



Episode 4 Survival Responses

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 1:17

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.

Duane Osterlind 2:12

Hello, everyone, welcome back to the Helping Couples Heal Podcast. It's me and Marnie, and I'm super excited about today's episode.

Duane Osterlind 2:23

I am too. And this is such an important topic. And I haven't personally seen a lot of emphasis on this, so I'm glad we're going to be talking about this today. So in this episode, we're going to discuss the two causes of trauma in a betrayed partner's experience. The first is what I think most people think of when they think of the shock of betrayal. So that's the initial trauma, which is commonly referred to as the Discovery. So this is the moment that a partner's world has changed due to finding out some painful new information. And then the second trauma is the individual's trauma induced survival responses. And this is the part that isn't often addressed.

Duane Osterlind 3:04

And that's why I'm so excited that we're going to do this episode. I'm a little surprised that in some ways, this information is not more available. Many partners I've talked to have felt quite lost without this information about survival responses. It's such a big part of trauma.

Duane Osterlind 3:24

Yeah, I agree. And I think that- I think that it's not just left out, throughout betrayal trauma treatment. I think in general, I think it's often missed when treating trauma. So not just betrayal trauma, but any kind of trauma.

Duane Osterlind 3:36

Right? I would agree with that. I mean, trauma, it's easy to focus in on the event. But when we look at this part of trauma, we're looking at those survival responses to the event. Marnie, can you define that a little bit more?

Duane Osterlind 3:52

Sure. So yeah, these survival responses begin as a way for a person's mind and body to protect itself from the discovery trauma, right? So a person finds out in a moment of shock that they have been in a relationship with someone who's been, let's say, cheating on them for X amount of years, right? And then they react in a way that is meant to protect them, but ultimately only lead to more traumatic experiences. And so, in my opinion, treatment has to address both of those traumas in order to effectively resolve the long term effects of trauma.

Duane Osterlind 4:26

Definitely. And I think it's easy to overlook that second part. So I think you have an interesting story about how you discovered this part of trauma and treating it.

Marnie Breecker 4:39

Yeah, I am, I had always treated betrayal just based on the initial shock of discovery. And that's the trauma, and it is very traumatic for both a partner and the person who caused the betrayal. And then it was back in I think, 2000 and I want to say 2010, maybe or 2011 and I was working with Dr. Omar Minwalla at the Institute for Sexual Health. And he had been working with a therapist in Houston named Sylvia Jason. And she mentioned in a conversation that she did these groups with partners that she worked with in Houston, based on a particular training that she'd had a certification in called trauma resolution therapy, or TRT, that was not specific to betrayal. But this was about resolving trauma. And it was from both of those two causes of trauma. So the first would be the initial, the initial trauma that happens, an example would be if somebody is on vacation, or was on vacation, for instance, in New Orleans, and the hurricane happened, that was incredibly traumatic, right? So that would be the traumatic event that most of us focus on. But then this TRT took it a step further and said, but now look, as a result of the trauma happening, you are now fighting for your life, essentially, you are now utilizing certain coping mechanisms, and you're having responses that are actually survival responses to help you cope with the trauma. The problem is that oftentimes, even though it's a desperate attempt for us to try to protect ourselves, it really ends up causing ourselves more trauma. Does that make sense?

Duane Osterlind 6:17

I think that makes sense. I mean, when I look at it, it can be easy not to be able to see both of those parts of it. This first part, which is like you said, you know, you have this traumatic event, and you can see it, and even as a clinician working with couples or working through trauma, that's usually what we talk about first. Right? But really, I think what you're saying is this second part, these things we do to cope with that creates its own set of trauma responses. So yeah, I mean, I think I think that makes sense. And people don't see that. It's not always easy to see that.

