



## Episode 3

### Pathologizing the Partner vs. Partner Trauma Model

#### **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](http://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 1:17**

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.

**Marnie Breecker 2:14**

Welcome back, everyone. Thank you for joining us today. We're going to be talking about the difference between the two approaches to the treatment of betrayal trauma. So I am here with my partner in crime, Duane Osterlind. How are you, Duane?

**Duane Osterlind 2:28**

I'm doing great, actually, I'm super excited because this is our third episode, and we've launched the podcast, and people are already downloading it. And it's really exciting. It's really exciting to me to see that people are going to get this helpful information.

**Marnie Breecker 2:42**

Yeah, I'm really excited too. And thank you guys for being here. We know that you have a lot of options these days in terms of what you listen to, and tons of podcasts to choose from. So we're glad that you're here. And we are going to jump in and get started, and what we're going to be talking about today is the traditional codependency and co-addiction model, and the partner trauma model, which are two very different approaches to treating this topic or treating this issue. I think that this is an incredibly important topic because so many of our clients, when they come in, they've already been to other therapists, and they're experiencing probably more trauma - we'll get into this in a later episode - It's something called treatment induced trauma, where they have been to other therapists who have really pathologized them and lifted them from that lens of the codependency and co-addiction model, which we're going to be talking about today. And so especially for people who are early on, maybe just found out about the betrayal and are just starting to look for help, I think this will really be an important topic for them, because it'll help them understand the difference between those two approaches, and then choose the model that that feels like the right one for them.

**Duane Osterlind 3:52**

Also, one point that I want to bring up is that a lot of times we use the term addict or addiction in our podcast. You can still have this betrayal even if you've had infidelity in your relationship, you can experience a lot of these traumas in the same way. But for simplicity we use the term addict. But if you struggled with any kind of infidelity, stay tuned. I think this is going to be helpful for you.

**Marnie Breecker 4:18**

Yeah, so we're talking about any intimate relational or sexual betrayal. So that could be-

**Duane Osterlind 4:22**

Right.

**Marnie Breecker 4:23**

-One affair, it could be multiple affairs, it could be a full blown history of addiction or compulsivity. It really, it's less, to be honest. And I think that people that listen are going to see this as we go along. It's less about the sexual behavior, and it's more about the experience of the betrayal.

**Duane Osterlind 4:38**

Right? Definitely. And I think that's such a good point.

**Marnie Breecker 4:42**

Thank you. Okay, so why don't we jump in? We can start with trying to give some background to all of you who might be unfamiliar with this particular topic. The traditional approach to the treatment of sex addiction was really similar to the approach that was used to treat partners of alcoholics, and it really strongly encouraged 12 Step participation. And then Pat Karns, who, who Duane and I studied under when we were becoming sex addiction therapists, and he's the leading expert in this field, he introduced a task model for sex addiction recovery. And at the time that Duane and I did our CSAT training, which was maybe about 10 years ago, it didn't focus on relational issues until task 20 of the 30 task model. And this is really counter to our approach, because as we're gonna keep talking about, and all of these episodes, our approach is very relational in nature. And it's all about integrating the partner into the addict's treatment from the very beginning. And that concept is very different from the traditional codependency model.

**Duane Osterlind 5:42**

Yeah, and I think it's important to also note the codependency model, in a way, it made sense at the time that it was created. We looked at the addict, and we said, okay, the addict has all these problems, and then we can work on the relationship. But what we found with more current research, and as the field has advanced, we really have to begin relationally right off the bat, it actually has a better outcome. And so at one time, that was the model, but realizing it just doesn't work.

**Marnie Breecker 6:17**

But unfortunately, the reality is that there are still people that are practicing from that model.

**Duane Osterlind 6:21**

But I think that's changing, I think people are beginning to see that. And as podcasts like ours come out and research comes out, I think that's growing. And I think that's very exciting.

**Marnie Breecker 6:31**

I think it's incredibly exciting too, and there has been a ton of change. But however, I mean, even as recently as a few weeks ago, I had somebody come in who had just gone to see a therapist and had quite significant trauma from feeling very, very pathologized. And made to feel as though she had something that - she wasn't the cause of her husband's addiction, but that she had played some kind of a role. And there was a lot of focus on her. And it was pretty devastating.

