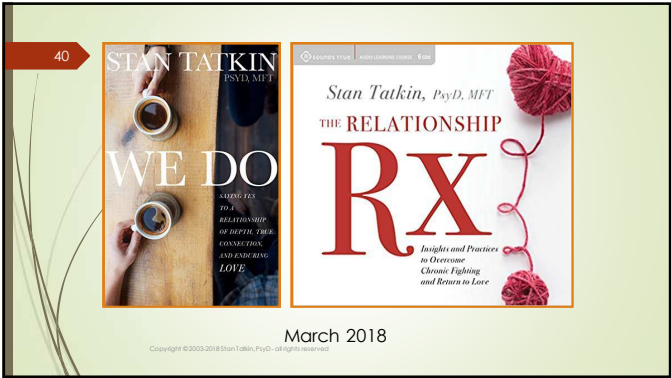
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