



Episode 6

The Sex Addict: Integrating the Partner Trauma Model (Part II)

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.

Marnie Breecker 2:13

Welcome back to the Helping Couples Heal Podcast and part two of our discussion about integrating the partner into the addict's treatment from the very beginning. So today, we are going to pick up with the topic of empathy, which is where we left off in Episode Five. And we're actually going to give you some concrete examples of empathic statements which do help with relational healing. And we're going to talk about common mistakes that addicts make in recovery, trying to fix their relationships. And finally, we're going to tell you what you can do to help your partner when she is triggered.

Duane Osterlind 2:44

Right, and I think this is such an important topic, because this can really help the addict change their behavior and really help their partner. So let's jump in and talk about empathy, which is truly one of the most important ingredients to healing a relationship that has been traumatized by betrayal. And let's start by defining empathy. So empathy is the capacity to imagine how another person might experience whatever it is they are talking about, on a feeling level, the capacity to attune to another's feelings based on what they have said, being able to really attune to how they may be feeling.

Marnie Breecker 3:28

Yeah, and I mean, the first thing that came to mind when you just shared the definition is so many partners that I work with, when they come in, and they're talking about the despair that they feel about their relationships, even in recovery is that they feel like that they are not understood by their husbands or their partners, they feel like their husband is not able to attune to how they are feeling. And that's a big problem. And Duane, I remember when you and I did a workshop, I think it was when you and I were doing a workshop years ago, I remember a couple that was doing one of the experiential exercises in the middle of the room. And he was just not able to look at her and see what you just described, like see her body language, look at her face, and imagine what she might be feeling. He just couldn't do it. He was completely lost. And she was devastated. Especially when she saw that the other husbands were able to do that with their wives, like that was just because that's so important.

Duane Osterlind 4:25

Right. And I think it's important to point out that for an addict who is going through this process, sometimes it becomes very hard to be empathetic, because they're feeling so much shame and guilt. They're really into their own feelings. So that becomes a really difficult process for them to do. So I also want to, I guess, reach out to the addicts out there and go, this is hard work. You've got to really work on yourself so that you can be present and listen. And that means regulating your own shame. And I think we're going to talk more about that as we go on through this. But I think that's just so important to say that.

Marnie Breecker 5:10

Yeah, so let's just keep reiterating as much as we can, that one of the greatest problems that couples encounter after betrayal is that the addicts often lack the empathy that really is necessary for relational healing. And so we cannot, we cannot emphasize enough how important this conversation about empathy is. So please listen carefully. If you're not driving, get out a piece of paper and a pen, take notes, but really listen to this, because I'm telling you that, that your partner needs you to understand. She needs you to get it. And she needs you to really get it on a feeling level, not just say the right words, not to say "I understand that you feel traumatized," or "I understand that I have caused you pain," but to really be able to show her that you get that on a feeling level.

Duane Osterlind 5:59

Right. And I'm also gonna say, you know, it may have to, for the person who's done the betrayal, and they have a lot of shame and guilt, it may have to start there with just the words as you learn how to do it. As you learn, as you work on your own recovery and you work on your own shame resilience, you will get better at doing it. But I'd also say sometimes it has to start there, just with the words, but you work to a point where you can truly get it and attune to your partner's pain.

Marnie Breecker 6:31

Absolutely. Alright, so let's talk about common mistakes that addicts in recovery often make in trying to fix their relationships. These are the things that we hear pretty often from our clients.

Duane Osterlind 6:42

And I think this is really, really good, because we give some concrete examples, because sometimes the addict will say these things thinking they're being empathetic, when really they're talking about their own pain.

Marnie Breecker 6:55

Right. Good point. So yeah, so the first one, I would say, is constantly saying "I'm sorry," but then continuing to do the same thing, right? So that really the "I'm sorry" doesn't mean anything if you keep doing it, right?

Duane Osterlind 7:05

Right.

Marnie Breecker 7:06

So continuing to make excuses, and to rationalize and justify or minimize the impact of the addiction or the betrayal on your partner-

Duane Osterlind 7:15

Right.

Marnie Breecker 7:16

- Pushing her to move on, acting as if nothing happened, pushing for sex or intimacy before your partner is ready, and expecting a pat on the back or praise from your partner related to the length of your sobriety. And this is one that I see really often; I remember years ago working with a partner in a group setting who shared that she baked cupcakes for her husband for his one year anniversary of abstinence. And that was after being given the impression that maybe he expected her to make a big deal about it, and to be as excited as he was. And remember, the other woman in the group was shocked and asked why she would do that. And I'll never forget the client saying that she felt she was expected to be his cheerleader, because in life, she had always been his cheerleader. And so she felt like maybe she wasn't supportive enough, that it would negatively impact his recovery in some way. And you know, she admitted that she didn't want to celebrate the fact that her husband had honored their marital vows for one year when he was supposed to be doing that all along. And then after processing and in groups, she was so angry at herself for doing that. And she was also angry at her husband for having unreasonable expectations. So she was really relieved to be given permission from all the other women in the group to not have to do anything on the anniversary, and most importantly that it wasn't her responsibility to be his cheerleader. So in the end, of course, she never made cupcakes again. And perhaps most important to add here is that today, her husband would have absolutely no expectation of her doing anything at all to honor the anniversary of his sobriety. Because while of course, it's a really positive and important day in his life, the reality is that it was also the day that his wife's world was shattered.

