



Episode 2

Betrayal Trauma & Relational Healing

Marnie Breecker 0:02

Hello, everyone. Before we begin today's podcast episode, we want to make an exciting announcement. We know that when couples are recovering from the impact of betrayal on their relationship, there can be a time where they feel stuck in terms of how to move forward with the sexual peace. How do we reintegrate sexuality after there's been betrayal, and that can be a really difficult conversation to have and a difficult process to go through. And so we've gotten a lot of feedback from our listeners who would like more help in this area. And so we're starting a group specifically for couples who'd like to start the conversation about sexual reintegration, and we have a fantastic coach. She's a sex and relationship and intimacy expert. Her name is Zoe Kors. You can learn more about her and the group at our website helpingcouplesheal.com. If this is a fit for you, please don't hesitate to reach out, we'd love to hear from you. Please remember that there's limited space so if you are interested, please reach out sooner than later so you can reserve a spot. Thanks, and we hope you enjoy this episode.

HCH Narrator 1:14

Welcome to the Helping Couples Heal Podcast: a place for healing and hope for couples impacted by betrayal resulting from infidelity and or sex addiction. Your hosts are Marnie Breecker and Duane Osterlind, licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, certified sex addiction therapists and founders of respected treatment centers in Long Beach and Los Angeles. Marnie and Duane co-created Helping Couples Heal, the most comprehensive in person and online resource for couples recovering from betrayal, and this podcast series is the first component of the program. Thank you for listening. Marnie and Duane are committed to helping you recover from the devastating impact of betrayal trauma, and are excited to support you wherever you may be in your healing. If you've lost hope, you've come to the right place. Now, take a slow deep breath, and let's begin with the Helping Couples Heal podcast.

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Duane Osterlind 2:06

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Helping Couples Heal podcast. My name is Duane Osterlind.

Marnie Breecker 2:13

And I am Marnie Breecker, and we are your hosts. And in this episode, we're going to talk about betrayal and relational trauma, we will define both of those terms, we'll talk about why it is so important to talk about this topic, and we will discuss why it is so difficult to heal from betrayal and relational trauma.

Duane Osterlind 2:30

So before we start, I think we really need to talk about a metaphor to illustrate why it's so difficult to heal from betrayal trauma and relational trauma. And this is a metaphor that we're going to revisit several times throughout this podcast series, because it's a helpful way for us to be able to define this. So the metaphor we use is that when we look at this, we look at it like a three legged stool. And each part of these legs represent three parts in the system. There's the partner, the addict, and the couple's relationship. And all three need attention and healing. And if one part of the system doesn't want to get help, the stool is going to fall over. So we'd like to think about it like that, which helps us conceptualize all the stuff that we're going to talk about in this podcast series.

Duane Osterlind 3:20

Yeah, and that's an important point. I, you know, I've met many partners over the years, Duane, who were very resistant to getting help initially. And you know, they would say that their husband caused the problem, and that they should be the one to fix it. So then they resist coming to therapy, because they're resentful that they're left having to deal with a problem that they didn't cause. And I really have heard that over and over again. But unfortunately, if that leg of the stool, the partner is ignored, or remains broken, the stool will never be sturdy, or safe and will likely collapse eventually.

Duane Osterlind 3:51

Right? And we have to remember that all three legs of the stool are important in this healing process. I mean, each leg must heal in order for the system to be restored. And let's be honest, I mean, the system will never be what it was before. Things have changed, especially when there's these, this kind of betrayal trauma. But we have to pay attention to all three parts of this.

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Duane Osterlind 4:13

Yeah, that's true. Alright, so let's jump in and explore betrayal and relational trauma. And I would love to start with why the psychoeducation piece, which is what we're doing now, is so important. So in other words, why are we even talking about this? So the first reason would be it's validating, you know, it will help the partner understand what she's going through and what her experience is, and put in a context that she can understand and then that she can work with. Right and then further learning about her symptoms and conceptualizing her experiences. Trauma is eye opening, not just for the partner, but also for the addict. And once we know what the problem is, then we can figure out how to fix it. And just a quick note, even though we are using the term addict throughout the podcast just for simplicity, we are also referring to those who have betrayed their significant other, whether it's one or multiple instances of infidelity, and they don't relate to or identify with the definition of an addict. But just again, for simplicity purposes, we will be using that term.