Marnie Breecker 6:53

Right. So as an example, I know that the people that are listening to us are not necessarily clinicians, but are the people that are out there in the trenches going through this particular betrayal. So speaking to you guys, what I would say is the discovery, the initial discovery, for instance, can be something like seeing a receipt, or getting a phone call from an acting out partner, or seeing some kind of tangible evidence that tells you that you have been betrayed. But then these survival responses that we're talking about would be something like, maybe starting to use alcohol, or drugs, or, or food, or even over spending as a way to try to cope, or a bigger one that I've heard from many of my clients that I've worked, with many of the partners I've worked with in the past are how they feel, the discovery of the betrayal has impacted their ability to be present for their children. So for them, really feeling like they were no longer a really present, available parent, because you know, in the past, maybe they came home from work, and they spent time with their kids and help their kids with their homework, or went outside and played ball. And then after the discovery, they're so desperate to find more information and to find safety that instead of spending time with their children, after they get home from work, they're now locked in a room on their computer searching for more evidence or searching for treatment options.

Duane Osterlind 8:10

Right? So I think it's so important to share with the audience how this secondary trauma manifests itself. You know, I recently had a client come in who just said to me, after discovery, and actually discovery had been like four or five months ago, it wasn't just like, this day, it had been actually some time. And just saying to me and looking at me, "I'm just not, I'm just not myself anymore. Something. I used to be so confident. I used to be so strong, and I feel so weak. I feel so helpless. I'm not the same person anymore. What's wrong with me?"

Marnie Breecker 8:45

Yeah, that is exactly what we're talking about. It's because oftentimes, as a result of the initial trauma, partners start to behave in ways that are not ways that they would have before the trauma. So yeah, the truth is, they're not themselves. Oftentimes, they are not themselves. They're not behaving like themselves, they don't feel like themselves. And I think one of our jobs as therapists is to help them understand that what they're describing to us is a secondary form of trauma. This is the survival response, which yes, again, I mean, I've said this before, in this episode, I'm going to say it again, it's a maladaptive way of trying to cope with the trauma that occurred. And I remember you mentioned to me, I don't know a couple months ago that you had a client who came in who had quit smoking almost 20 years ago, and had started to smoke again, right after finding out about the betrayal. I think that's a really good way of illustrating what we're talking about here. It was an attempt to survive, she was trying to survive and one of the ways that her body told her she could do it was to go back to something that was really unhealthy for her, and that made her feel worse about herself. Another example is that oftentimes partners start to act out with compulsive sexual behavior, or behave in certain types of sexual behavior that's not congruent with their own values.

Duane Osterlind 10:02

Right?

Marnie Breecker 10:02

So these are things that I think a lot of people that are listening can relate to: just becoming somebody who they don't even like anymore, and not having the words or the language to explain that what they're experiencing is actually trauma. And so I think one of our greatest tasks as therapists, when we're dealing with partners, and when we're dealing with addicts, is to help people understand survival responses as another dimension of trauma, and to normalize those responses and help people start to attend to those wounds. Right? Not ignore them, help them, help them start to identify what are their survival responses, and hopefully some of them will be very adaptive and healthy coping mechanisms. But identifying the ones that are not gives us a jumping off point to help people start to look at those and treat those and heal from them.

Duane Osterlind 10:53

Right, a lot of partners who come in, and they don't see this, they go right and blame themselves like, "I must be broken", or "something's wrong with me." And normalizing that for them that for trauma, this is a normal response. This is how the body responds to it. This is how as human beings we respond to it, and just normalize it. And then also creating room for the person who's done the betrayal to understand it, and give them room to work through it.

Marnie Breecker 11:27

Yeah, absolutely. Focusing on the secondary trauma, which are these survival responses, allows the process as, you said, of self forgiveness. And it also facilitates healing by helping both the partner and the addict understand the underlying reasons for these responses and as an attempt to survive and to cope.

Duane Osterlind 11:46

Right.

Marnie Breecker 11:46

So one thing we can do as clinicians is to help the clients replace those maladaptive responses with healthy coping skills. I think that's really an essential first step in healing. And then stabilizing their trauma symptoms, which result from discovery is crucial. And so is helping them recognize some of their behavioral responses as trauma. So what we're saying in this episode is that it helps to do both.

Duane Osterlind 12:09

Right.

Marnie Breecker 12:09

And recognizing these trauma survival responses is not just important for partners in their healing, it's also important for the addict, because it allows them both the language to talk about it, and allows them to conceptualize what's going on in a way that they can both understand.

