

Clinical Implications and Applications of Psychoneurology: Translating neuroscience to the consulting room

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Article #3: Psychoneurology of Couples' Therapy

In the first articles in this three-part series we looked at the question: 'Why is the new psychoneurology literature important and what, as a clinician, do I need to know?' In the second, we examined 'Psychotherapy as a Right Brain Experience.'

In this last preview article we'll examine the application of these neurological principles to work with romantic partners who frequently arrive emotionally dysregulated by conflict that has been both chronic and intense.

As human beings, we are born with immature nervous systems that are literally 'wired up' in our first attachment relationships and throughout our early years. The closer and more secure those relationships, the more efficient and flexible our neural circuitry. But whatever the quality, we end up 'wired into' one another with a powerful predisposition to react automatically. That can be wonderful, emotionally attuned relationships have the capacity to calm and nurture us. But they have the opposite capacity as well.

We have all suffered a degree of trauma in our relationships; and have all experienced being bounced around inside, especially interpersonally. We all have the potential to feel like victims in our own relationships. No wonder clients walk into our offices wanting us to change the other people in their lives.

Couple's therapy can be a daunting way for us to work. In addition to the problem of balance, of keeping the alliance with both equally, is the fact that couples often arrive battle weary or in the midst of betrayals and affairs. Another major challenge is the condition of their sensitized nervous systems and the subsequent hair trigger eruptions of high emotionality:

A major Paradigm Shift coming out of the neurological literature to address these 'instant eruptions' is a revision of our perspective from the idea of "Individuals in conflict" to the notion of a single system with a "Fused Neural circuitry" Our working hypothesis will be that partners in an intimate couple rely upon one another for regulation of their autonomic nervous systems, and that this dependency, like that of the psychotherapist/patient dyad, has its roots in the mother-infant attachment system.

Allan Schore says it this way: "Rather than viewing the couple as two separate people, the contemporary picture is of a single, emotionally fused system whose coupled chemistry tunes the brains and minds of each. Just as a care-taker's precise responses tune the brain and mind of the newborn

baby, so too do the dynamics of the couple . . . set the stage either for well-regulated or dysregulated emotion within individuals.”

That is, intimates regulate one another’s autonomic nervous systems (for better or for worse). Dysregulated reactivity, the lack of neural integration, causes suffering, disrupts the ability to communicate, erodes, and can eventually destroy, the closeness of our intimate relationships. It is this kind of blind reactivity we need to help our clients interrupt. It is the same reactivity we need to work on in ourselves.

‘Hot couples’ can flash anger, blame and defensiveness at lightening speed in a kind of Amygdala hijacking of the entire brain. The neo-cortex is complex, but relatively slow. Buried beneath these cortical folds, lay the more primitive neural centers that detect and register danger at flash quick speed, and are charged with keeping us alive. These centers can freeze us, propel us into flight or flash us into fury at a thoughtless partner who just tromped on some old unhealed wound.

When intimates are fighting, they start frontal lobe to frontal lobe. But the amygdala has a master switch and can put the frontal lobes out of commission; they go dead, literally. Its overkill in a relationship, but on the freeway, it can save our lives. The antidote is emotional regulation, the integration of our complex neurology in which disparate neural centers within each of us function in a smooth and coordinated way creating coherency which allows us to more easily regulate ourselves.

The objective of couple’s therapy thus becomes the improvement of both self and co-regulatory strategies within and between the members of the team. Securely attached couples can regulate each other naturally. They do so with empathy, humor and reassurance. And their great advantage is that they can internally regulate their own nervous systems more successfully.

But most of our therapy couples grew up insecurely attached. These couples can be sensitized to think consciously about what regulates or dysregulates relationally and learn to function as a regulatory team, balancing each other’s ANS. In the seminar, we’ll examine how, explicating neurologically the concepts of amygdala hijacking and conservation of energy, and examining regulatory skills that you can immediately apply.

Questions, comments as you’re digesting this introductory material? Send them along. If you’re confused or wondering about something you’ve just read, you can be sure if this material has sparked some knowledge or experience in your own practice of therapy, I encourage you to share your comments with the rest of us.