Duane Osterlind 5:14

Right, definitely important point.

Marnie Breecker 5:16

So another reason that it's important to talk about this, you know, emotions are so overwhelming, that seeing them from the lens of trauma can help both members of the coupleship. You know, addiction is obviously all about the denial of reality. So recovery is about getting into reality, no matter how painful that may be, and talking about it is painful.

Duane Osterlind 5:36

Yeah, it is hard. I mean, this is hard work that we're going to get into, there's a lot of pain and trauma, but by knowing this stuff, you can work towards something different.

Duane Osterlind 5:46

Right. And lastly, I would say, it's important to talk about this because it's really helpful for the addict or for the person who's done the betraying, so that he can understand the traumatic impact of his betrayal on his partner. Many addicts experienced extreme remorse only after learning about partner trauma, because of their initial reactions, you know, for instance, telling her she's crazy, and that she's overreacting, that she has her own disease, you know, etc, etc.

Duane Osterlind 6:15

Right? Yeah. And I think that it's so I mean, this is such an important part, because when the addict understands that trauma, and really gets it, they can, they can make changes that help heal this whole system. And so that's why this is for everybody in the system.

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Duane Osterlind 6:33

Yeah, you know, you I remember years ago, when I first started to facilitate this workshop, the husband of one of my clients was so angry after the first day, because he'd been in recovery for about 10 months at that point. And that was literally the first time he was hearing the word trauma with regards to his partner's experience. And he was so angry that he didn't learn about it sooner, because he felt that they would have had a much better start to their relational healing.

Duane Osterlind 6:57

Exactly. I mean, I've seen that happen so many times, which is why, you know, we really believe that integrating the partner trauma model into the addict's recovery, from the very beginning, is crucial to the relational repair. We got it, we have to know how we work relationally. And that's why it's so critical.

Duane Osterlind 7:15

Exactly. Yeah. So why don't we now get into some definitions and start by defining betrayal trauma, and how it's different from relational trauma. So I'm going to start with betrayal trauma. And, you know, I hear people often using these terms interchangeably, but in fact, while they're connected, they're actually quite different. So betrayal trauma refers to one partner being betrayed by the other. And it occurs in the context of a relationship where there's an expectation of trust and safety, and where there has been a violation of that trust and safety.

Duane Osterlind 7:49

Yeah, and one thing I'd like to highlight why betrayal trauma refers to any portrayal of an intimate relationship, including financial betrayal. For the purposes of our podcast, we will be focusing on the the traumatic impact of betrayal trauma as a result of sex addiction, and infidelity. That's our main focus. And, you know, we also want to point out that both men and women suffer from betrayal and relational trauma. The reality is that it's mostly women who come looking for treatment for partner trauma. That's what we see. However, you know, about a third of sex addicts are women. So we know that there are many men who suffer too. Unfortunately, it's also clear that most male partners suffer in silence because we're not seeing them in our offices or treatment centers as much.

Duane Osterlind 8:33

And that's, that's unfortunate, and perhaps talking about it more like we are, maybe we'll bring those people in to get help more.

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Duane Osterlind 8:40

Yeah. And they'll get some healing as well. So we understand that this impacts everybody, you know, male, female, everything so, so let's get into relational trauma and how that's different from betrayal trauma, okay? So when we're looking at this, betrayal trauma is the cause of relational trauma. And in other words, it's the result of the traumatic impact of betrayal on the relationship. And, you know, when we look at relational trauma, we can define it as an attachment injury, or attachment trauma. And those are relational experiences that are overwhelming, perceived as dangerous, or lead to trauma responses, like fight, flight, freeze, and fold. We know that research shows that infidelity is experienced as an attachment injury. And so we have to look at these concepts.