Duane Osterlind 12:23

And I think by just being able to see both sides of this trauma, you know, the betrayal trauma, right, right in the front of the discovery, and then these survival responses, it allows room for them to be tolerant of these experiences. Once people kind of know like, "this is trauma", they can be a little softer to it.

Marnie Breecker 12:45

Yeah, the sad part is that often without this understanding of trauma or survival responses, partners are blamed for the responses.

Duane Osterlind 12:55

Right.

Marnie Breecker 12:55

So these very survival responses often give the addict, who is most likely experiencing their own internal shame, permission to put blame on the innocent party, right, who's the partner, and they may call them crazy, or make statements like "you also have a disease" or "look, you're drinking every night, obviously, you know, you know, there's something wrong with you, too." And what that does is just perpetuates the cycle of gaslighting and abuse. Unknowingly, by the way, I'm not saying there's anything conscious or intentional, but that's what happened.

Duane Osterlind 13:25

Well, it's like, you know, recently, some clients came in - and I hear this quite often - where he's like, "I've told her everything, I've said everything. I'm not doing anything wrong, it's been six or seven months. But she just keeps... something's wrong. She's crazy. She won't leave me alone, she won't let this go. She won't move on." And they don't even know what to do. And they don't realize that this is the trauma.

Marnie Breecker 13:55

Right? And because other professionals sometimes miss it, too. And they're not telling the addict, "listen, what's going on, what you're describing is your partner's - these are trauma and survival responses, and you can actually help her." So again, if we have professionals that are also missing it, then obviously they're not going to be able to help direct the addict to more productive ways of helping their partner heal.

Duane Osterlind 14:21

Right. And so if partners and addicts don't understand this dynamic, don't understand what's going on, the addict on his side can't build empathy, can't be patient with the partner to develop safety. Right? Because they're just like, you tell your partner "Oh, you're just crazy. Get over it. What are you doing? Why are you doing all these crazy things? Why are you checking everything?" It doesn't create a sense of empathy, it doesn't create a sense of safety where they can heal their trauma. So it's so critical that the addict and the partner know what's actually going on with them.

Marnie Breecker 14:54

Yeah, because think about how different it would look if we had a partner who is quote/unquote "acting out" or at least, that's what it looked like from the outside, right? But really what that was is a survival response. And the addict was educated in this, let's say, hears this episode or talks to other therapists or learns about it in groups. And then he's at home with his partner, and she starts to, quote/unquote "act out", he recognizes it as a survival response. And he's able to assure her that she's not crazy, or he's able to intervene and say, "I think what's going on is that you're really triggered right now."

Duane Osterlind 15:27

Right.

Marnie Breecker 15:27

You know, and "I know this must feel like, it's not like you" and "what can I do to support you" are just really naming it and participating in the healing aspect, rather than blaming her and pointing out that she's crazy or overreacting.

Duane Osterlind 15:41

You know, also, that just creates room for the person who's done the betrayal. It creates room for them to be patient. I think that's such a huge part. Once they understand trauma, I see a lot of times they're able to take a step back and not take it as a personal attack.

Marnie Breecker 16:01

Absolutely.

Duane Osterlind 16:01

They can say, "Oh, this is trauma that's happening right in front of me, let me be compassionate to it." And that can change the dynamic in a relationship so much.

Marnie Breecker 16:13

Well again, it goes back to the idea of either creating a further rupture in the relationship or being able to help repair. So if an addict goes into the you're crazy, or "Why aren't you over it by now?" Or "I've been sober for six months and this is an overreaction." And "have you been talking about this with your therapist?" That's likely an opportunity for there to be an additional rupture and for the partner to feel blamed and not understood. But if he's able to help her in the moment, recognize that she's having a trauma response, that can go a great distance in terms of helping the relationship heal.

Duane Osterlind 16:47

Right, being able to say "that's a survival response, that's happening right here, right now, I can do something different". And yeah, I definitely agree with that.