Duane Osterlind 8:45

Yeah, I think that's a great example. And I think there are even some more examples of what mistakes addicts make. And going back to what we were saying earlier, where, you know, a lot of times an addict will say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again, and hoping that the partner can see that. But really, it's important to remember that for the addict, they're getting caught up in their own shame spiral. And by saying, "I'm sorry, can't you see how much pain I'm in about all the pain that I caused you?" is really redirecting the attention away from your partner back to your own pain. And I think sometimes addicts have a very difficult time understanding that.

Marnie Breecker 9:32

Yeah, so like, like, they might say something like, "why are you even with me when I'm so horrible, and I've destroyed your life."

Duane Osterlind 9:37

Right?

Marnie Breecker 9:38

Right. So now the partner then has to take care of you rather than focusing on herself and her own pain and her own healing.

Duane Osterlind 9:44

Right. And so then once again, you're not in tune to their pain. And this is something that the addict has to really work on. Because most of the time when the addict is dealing with their addiction, right, they are focused on their own pain. How do I get out of my own pain? I get out of my pain by going into my addiction or going into my infidelity or an affair, and they're used to that. So this is something new and to be able to sit with their own guilt and shame and attune to the pain that they may have caused their partner? It's difficult. It's painful. It's hard.

Marnie Breecker 10:16

Yeah. Which is why another example of a mistake that's often made is not taking responsibility for the choices that he made.

Duane Osterlind 10:23

Right.

Marnie Breecker 10:24

Right? And then another big one, I think, is lying to avoid a potentially unwanted consequence. And I'd say the most common unwanted consequence is a partner getting angry.

Duane Osterlind 10:34

Yeah. And I always tell people who've gone through this, be as honest as you can. It may hurt right now, but you're actually building trust by being honest. By putting it out there, you show that your partner, you show your partner that you're committed to this process.

Marnie Breecker 10:50

Right? Because oftentimes, if the addict starts to get honest, and then his partner gets angry, he'll come back into therapy and say, it didn't work, or it was a huge mistake. It was a nightmare. I told the truth and she got angry. And I'll say, but that's okay. That's fine. Of course, she got angry, like, think about what it was you're sharing, she has the right to get angry. It's actually a very normal response. And you told the truth. So that's okay. Now you have to learn how to sit with the discomfort you feel. But the reality is, you're really moving forward in your recovery, especially in the couple's recovery, because you were honest.

Duane Osterlind 11:25

Yeah, definitely. And that takes a lot of work. I think another big mistake is that the addict says, "Okay, now that I'm in recovery, everything should be fine." And that's just not the truth.

Marnie Breecker 11:37

No, it's not, it's not and that actually puts a burden or some kind of responsibility onto the partner thinking that he's expecting her to be moving faster, that she's not doing good enough, and can create more, more anger and more relational ruptures.

Duane Osterlind 11:54

Right. So all these things don't add to the recovery process. These are the things that you don't want to do. So let's kind of talk about some of the things that we should do.

Marnie Breecker 12:03

Yeah, why don't we give some examples of empathic statements, which really do help. So that might look like something like this: "Based on what you have said, I imagine that you might feel angry, and scared, I can see that you're sad, I know that you're in pain, it makes sense that you're angry." And I think probably the most validating statement is simply "I hear you".

Duane Osterlind 12:26

And just being present, just working to be present. Even if you're feeling overwhelmed at that moment, to do your best. And part of learning to be empathetic is sometimes saying, "Hey, I feel like you might be hurt by whatever I said." And they could go, "No, I'm not hurt, I'm angry." And that's okay to make a guess and let your partner correct you if you don't get it right, that's part of building empathy and attuning and getting better at it. It's at least trying and making that effort.

Marnie Breecker 13:00

Exactly, exactly. So Duane, why don't we try to use this language that we're teaching in a roleplay? I think you and I were talking about how we can really help to demonstrate in more of a concrete way, how this might sound in practice for people?