Duane Osterlind 9:29

I've heard many times that attachment injury is characterized literally by a violation of human connection. And with all the stories that my clients come in with and the reactions being so universal, I would say that the impact of betrayal should never be minimized.

Duane Osterlind 9:44

Absolutely. I mean, it can also be defined as a violation by someone relied on or dependent on for safety and security. So the nature or importance of the relationship is the most important issue.

Duane Osterlind 9:57

Right? So in other words, we won't experience trauma if we're betrayed by an acquaintance or a coworker, or maybe a neighbor, but betrayal trauma will occur within the context of a relationship where there's that expectation of safety, as in the case of married couples or committed partnerships.

Duane Osterlind 10:14

And then the last point I'd like to make before we move on is that an attachment injury occurs when one partner violates the expectations that the other will offer comfort and caring in times of danger and distress. The partner's experience is ultimately one of being abandoned during a critical moment of need.

Duane Osterlind 10:30

Yeah, and you know, this can be seen after the initial discovery, you know, when a partner is in a state of trauma and her husband is continuing to gaslight her or be defensive, or continuing to lie and keep secrets.

Duane Osterlind 10:42

Exactly. I mean, it's heartbreaking to see someone in that kind of pain. It's-

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Marnie Breecker 10:47

Yeah, it really is.

Duane Osterlind 10:48

And that's one of the reasons we're doing this podcast is we want to help people, and we want to support people, because it is, and that's why it's so important to understand both betrayal trauma and relational trauma and understand the context.

Duane Osterlind 11:00

Right, absolutely. So you know, again, they are different things. And while I said this before, I think it's- I think it's worth saying again, that they're used interchangeably, often, but they really are different. So betrayal trauma speaks to the partner's experience and need for healing. But then you also have to understand that as a result of the betrayal, the relationship needs healing as well. I just think it's really important to highlight the difference between the two, because we're going to be using those two terms quite a bit, and I don't want it to come across as them being the same, right? So when we say betrayal, trauma, let's think of partner trauma, and we say relational trauma, let's think of the traumatic impact on the relationship because of the betrayal.

Duane Osterlind 11:03

And I think that being able to look at both is going to help people understand it, but then also help people to develop better responses to it, so they can work with it. Right? So let's discuss how we approach the treatment and healing.

Duane Osterlind 11:52

Maybe we can start by talking about the fact that we use a relational triage approach. And what that means is that we start with healing betrayal trauma and focusing on the partner's needs before moving into relational trauma. You know, there needs to be some level of stabilization in the coupleship, and also the sobriety needs to be established first. And what that means is that the person who has done the betraying is no longer doing those things. So often couples will come to therapy initially for crisis management, but relational healing doesn't usually happen in the early stages of treatment.

Duane Osterlind 12:26

And I'd also say sometimes, you know, that's what people want to jump into that relational healing and fix it. And it's, we have to deal with the trauma, we have to deal with this betrayal trauma first, before we can move into that and work on that relationship.

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Duane Osterlind 12:40

Yeah, you know, a metaphor that I always use when I'm explaining this to, to clients is, imagine if a couple is in a car accident, and the person driving, maybe it's the husband, hurt, you know, broke his finger, or broke his arm, and the passenger, who's the partner, was really hurt, you know, she's hemorrhaging blood, there's internal injuries, and so they get to the hospital. And if there's limited, you know, nursing staff, doctors available, they're going to take the partner in first because she is more at risk, you know, she's more in danger. And it doesn't mean that they will ignore the person who's driving the car, who only has the broken arm. But at that moment, they're triaging. And in that moment, the partner's wounds and injuries are more acute, and those will have to be attended to first.

Duane Osterlind 13:30

Yeah, definitely. And you know, when we look at partner trauma, we really see it caused by betrayal. And so we look at like, first the initial shock of discovery, then we're looking at the partner's survival responses, which are induced by the betrayal and can cause further trauma to the person because they're different now than they were prior to the trauma. But we have to talk about those survival responses because usually when somebody's doing that, they're doing things that aren't in their own value system.

Marnie Breecker 13:57

Can you give me an example of that?