**Duane Osterlind 6:57**

Right, you know, "stay on your side of the street, you have to take care of your business on your side, and then I have to take care of my business, and then we can come together". And what we realize now is that that's just not the case. We're influencing each other all the time. One thing I also wanted to say about this codependency model versus the trauma model, is that a lot of times when partners would come in, and they have all of the acute emotional overwhelm as a response to that trauma, they were a lot of times just seen as crazy. They need to control this behavior. This is exacerbating the infidelity or the addiction, which really actually ended up harming the partner more.

**Marnie Breecker 7:42**

Well, yeah, because the message that it says to the partner is in some way you have some ability to control or impact your partner's acting out behavior.

**Duane Osterlind 7:52**

Right.

**Marnie Breecker 7:52**

And, and that's actually just not the case at all. And like you were saying, coming in and having all of these acute symptoms of trauma that might look a little bit like some kind of pathology. The truth is that trauma creates symptoms that make us look that way. I mean, I can tell you that when I've been at the worst, when I've experienced the worst trauma in my life, I probably looked really crazy too. And if I walked into, you know, a therapist's office and didn't give any context and didn't tell them what had just gone on, they might have thought I was crazy. Think about it from this perspective, the clients that come in, they feel like they're going crazy, right? So what they really need is to be normalized on some level and to be validated, and for them to understand that what they're experiencing is trauma, as opposed to being thrown this label of co-addiction or "you've got codependency", and then they feel oh, "so I must be crazy. There is something wrong with me". And that's not in their best interest.

**Duane Osterlind 8:47**

Yeah, I have to look back at my own history as working as a treatment professional. When I started working as an intern a long time ago, and I worked in addiction treatment, this was the model that was promoted. And as I've evolved as a clinician, I just saw that that didn't work. There's something wasn't right about it, wasn't working, I was really able to see how the partner was really left behind in this old codependency model of treatment.

**Marnie Breecker 9:17**

Yeah, absolutely. There were so, so few resources for partners even as recently as eight or nine years ago, right when we were new in the field. And as you said the only real treatment model was the codependency model. But then, as clinicians who were advocating for more of a partner trauma stance, started to sit down with partners and really listened to what they were saying and how they described their experiences. It was really easy to see that what they were experiencing was trauma. And sadly, the reality is that up until maybe at least 2009 or 2010, when the field started to acknowledge partner trauma, partners were often, as we said, immediately labeled with a disease of codependency or co-addiction. And many professionals failed to recognize the client's acute emotional overwhelm as a response to trauma, and instead diagnose them with codependency. So, or sometimes even borderline personality disorder or just saw them as crazy, which is really tragic and caused so much more harm.

**Marnie Breecker 9:23**

Right. And what we realize now is that that's just not the case. We're influencing each other all the time. And we're learning that, actually, co-regulation is a better model for healing. And that's part of this whole process here.

**Marnie Breecker 10:32**

So when we look at the historical co-addiction model, it presumes that the partner has her own disease, and then this label of disease, which is often identified as co-addiction, as we've said, is given to partners who are seen as attempting to control the sex addict, and/or his addiction. Treatment then, is about helping her to stop her attempts to control and to recognize those attempts as signs of her own pathology.

**Duane Osterlind 10:56**

Right. And I think that's the saddest part with that, then her trauma responses are really misunderstood. And they were a lot of times just seen as crazy, they need to control this behavior. This is exacerbating the infidelity or the addiction, which really actually ended up harming the partner more and just seen as acting out behaviors.

**Marnie Breecker 11:19**

Right? What's missed is, is recognizing those trauma reactions as a desperate attempt to find safety in an unsafe situation. This person does not feel safe, they are shocked by what they have discovered. They don't know what- they feel like their lot, their life has been a lie, and they are desperate to find safety. So then how that looks in treatment is that the immediate focus, if someone is pathologizing a partner and saying she has codependency or co-addiction, and they want to get her to abstain from those controlling efforts and behaviors, and they want to explore her family of origin issues and try to figure out why she is codependent and then often referring her to a 12 step codependency program. So you know, picture a partner, and I'm sure that you can think of many that you've worked with, as I can, who finds out that her husband's been living a double life and lying and psychologically manipulating her for years to cover up that double life. And then she finds out about the betrayal. And in that instant, her world and her reality is completely shattered. And she's shocked and she's devastated. And as you and I know, she's completely traumatized. So then she, in a state of trauma, comes to therapy, desperately looking for help. And then if she's seeing somebody who's working from that traditional codependency model, told she's the problem, and that that's what needs to be focused on. And I truly can't think of anything more invalidating. And that could cause further trauma to a person in that situation. People automatically labeling them and treating them as codependent without actually taking a full assessment and really getting to know them, and really looking at their history and looking at their current presenting symptoms, and just listening to what they have to say, rather than immediately throwing some kind of diagnosis on them. I will tell you that when I was hired years ago to work at a treatment facility in LA that specializes in sex addiction and infidelity and betrayal, I was told in my interview that nobody else who worked there, none of the staff members were willing to work with the partners. And I, you know, inquired about that and was curious and was told that they all thought that they were crazy. And to be quite honest with you, you know, I did get that job. And I worked there for a while. And that was never my experience. Very rarely did I work with somebody who ultimately had one of those other psychiatric disorders. You know, it's possible, of course, there's always going to be people that-

