


Couple Therapy: Shared Principles of Governance

Psychobiological Approach to Couple Therapy®

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I N S T I T U T E



All People Are Difficult, But You Shouldn't Be Too Difficult


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The Human Primate

- Your brain makes too many mistakes in the social-interactive world
 - Your brain, though a very impressive organ, is prone to lots of errors.
 - You tend to believe everything you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste is objectively real; or believe your memory is accurate; or believe your communication is clear as a bell.
 - Your brain all too often conflates social cues (faces, voices, movements, postures, words, and phrases) with real danger.
 - Your brain is mostly automatic, memory-based, and therefore confuses current events with previous experience via a lightning fast memory and recognition system.
 - Your brain constantly replaces missing evidence with made up "facts."
 - Your brain imagines things that are not there.
 - Your brain is, by nature, pessimistic and negativistic.

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The Human Primate

- You are genetically predisposed as a homo sapien to be difficult
 - As such, you are aggressive, self-interested, and prone to dislike people who are "too familiar to ignore, but too different to tolerate."
 - You're too easily swayed by "group think." This means you are more heteronomous (opposite of autonomous) than you realize.
- Who you are is largely formed by your experiences and memories.
 - If you experienced any trauma, especially in early childhood that remains unresolved, you are likely to be hyper-reactive to threat cues, both internally and externally.
 - If you are highly sensitive, you may be empathic but also highly reactive.
 - If you are not sensitive, you may lack empathy and also be under responsive.

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The Human Primate

- Your development plays a consider role in how difficult you are
 - Ability to manage your impulses
 - Ability to tolerate frustration
 - Ability to shift your attention at will
 - Ability to manage your state of arousal
 - Ability to socially-emotionally act and react appropriately under stress
 - Ability to make decisions
 - Ability to override what feels good for what does good
 - Ability to remain self-aware in real time

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Shared Principles of Governance

- We also live a lot longer than either non-human primates or our recent ancestors.
- All this suggests the value of taking active steps to ensure the longevity of our relationships.
- Romantic love waxes and wanes over time.
- Mutual physical attraction can dim as our bodies undergo slow but inevitable changes as we age.
- Common interests also change as we are exposed to new experiences, attractions, and pursuits.
- One of nature's little jokes is to turn what attracted us to another person into what may eventually annoy us.

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Shared Principles of Governance

- As social animals, we depend on each other for survival on many levels: physically, psychologically, emotionally.
- In the wild, primates procreate and pair bond, on average, for four years: enough time to raise one child and protect it from the hostile environment.
- Nature cares not about long-term relationships.
- Most of us modern humans, however, do care because we are part of a society that values, even requires, cooperation, collaboration, and social fidelity to agreed-upon principles of governance.

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Shared Principles of Governance

Social contract theory focuses on whether agreements between people are *balanced, fair, and just*.

Theory traced to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and more currently John Rawls (1999).

Lawrence Kohlberg (1971) made ability to form social contracts definitional to stage 5 in his theory of moral reasoning development.

Ivan Böszörményi-Nagy (1973) used social contract theory to explain why families who expected loyalty despite a climate of unfairness or injustice created individuals who felt angry and later attempted to settle their scores with spouses, employers, and others.

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Secure Principles of Governance

- Principles, unlike rules and laws, are beliefs. I strongly discourage you from thinking in terms of rules. People may break rules and laws but breaking one's principles is akin to being untrue to oneself.

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Shared Principles of Governance

- Secure functioning partners are equals and held to mutually agreed upon principles of governance.
- Without a common purpose that serves both partners the default will be the wild west.
- How are the two of going to govern—each other and everyone else? How are you going to protect yourselves from each other and from those outside your partnership?
- Consider them your "ten commandments" and treat them as such.
- These principles must remain pithy (think "Thou shalt not kill"), fully understood, and accepted as representing a deep and abiding personal belief in them.
- If you do not or cannot fulfill your side of these agreements, under all circumstances, then the guiding principle does not truly exist. Take this very seriously and make certain your principles are in accord with one another.

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Examples of Shared Principles of Governance

- We put our relationship first.
- We have each other's backs.
- We protect each other in public and in private.
- If one of us is in distress, we drop what we are doing and minister to that partner.
- We repair with each other immediately or as soon as possible.
- We take care of bad feelings immediately and relieve each other as fast as possible.
- We always protect our relationship's safety and security.