Duane Osterlind 13:59

Well, if someone really, you know, one of the things they valued was trust in a relationship, and now they're checking their partner's phone all the time. They're like, "I never used to do that, I never used to check my partner's phone, and now I'm doing it all the time". Or showing up, you know, they're so hurt and angry, they show up at their work. "And I've never done that before". Or "I used to be really present for my children, and now I can't be," or "it's so difficult to be," or "I'm getting irritable, you know, when my kids are doing something when I never used to be that way".

Marnie Breecker 14:28

Yeah.

Duane Osterlind 14:28

I think that we have to look at all of that. And that adds more levels of trauma.

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Marnie Breecker 14:32

Absolutely. I was just gonna say I think it's worth saying also that, you know, this idea of, let's say, a partner, becoming more hyper vigilant as a result of the trauma whereas she was never like that before. Like you were saying, never would look at her husband's phone, never wanted to see emails, you know, never questioned what he was doing. And oftentimes, the partner really is traumatized by the fact that she is behaving in a way that she never would have before. But what further traumatizes her is that her husband often is angry because of how she's behaving, and blaming her, and sometimes raging and telling her she's crazy. And why I said that that's further traumatizing is because he's not recognizing, again, that it's the betrayal and the fact that she is literally traumatized, you know, and her brain and her nervous system is reacting according to the fact that she's been so traumatized. So she's, she didn't sign up for those behaviors, she didn't get married thinking one day, I want to be a police detective, or I want to be, you know, I want to monitor what my husband's doing. Most women don't get married wanting to do that. And so it's bad enough for them to realize that they're changing. But then when they get blamed by their husband, it's really quite a crazy making cycle. And it certainly doesn't help the relational healing.

Duane Osterlind 15:48

Right. So after that, there has to be some healing and trauma resolution for the partner in a period of sobriety maintained by the addict, and the focus of treatment can then begin to shift to relational healing. All of those responses, we have to work on those. And then you can make that shift to the relationship and actually work on the relationship and help couples learn to manage their triggers, co-regulation, communication, and boundaries. That's the part of that relational healing.

Duane Osterlind 16:15

Yeah, and we go into a lot of details about all of that in our workshop.

Duane Osterlind 16:18

Right. Let's develop an understanding of how this fits into the context of PTSD and complex PTSD, because they're gonna see those terms. So I think we should talk about it.

Marnie Breecker 16:31

Alright, so why don't we start with PTSD, which is what most people think of when talking about trauma. PTSD is associated with a single traumatic event. So if somebody experiences, you know, the diagnosis of a terminal illness, or a divorce, or an incident of being assaulted, or, you know, most people identify PTSD with veterans, right? In combat.

Duane Osterlind 16:55

Right.

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Marnie Breecker 16:56

So that's what typically it's associated with. And PTSD is a nervous system response to a high level of stress.

Duane Osterlind 17:04

Right.

Marnie Breecker 17:04

Right. So the body holds on to that, onto that stress, and then the system, the nervous system is stuck. And we can begin to understand the impact of betrayal trauma and relational trauma through the lens of PTSD. However, betrayal trauma really falls into this other category of complex PTSD.

Duane Osterlind 17:23

You know, most people are familiar with the term PTSD, we hear it. It's much more in the news, I guess, and it's more common knowledge. But many have not heard of the term Complex PTSD. So Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or C-PTSD, also known as Complex Trauma Disorder, is a psychological disorder that can develop in response to a prolonged, repeated experience of interpersonal trauma in a context in which the individual has little or no chance of escape, right? It's not just one event, it's a continuous stressor.

Marnie Breecker 17:58

Right. So this is what partners experience over the course of many years of marriage or relationships during which time they have been deceived over and over again, and exposed to long standing periods of chronic abuse and manipulation. Because it's important to acknowledge the fact that when somebody is hiding an addiction, or hiding their behavior, in order to do so, they have to lie over and over and they have to deceive, and they have to manipulate in order to keep their secret.