**Duane Osterlind 13:44**

Right.

**Marnie Breecker 13:45**

- you know, but generally speaking, what I saw, you know, across the board at that treatment facility, were women coming in who were devastated by the impact of betrayal that were traumatized. And as their trauma symptoms lessened, and as they healed, and often as their relationships healed, a lot of those or often many, or most of those symptoms disappeared.

**Duane Osterlind 14:05**

Right, now that mirrors my same experience, because I've had partners come in to my office and go through that, you know, they were with a therapist that was very codependency focused. And for some reason they found, or they're looking for hope, because it's not working for them. And they come in and when I would validate their experience of trauma in some ways, just that moment, there was a visual sigh of relief, like, oh, my gosh, you get me, you understand me? I'm not crazy.

**Marnie Breecker 14:39**

Yeah!

**Duane Osterlind 14:40**

And it's such a powerful experience to see that, then to help clients and partners who've been betrayed through that.

**Marnie Breecker 14:47**

Well, yeah. Because, you know, as we were just talking, I was thinking to myself, usually what happens is that when they first discover their husband and the betrayal, and they're having a huge reaction, right, because they're experiencing trauma their husband often tells them that they're crazy, and they're overreacting, right and, and so you know, "you're making a huge deal of this" and "chill out" and all of whatever it is that they're saying. And then they go into a therapist and imagine if the therapist is pathologizing them or conceptualizing them from that same lense, even if they don't use the word crazy. People can often pick up on the energy that's coming at them. And, you know, and often will come out of the therapeutic experience and say, "that therapist thought I was crazy. That therapist definitely thinks there's something wrong with me or I contributed to this problem."

**Duane Osterlind 15:33**

Right? Yeah, definitely. And I've had the same experiences. I mean, we react to trauma in that way. And our behavior changes and yeah, can be seen as, as crazy, it can be easily labeled as crazy. I agree with that.

**Marnie Breecker 15:48**

Absolutely. I think it's worth saying that there has been a shift in the field with more of a focus on partner trauma.

**Duane Osterlind 15:55**

Definitely.

**Marnie Breecker 15:56**

For sure, but it still happens today. Alright, so let's look at how the partner trauma model is so different from this codependency model. So I would say that the first and most important thing is that the partner trauma model is sensitive to the partner's experience, and therefore the treatment takes the focus off of the addict and redirects, redirects the attention to the needs of the partner. And then also, the trauma model includes information specifically on the traumatic impact of the addiction and the behavior on his partner. And the crucial part of this is that it happens from the very beginning. And you know, as you know, Duane, we are going to be devoting an entire episode coming up to integrating the partner trauma model into the addict streaming from the beginning. Because we think that that's incredibly important. And what that does is it helps to reduce denial around the impact of his behaviors on others. And that helps him in his recovery, because it encourages empathy, which is really a crucial component of relational healing and repair. So what we want our listeners to know is that this is the model that we use when we're working with clients who have been impacted by betrayal. And it's how we conceptualize a partner's experience. And we look at her trauma. And it's 100% the focus of this podcast series and of our workshop.

**Duane Osterlind 17:10**

Right. And I think it's also really important that part of this model looks at the intimacy component. When we look at sex addiction and infidelity, we're also looking at an intimacy disorder. And intimacy disorders require relational work, and we start that right away. And often the person who has done the betrayal or the infidelity or struggling with an addiction, has a lot of their own internal trauma that stops them from being relational. Intimacy disorders require relational work. And relational work is being able to relate to your partner; understand how they're feeling, how to give that feeling back, and exchange the emotional component back and forth with each other to understand how we impact our partner.

**Marnie Breecker 18:02**

Right. And that's a perfect example about why if you look at just the traditional model of codependency, and even looking at using simply a 12 step model to try to heal this, it doesn't work. Because if the sex addict caused the betrayal, then it makes sense that he's not going to be able to repair the relationship, if he stays on his side of the street, while his partner is bleeding and lying alone by herself on the other side of the street.