Marnie Breecker 16:56

So helping clients conceptualize those, you know, quote/unquote "crazy behaviors" as survival responses, or essentially, the brain's desperate attempt to get safety/to find safety, or to cope with the traumatic experience is really, really validating for the partner. I don't think that we can stress that enough. And once we name that, then she can really get it that she's not crazy, and that her behavior makes sense in the context of trauma. And this is really important for both members of the relationship, and as we said, can set the stage for healing and empathy building, which is a critical ingredient for relational healing.

Duane Osterlind 17:33

Yes, without a doubt.

Marnie Breecker 17:35

Because without the empathy, the partner will just continue to feel invalidated and misunderstood, and then they'll most likely remain stuck. And then they'll probably both be frustrated with a huge disconnect between them.

Duane Osterlind 17:45

Definitely. Yeah, I think this information is critical for partners and addicts on their healing journey to understand what's going on on a mental level, on a biological level, and how that all works together. With that information, they can work on the other stuff, which is "how do we respond? How do we repair this now that we understand these different parts of trauma, specifically, these survival responses?"

Marnie Breecker 18:12

So we encourage everyone to advocate for their own healing. And that means that if you're working with a therapist who hasn't addressed the secondary trauma, you can determine whether or not that would be helpful for you and you can bring that up. So you may be wondering, well, what else can you do if you're listening to this episode, and you realize that you have indeed been engaging in behaviors or responding in ways that you didn't know until now were actually survival responses. I would say that making a list of those survival responses would be really helpful. Actually writing it out and include any specific examples you can remember. For example, if one of your identified survival responses was to isolate, then think about isolation and how it's been manifesting in your life and write down the specific incident. So in other words, don't just write down "I have isolated", write down the specific times you can remember that you've isolated. So maybe if you have declined invitations to parties or other social events that you would have otherwise gone to, write down those specific invitations that you declined and the specific times you can remember where you chose to isolate.

Duane Osterlind 19:14

Right, and I think this exercise is going to help you reframe the behaviors to a perspective of forgiveness and understanding and that allows you to have compassion for yourself. Once you understand how your behavior is actually your brain's way of coping with an otherwise intolerable experience, these responses begin to make sense. So please give all the support you can. That can be extremely helpful as well.

Marnie Breecker 19:40

We hope this episode has been helpful. As you can probably tell, we are not able to emphasize enough the importance of acknowledging and identifying survival responses in order to help move a stuck or traumatized relationship in a direction of healing. The truth is that if the partner is still being called crazy by her husband after he has listened to this episode, or after he's gotten this information from another therapist or another person or in another forum, then the truth is that he is still perpetuating the cycle of abuse and gaslighting.

Duane Osterlind 20:08

Right. And one point I want to bring up is that in a later episode, we're going to address the addict and how integrating the partner trauma model into his treatment is going to be incredibly helpful for them both.

Marnie Breecker 20:21

Yeah, for their couples recovery. Absolutely, yeah. And it's also a very effective way of helping him build empathy, and realize the traumatic impact of his addiction or behavior on others, not just his partner. And this typically isn't done in a traditional addiction treatment model.

Duane Osterlind 20:36

Right? And we know this is challenging, especially for the addict in many ways, it can elicit a lot of feelings of shame and defensiveness, which can end up doing more damage. So you have to be gentle with yourself. As you go through this, we're going to do our best to help you take this information from a place of healing and support so that you can end up repairing your relationship and begin to rebuild trust and intimacy.

Marnie Breecker 21:03

Thank you so much for listening today. We hope this information has been helpful to you. If you have any questions or comments, as always, please feel free to reach out to us. You can visit the Helping Couples Heal website for our contact information. And we also encourage again, if this has resonated for you and it's something that has not yet been addressed in your own therapy, please bring it up and advocate for yourself just as you might do if you went to a doctor for some kind of a medical condition that maybe he wasn't or she wasn't aware of. So please, please advocate for yourself always. And we appreciate you. Thank you, and we look forward to connecting with you soon.

Duane Osterlind 21:42

Yeah, until the next episode. Take care.

HCH Narrator 21:47

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 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.