Duane Osterlind 17:58

Right. And that that causes the crazy making, you know, like feeling crazy, because you can't trust your own judgments, because you're being deceived all the time, right? So why is it? Why is it important to understand PTSD and complex PTSD, you know, understanding the symptoms can help us understand what we need to do to heal and recover. It frames a person's experience into something concrete, instead of just overwhelming emotions, which can often be confusing when we're experiencing this. If we can understand what our body's going through, it gives us a little bit of room to breathe, and it helps us make sense of the experience. So when a partner understands this, they can kind of go "oh, now I see what's going on".

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Marnie Breecker 19:05

Right, right. And again, that goes back to why psychoeducation is just so important, you know, in the early stages.

Duane Osterlind 19:11

Right. So, with all this information that we've shared, one of the biggest questions we get is "why is this so hard to heal from?" Many partners feel stuck, feel, you know, like, it's just so overwhelming. "I can't get through this."

Marnie Breecker 19:28

Yeah, yeah. So I would say that there's quite a few reasons why it's so hard to heal. The first would be because the greatest damage of betrayal is broken trust and once trust is destroyed, it's hard to rebuild.

Duane Osterlind 19:42

Takes time.

Marnie Breecker 19:43

And remember that, yeah, it takes a lot of time. Sometimes it can't happen. You know, many times it can, but we don't know. And then remember the metaphor of the three legged stool that we talked about at the beginning? Well, healing the whole system makes it take longer and it's more complex because you've got people that are going at different paces, and having a different experience, maybe the addict gets sober and is sober for a good year and feels so good about his recovery, but the partner is still dealing with the trauma of all of it. And, you know, and he's pushing for her to, you know, move on with it. And the relationship is certainly stuck. And it's a big mess. Really important to remember that you have to heal the whole system.

Duane Osterlind 20:23

And that takes a lot of resources. And I think also, it's important to note like, in addiction, unfortunately, addiction, relapse is part of the healing process, as addicts try to work to get better, they're not going to be perfect at it. But that can often cause more trauma, and make it harder for recovery, you know, for the relationship to recover and heal, when, when that's happening too, so that adds another layer of complexity. Healing's hard because of all the ongoing triggers that happen. I mean, we live in a sexualized culture, and there are triggers everywhere; media news, etc. You know, these triggers can bring up all those emotions again. A common thing that I hear about that is, the couple sits down to watch a movie together, they feel really close. And all of a sudden, they didn't know the movie has a storyline about an affair, and the partner goes into their trauma, the addict, or the betrayer doesn't know how to respond in a way that's helpful.

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Marnie Breecker 21:26

And gets defensive or angry.

Duane Osterlind 21:28

Yeah, and gets defensive or angry, and kind of pulls all the relationship back and pulls it all back up again. And what we have to remember about is that, you know, the nervous system is now, with that trauma, is now wired for threat and is hyper vigilant to that threat. So there's a lot to work on, you know, and that sounds overwhelming. But there is a way to do it. I also also want to kind of wrap up this first episode just talking about, you know, being a little bit on an uplifting note. Yes, it's difficult, but it can,

Marnie Breecker 21:57

Yeah, there's really a lot of hope for healing, which is why we do what we do. You know, a lot of my clients asked me, "How do you do this, this work is so depressing, it's so awful". And I say it's, it can be that way at times, especially in the beginning. But I certainly wouldn't do what I do if I didn't see an incredible amount of healing and hope. So I think maybe what we can do to leave off on this sort of uplifting note is talk about what we have seen with our own clients over the years. That may explain why some couples recover and heal, and others don't. And you know, I'm very excited that in future episodes, we're going to have some couples who identify as relational healing success stories, who are going to share with us what they did, and how they healed.

Duane Osterlind 22:38

And I think, you know, when I look back, and I look at the couples that have really overcome this betrayal, this betrayal trauma and relational trauma, one thing that is really common is that they've invested time and energy and at times financial resources into getting better, it becomes a priority in their life. They've really said, "This is what we're going to do". And it's a hard journey, but they're dedicated to the process. I mean, I think that's one thing that I see in couples that get through this, you know, another thing is that they reach out for expert help: people who know how to help them. So they seek that out, they look for professionals, and if and if they find a professional that isn't working for them, they'll go and find another professional, they'll find the person that's going to work for them.