**Duane Osterlind 18:27**

Right. And I think this is the really hard part to understand, is that the person who has done the betrayal is going to be a key for the partner's healing, that relationship is going to heal this trauma. But if you don't know how to do it, or it's difficult for you, you definitely have to get coached in that and supported in that in being relational, especially when you're, you know, you're dealing with such intense emotions. But that does happen in this trauma sensitive model, you learn how to do it.



**Marnie Breecker 19:01**

Yeah, you know, the reality is that when somebody has been engaging in these behaviors for so long, and they have, you know, as you mentioned, an intimacy disorder, it doesn't come naturally to them to do the very things that they need to do to help heal their relationship. You know, empathy, for instance, doesn't just come naturally. So most sex addicts and people that have, you know, been betraying their most intimate partner really need to learn the skill of empathy and be coached its practice. And that's why people come into therapy, oftentimes, that's one of the benefits that people get from coming into therapy in response to betrayal. And so I think it's really important, maybe one of the the biggest takeaways, from what is the difference between the partner model and the partner trauma model, and that other model is that the trauma model does not conceptualize the partner as someone with their own disease, as someone who has experienced significant wounding in response to sex addiction or betrayal. And who then needs to have the person who hurt her participate in the healing process, at least if they're going to try to stay together.

**Duane Osterlind 20:03**

Right.

**Marnie Breecker 20:04**

So partners present in therapy because they've been betrayed, and they're traumatized. And if they also happen to share information about their family of origin that points to a history of codependency and they express interest in working on those issues in therapy, then that's a different story. But even in that case, that would still have to happen once the client is stable and some level of trauma reduction has occurred, specifically with regards to the betrayal. So working on codependency and family of origin issues would occur later in treatment. So in a relational triage model, which is how we work, the treatment would focus on the reason the client states she has sought help, which is to heal from the traumatic impact of betrayal. So from a relational perspective, healing can only occur in the context of a couple working together. The partner does, of course, have to work on her own healing so that regardless of whether or not she stays in the relationship, she can recover and go on to live a healthy and happy life. But in order for the relationship to heal, the person who has betrayed his partner must actively participate in healing the relationship and helping her heal her trauma. And we go into quite a bit of detail about how that occurs in an upcoming episode. So I'm not going to focus too much on that now. But I do think that a few things worth noting, in case you're wondering what that actually looks like, in treatment setting would be an addict doing a full Formal Disclosure, empathy building, establishing and honoring boundaries and agreements, immediately ceasing all forms of emotional abuse (lies and manipulation), and then learning this idea of co-regulation, which is what is used for him to support his partner and help her recover from triggers and trauma reaction.

**Duane Osterlind 21:41**

And I think what's so important to note is that this is hard work.

**Marnie Breecker 21:45**

Absolutely. And, you know, this is hard work. And it's for so many different reasons that it's very multi-layered. I mean, if even if we look at what we were talking about a few minutes ago about the treatment induced trauma, remember that you could, a couple can arrive in a therapist's office, having now already had treatment induced trauma, and that now can set the couple back, because there's been more trauma, and it takes away from the healing that could have occurred, right? So then that results in clients becoming hesitant to trust the new professionals. And then this process of establishing trust in the therapeutic relationship, again, redirects time and focus away from relational healing. So we really encourage you, if you are a couple struggling with betrayal, and you need help, please make sure to find a therapist who works from a trauma perspective.

**Duane Osterlind 22:32**

Absolutely. I think that's so critical.

**Marnie Breecker 22:35**

But the great news is that there are so many therapists out there today practicing from this model. And they're relatively easy to find: APSATS is one, an organization that's devoted to training therapists specifically in this model, and you can find Certified Partner specialists by visiting their website at [apsats.org](http://apsats.org). Or you can go to the [helpingcouplesheal.com](http://helpingcouplesheal.com) website and we will have the link posted there as well.

**Duane Osterlind 22:58**

Yeah, we'll list it all there so people can find it. Thank you so much for joining us today on the Helping Couples Heal Podcast. We appreciate you listening, and it is an honor to be supporting you on your journey of healing.

**Marnie Breecker 23:11**

We hope that you will join us next time and until then take good care.

**HCH Narrator 23:14**

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](http://helpingcouplesheal.com). If you are finding the podcast helpful, please support Marnie and Duane in 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.