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Shared Principles of Governance

- SPoG address the following fundamental questions:
 - Why be a couple? Why should the two of you be together?
 - What purpose do you serve?
 - What do you do for each other that you couldn't hire someone else to do?
- SPoG are based on personal and mutual values
- Partners must fully buy into their SPoG
- Partners must be able to articulate values on which the social contract is based
- SPoG hold partners to agreed-upon behaviors that preserve and protect the relationship

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Shared Principles of Governance

Introduce social contracts

- Explain the value of social contracts
- Assess current contracts (if any)
- Elicit an issue they can address by developing a contract

Challenge the reasoning behind a social contract

- Check complexity and articulation of the agreement's personal and mutual good
- Actively challenge the couple to strengthen their thinking
- Hold couple accountable by checking their responses against the spirit of the social contract

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Shared Principles of Governance

- ✓ *"When one of us is in distress, we act quickly to relieve or reduce that distress."*
- ✓ *"If one of us is ever tempted to cheat, that partner will disclose his or her feelings, rather than act on them, and the other will listen without rushing to judgment."*
- ✓ *"We will serve as each other's primary go-to person."*
- ✓ *"We agree to postpone having a second child until such time as both of us are comfortable in our careers."*
- ✓ *"Events involving our immediate family (children, parents, and siblings) will take precedence over other events."*

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Shared Principles of Governance

- This is where shared principles of governance come in.
- If you and your partner are bound together by principles that govern each of you as well as how you relate to everyone outside your "couple bubble," you increase your chances of weathering the winds of change.
- These principles are your Ten Commandments.
- Much like our shared belief in the Constitution, you must believe your shared principles will hold together over the long run, despite shifts and changes in love, lust, common interests, and all other ephemeral attractants.
- Depending on your imagination and forethought, your principles could include survival, thriving, trust, respect, admiration, radical loyalty, devotion, and a feeling of believing in something greater than the self.

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Shared Principles of Governance

- Principles, unlike rules and laws, are beliefs.
- I strongly discourage you from thinking in terms of rules.
- People may break rules and laws but breaking one's principles is akin to being untrue to oneself.
- Shared principles of governance are especially useful when you or your partner don't feel like doing something, don't like each other, or are in a bad mood.
- Here are some examples of shared principles of governance to get you started:

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Shared Principles of Governance

- We put the relationship first, above all other self-interests
- We always protect each other's sense of safety and security
- We apologize, make amends, and rectify misunderstandings or injuries in short order
- We are fully transparent with each other
- We minister to each other immediately when we are in distress
- We are the first to know things
- We never threaten each other or the relationship

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Shared Principles of Governance

- The principles you and your partner create must be particular to your mutual needs.
- You may want to consider big-ticket items first: your relationship, children, work, self, and so on.
- You both must fully buy into your shared principles and be ready to defend why they serve both a personal and a mutual good.
- In other words, explain why each principle benefits you and your partner, specifically.
- You must drink the Kool Aid™ on each principle, or it will not protect either of you or your relationship.
- If you don't believe in the principle, when it comes time to pony up, you won't do it.
- The strongest, most enduring couples can articulate their shared principles of governance. Can you? Take the time you need to co-create yours.

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Conclusion

- The couple therapist must have a strong sense of where the couple should go: the therapeutic narrative
- A good therapeutic narrative is secure functioning
- Secure functioning requires that partners operate from principles of fairness, justice, mutual sensitivity, collaboration, and cooperation
- The human primate is by nature self-serving, impulsive, warlike, fickle, moody, xenophobic, and highly influenceable by group trends
- In order to remain civil, human beings must believe and shared principles, mythologies, and ideas that help ensure collaboration and cooperation
- The couple is the smallest unit of a society or civilization and it must operate according to principles of social justice and fairness or it will perish

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Conclusion

- The couple therapist *must expect* secure functioning in the couples or they will not endure the vicissitudes of coupledness over the long haul
- If the couple system represents the roof of the house as well as the moral and ethical culture of this mini society, their ability to function in a secure functioning manner is not simply vital to the health of the couple but also to their children, other family members, friends, coworkers, community, and so on
- If the couple, not simply the individual, is like a nucleus whose axon terminal and many dendrites serve as a continuous action potential for all its neighboring nuclei, then the building to a long-term potentiation for a more secure functioning society is more likely
- Secure functioning couples often become mentor couples that serve as a beacon to others who wish to learn what they know and practice

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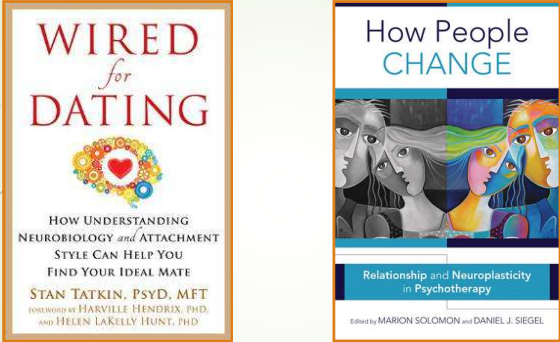
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SAVING YES
TO A
RELATIONSHIP
OF DEPTH, TRUST,
CONNECTION,
AND ENDURING
LOVE

Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT

THE RELATIONSHIP
RX

Insights and Practices
to Overcome
Chronic Fighting
and Return to Love

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