Marnie Breecker 23:26

Yeah, and they certainly are consistent and attend therapy or group therapy regularly, you know, and 12 steps, what I see with the couples that usually do not make it is maybe an attempt at recovery and working hard in the very beginning. But then there's like a real tapering off of that. And they stopped going to meetings, they're not going to their individual therapy, they you know, they don't work the steps. And typically the message that that sends, to be quite honest, to the partners: "Listen, I know that you're traumatized and our relationship's traumatized, but I'm really not willing to do whatever it takes, you know, enough already. It's been, you know, six months, and I've done all that work, I saw therapist and-

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Duane Osterlind 24:05

"Get over it."

Marnie Breecker 24:07

Yeah, "get over it."

Duane Osterlind 24:08

And not understanding how betrayal trauma works. So understanding that six months is probably not going to be long enough for someone to move through this kind of betrayal trauma.

Marnie Breecker 24:17

Yeah, you know, I, I've often had to tell men or addicts that I've worked with that it, you know, it takes a long time because there'll be in my office saying, "Listen, it's been six months, and I've done all of this stuff and everything you've told me to do I'm doing, and I've got all this sobriety, and she still can't get past it". But ironically, you know, a year or two later, after there's been a shift, and he has begun to sort of work more from the relational model, in the end, he'll look back with me and sometimes even with his partner, and laugh about the fact that at the beginning, he was saying, "Come on six months get over it." You know, because really, that's what he thinks. That's why going to specialists in betrayal trauma, I think, is so crucial. You know, in other - Most therapists are capable of handling depression and anxiety and life transitions, you know, and some other things as well. But with betrayal trauma, that's a real nuanced area of psychotherapy. And I can't tell you how many people have ended up in my office that have come in with, you know, treatment-induced trauma, because they've gone to get help from well-meaning professionals who are trying to treat them, but really had no idea how to treat relational and betrayal trauma.

Duane Osterlind 25:30

I've seen the same thing. And that can be heartbreaking, because that's another level of work that has to be done or undone. So yeah, definitely, I get that too. You know what, one thing else I noticed, too, is when people really heal, they invest in all the resources available to them. They read books, they listen to podcasts, they go to support groups, they use all the resources available to them. And when they do that, and they walk through it, it is amazing to see some of the relationships that come out of this process. Yes, there's still pain. And yes, the relationship is not what it was before. But some, in some ways, it's a deeper, meaningful relationship. And it's so... I mean, I think that's what keeps me doing this work, it's so amazing to see that; trusting each other and loving each other through this process. And coming out the other side and having these deep, meaningful, probably deeper relationships than they ever had even going into this process. And that's amazing.

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Marnie Breecker 26:29

That's something, a lot of couples say that for sure. And, and you know, we acknowledge that it's different to hear two therapists talk about the fact that you can heal, but again, that's why we're going to be bringing on actual couples who have gone through this process who can share their own journey with you. Because I do think talking or hearing from people who have truly been through it, and have come in on the other side could bring a lot of hope. So-

Duane Osterlind 26:29

I'm so excited to hear that. I'm so excited.

Marnie Breecker 26:49

Oh I can't wait to have him on. Me too! So we're going to list some of those resources that Duane was just talking about on our website, helpingcouplesheal.com, so you can check those out. And hopefully you'll find some help there. And that's all for now. We are really appreciative of you being here. Thank you for listening, and we will talk to you next week.

Duane Osterlind 27:14

Yeah, we'll see you in the next episode.

HCH Narrator 27:17

Thank you for listening to the Helping Couples Heal Podcast, where your healing is the number one priority. If you'd like additional resources about betrayal trauma, or to learn more about the Workshop, please visit helpingcouplesheal.com. If you are finding the podcast helpful. Please support Marnie and Dwayne continuing to reach others impacted by betrayal trauma by leaving a review on iTunes and sharing this podcast with someone you care about. Once again, thank you for listening. We're grateful for your trust and look forward to continuing to support you on your journey of healing.