Duane Osterlind 13:15

That's a great idea, let's do that. So here's a common situation we hear about a lot: a couple sits down to be together and they watch a movie or they're watching a TV show. And in the show, unbeknownst to them, a scene of infidelity comes up, the partner has a trauma reaction and withdraws or gets angry, this triggers the addict's shame, and then he has his own trauma reaction and withdraws or starts a fight. And then he may say something or respond to her in a way that moves them actually further apart and creates a rupture in the relationship. We see this happen quite a bit. There's triggers out there. So Marnie, let's roleplay, how this may look in a non relational way and then we're going to do it in a relational way.

Marnie Breecker 14:06

Okay. Alright, so I'm going to be the partner.

Duane Osterlind 14:08

Right.

Marnie Breecker 14:09

"I know exactly how that woman feels. Because that's how I felt the day I found out about your addiction. I still can't believe you betrayed me and you hurt our entire family."

Duane Osterlind 14:18

"Oh, my God, that's not a real person. She's just a fictional character in a TV show. You're the one hurting our family because you're not getting over this. It's about time. It's been eight months. I've been doing everything you've asked. I've gone to therapy. I'm not doing that anymore. So get over it."

Marnie Breecker 14:35

So Duane, let's do that again, using a Relational Approach this time. "I know exactly how that woman feels. Because it's how I felt the day I found out about your addiction. I still cannot believe you betrayed me and hurt our entire family."

Duane Osterlind 14:48

"I hear you. You're right. I did betray you and I did hurt our family. It makes sense that you are triggered right now and that you're in pain, but I want you to know I'm abstinent today, and I'm fully committed to my recovery and keeping you and our family safe."

Marnie Breecker 15:06

So Duane, I think it's pretty obvious. And I'm able to hear the difference between that kind of non relational and relational examples. What do you think?

Duane Osterlind 15:15

I think so. So much of it comes across at the time of delivering that and being present for your partner, even if you're not doing it perfectly. But as you can see, in the second example, I'm really trying to be there, I'm not trying to hurt, I'm validating her feelings, I'm letting her know that I see that she's in pain, and I'm not adding any excuses, I'm not going into my own shame. And then I'm reassuring her that I'm committed to this process and to this relationship, and those are the components that you have to keep in your response.

Marnie Breecker 15:48

Yeah, and in that first example, you know, when you were saying, "she's just a fictional character in a TV show, and that's not a real person, what that person is doing then is moving the topic away from the partner's feelings and her trigger, and going more into semantics. The partner knows that it's a fictional character, she obviously knows she's watching a television show or a movie.

Duane Osterlind 16:10

Right.

Marnie Breecker 16:10

But the trigger is, "oh, my God, this is what you did to me." And so for you to sort of ignore that and go into the semantics is a big mistake. Another example of that is if a partner is expecting her husband to come home for dinner, let's say at seven o'clock, and he comes in at 7:45, and he wasn't answering his phone, and she couldn't reach him. And then they go into a therapy session, and they're discussing it. And she's like, "you know, he was an hour late and, and that's, you know, used to come home late all the time when he was acting out." And then the husband interrupts and says, "I wasn't an hour late, I was 45 minutes late," you know, that's a big one, like focusing on sort of making her wrong, or looking at the like, the very specific facts about that, as opposed to "you're right, I was late. And I imagined even being five minutes late now, with my history would make you scared, and I am so sorry."

Duane Osterlind 17:04

And if they do that response, oh my gosh, over time, the relationship changes.

Marnie Breecker 17:09

Right. So we really encourage you to use this language, which again, we kind of refer to as a relational language. And we also get that it may seem like a foreign language to you now. But really, if you practice it with your therapist, with a friend in your group, and you practice as often as necessary, then eventually you'll become comfortable using it in real life. And you'll use your own language, like you'll bring your own words and your own style to that. And then what comes with it is empathy and compassion to your partner when she is triggered. And the reality is, well, empathy comes naturally to some, as we've said before, it does not to others. And that's why we're giving such specific examples. Empathy lacks defensiveness, it lacks anger and rationalization or explanation. And it focuses only on attuning to the other person in an effort to make them feel understood. And every single partner we have ever worked with has been desperate for this. And yet, it's something that truly often does not come easy to the person who they need to hear it from the most. And that is why we created the workshop. You know, Helping Couples Heal was designed specifically with the intention of providing specific tools to help couples heal from the trauma of betrayal.

Duane Osterlind 18:24

It's just so important to be able to get these skills. So what can you do to help your partner when she is triggered? That's the question we want to answer. And we want to give you some skills, some things that you can do in those moments. And it's important to remember that partners will get triggered no matter how far along she is in her healing. This is a normal and expected response to trauma. And so in our workshop, we will help you manage these triggers effectively. Without help often these triggers create relational ruptures. And the truth is, these experiences can actually be an opportunity for increased connection and closeness. If they are navigated correctly. We know this may sound challenging, but we are here to guide you through this process. We believe that every trigger can be either an opportunity for rupture or repair and our goal is to help you avoid rupture whenever possible and consistently create opportunities for repair.

Marnie Breecker 19:24

Yeah, you know, Duane, this is really what I love most about our work. I love doing this. I love helping couples develop the skills to repair their relationships and get closer and more intimate. So imagine learning to work together as a couple to recover and heal. You know, it's possible, but it requires focused work and guidance from professionals. So I want to encourage everyone who's listening to take a moment and imagine what that might feel like to really heal and repair your relationship and to feel close to each other again. You can actually do that and there are specific steps to help, so we're going to share some of that with you now. So what we're going to share now is a way that you can actually help your partner recover from a trigger, and then create repair rather than rupture. So it's a three step process. And the first step is validation. So as soon as you realize that you've triggered your partner, or that she's having a trauma reaction, validate her experience.

Duane Osterlind 20:22

And the second step is co-regulation. So your partner's having a trauma response, which means that most likely she has seen or heard something in the present moment that has caused a reaction in her brain that tells her she is in danger. She feels unsafe, her brain has gone offline, and she is emotionally dysregulated. You can do something to help bring her back online.

Marnie Breecker 20:49

Right. So that's the co-regulation piece. And then the third step and the final piece is empathy, which we started this episode by talking about. So your partner needs to feel that you get it, that you really understand how she feels. So this is an opportunity to help her feel closer to you and to foster intimacy and trust. Or it can be an opportunity to create more distance between the two of you, to destroy trust and intimacy, and to actually trigger her again, into a trauma response.

Duane Osterlind 21:18

So if you keep these three steps in mind, validation, co regulation, and empathy, and begin to learn these skills, you can help repair your relationship. What's important to remember is that all of this requires the careful use of language and communication. Couples recovering from the traumatic impact of sex addiction on their relationship often struggled to communicate in a healthy way. So there are techniques that foster and teach assertive communication to help defuse negative emotions and allow partners to feel heard and seen. One of the things that we use a lot is the Imago Dialogue by Harville Hendricks, and it's a very structured way of communicating to each other that creates a sense of safety and containment. And in the beginning, that's often needed, because there's so much intense emotion that couples struggle with that it's hard for them to connect. And the Imago Dialogue is a starting place for them to be able to do that.

Marnie Breecker 22:25

Yeah, because even though both partners most often want to feel connected and close, often what happens is when we're using non safe or unsafe language, communication, etc, then feelings of anger and frustration and pain and resentment often come in. And that leads to passive aggressive communication. And then what happens is defensiveness, you know, occurs, and then ultimately, that's a relational rupture. So we actually teach this dialogue, the Imago Dialogue, and literally walk you through it step by step and give you opportunities to practice as a couple in our workshop, which is pretty, pretty cool.

Duane Osterlind 23:02

Pretty powerful, because it's a helpful structure for people to be able to use when they're stuck here. And especially for addicts, when they're feeling all of their overwhelming shame and guilt, they can still work to be empathetic, and it's that it helps them in a way contain all of their own feelings so that they can work on being empathetic. And we'll talk more about that. I think we should probably do a whole episode on the Imago Dialogue, because I think it's so important.

Marnie Breecker 23:32

For sure. And I think it's worth mentioning that if you do choose to practice it with each other, which we think is great, please make sure to start with using more benign content, you know, I wouldn't encourage you for the first time to start to try to use Imago and to use, you know, a really, really big topic or issue. And right now everything might seem really big. But when I say choose something small to practice, I mean, literally come up with something like "you didn't take the garbage out," or "you forgot to pick up the dry cleaning." So remember, the goal is to just practice and practice using less impactful examples. Because the goal is just to develop skills so that ultimately you can use it with more of the bigger topics and the bigger ruptures and the bigger difficulties in the relationship. But that's definitely not you know, but I wouldn't encourage you to practice for the first time using a really big issue that comes up.

Duane Osterlind 24:31

Right. Yeah.

Marnie Breecker 24:32

So we know we've given you a lot of information here. And we also know you probably won't remember everything. So we encourage you to listen to this episode as many times as necessary. And again, take notes. And in each episode, we're really just planting seeds that will continue to grow as we move together through this podcast series. And please know that our ongoing goal is always to continue to support you on your journey of healing, wherever you may be, and on your journey of connection with each other and with yourselves. We are truly honored that you're allowing us to be a part of your healing. This is a complex, often exhausting and painful process and we know that it requires a lot of energy and it does not happen fast. Please, please please be gentle and patient with yourselves and compassionate with each other. It requires a lot of energy and does not happen fast. Please be gentle and patient with yourselves and compassionate with each other. Thank you again for listening. Thank you for allowing us to support you. And we look forward to continuing to support you on this journey of healing. Until the next time, take care.

Duane Osterlind 25:40

Take care.

HCH Narrator 25:43

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.