



Episode 10

A Partner Sensitive Recovery Plan

HCH Narrator 0:29

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 to the Helping Couples Heal Podcast. I'm here with Marnie Breecker, my name is Duane Osterlind. And today we are going to talk about the circle plan. And both Marnie and I talked about how we thought this would be an important episode because a lot of times we refer to the circle plan, and a lot of people don't know what that is or what that means. And we're also going to talk about the fourth circle that isn't in the original circle plan. So Marnie, let's just talk about what is this circle plan?

Marnie Breecker 2:51

So the circle plan is essentially a recovery plan that was introduced years ago. And it's a three circle plan which essentially establishes an addict's sobriety. And so the inner circle, which we look at as being like, if you look at this as a traffic light, the inner circle would be red. And that means stop, you know, these are the behaviors that the addict is going to be abstaining from. And if he engages in these behaviors, then that essentially constitutes a relapse in his program and losing his sobriety. The middle circle would be yellow, caution, danger, and that would be triggers, either internal feeling states or external triggers, that would lead him into his inner circle. And then the outer circle, which is green, is go, we want you to live in this place. So this would include all of the healthy behaviors, wellness, activities, hobbies, fun, all of the things that would lead the addict to be as far away from his inner circle as possible. So in a nutshell, that's the original circle plan, as was introduced by SAA years ago.

Duane Osterlind 3:58

We're gonna put a worksheet on the website as well that you'll be able to download with this episode. But I also like to tell people, it kind of looks like a target and it moves outward. And the reason is, because sexuality is such a part of our life, one of the reasons we create a circle plan is for someone to be able to define the behaviors, make them concrete, especially when people are dealing with compulsive sexual behaviors. Because when someone is dealing with an addiction, there's an easy way to kind of go, "Well, you know, I think this is okay. Or that is okay." This makes it very concrete. So a person can know exactly what behaviors they want to stop and know exactly what behaviors they want to go towards and that are good for them. Right? And I'd also say that everybody gets to define what that is themselves. There's no right sexual behavior or wrong sexual behavior. A person gets to define that I'd say, with consultation with others, to get feedback and design that plan themselves. There's not any necessarily negative behavior or positive behavior, it's the behavior you want to change.

Marnie Breecker 5:03

Right? Because what is destructive sexual behavior to one person is not necessarily destructive sexual behavior to another person.

Duane Osterlind 5:10

Exactly.

Marnie Breecker 5:11

Yeah. And I think it's also important to say that oftentimes, what goes in the inner circle might also be things that were not necessarily destructive prior to coming into program or coming into recovery. But oftentimes, certain other sexual behaviors are considered off the table for a period of time, because it's easy to substitute one sexual behavior for another. So what I mean by this is, there are times that somebody comes into recovery, saying that their problematic sexual behavior was sleeping with prostitutes or going to massage parlors, and they never had a problem with pornography. However, because sexual addiction is really about and the arousal, the addiction is to the sexual arousal. Addicts are very, very clever and can move from okay, I might not be going to a prostitute or to a massage parlor right now. So I can now get my fix from looking at pornography. So I think that's why when you talked about consultation, that's really important, because we need to have helpful professionals determining what is best to go in that inner circle.

Duane Osterlind 6:18

Right, and get feedback so that you can really think about it and get insight into it and make an informed decision for yourself. And what I'd also say is having a circle plan, and if you're in a relationship, having a circle plan can be helpful to the partner as well, because they know what's going on. They know what the addict's behavior is and what they've set up. And sometimes that can be helpful to the partner. So when they say, "Are you sober?" The addict can say, "yes, because I'm in my plan."

Marnie Breecker 6:53

Right. And I think that traditionally, addicts were often told that this is their plan and not to share it with a partner. And I think it's important for us to mention that the way that we operate, and the way that we talk to our clients is that we encourage sharing the information, the circle plan, with a partner, so that she can feel included, and she can feel like she knows, you know, how was he defining his sobriety? What are the things that help him stay as far away from his inner circle as possible? What are the triggers, so that she can be sensitive to that and aware?

Duane Osterlind 7:26

Right.

Marnie Breecker 7:27

So someone listening might, you know, now might be like, "Well, I was told not to show that to my partner." And if that's the case, I wouldn't be surprised, because that is something that some therapists say. But that is not our belief or our approach.

Duane Osterlind 7:41

Right? Definitely. And once again, it's doing all this work in consultation and what's right for the individual, they get to decide all the stuff, these are suggestions, these are ways of looking at it, ways that we have found it helpful. But once again, everybody's an individual, and everybody has to do that in consultation with trustworthy others.

Marnie Breecker 8:02

Exactly. And just before we move on, maybe we should just give a couple of examples of the things that would be put into a circle plan.

Duane Osterlind 8:09

I think that's a great idea.

Marnie Breecker 8:10

Okay, so with the inner circle, that's the sexual behavior. So it could be anything from pornography, to masturbation, to sex outside of one's marriage to massage parlors.

Duane Osterlind 8:22

Right, and it's very concrete. I also say with the inner circle, we don't put thoughts in there, or feelings in there. Because those aren't something that we can absolutely control.

Marnie Breecker 8:35

They're not measurable.

Duane Osterlind 8:37

They're not measurable. So it's behaviors that go in that inner circle. And then we have the middle circle. And this is kind of like you said earlier, the yellow light. And this is where we put things that they're not necessarily wrong or bad or anything like that. But they can lead to this acting out behavior. So I use the example of: so if someone is looking at pornography, what they might include in the middle circle is something like using the computer alone at night, right? That's not necessarily a bad thing to do. But for someone who struggles with compulsive pornography use, that's a warning signal that says, "Hey, I gotta be careful here." And so addicts can kind of use that to start to understand what their triggers are, where they're more at risk. It's not necessarily wrong. It just tells them that, "hey, I have to be careful in this area."

Marnie Breecker 9:37

Right, and everyone's middle circle is going to look totally different because of that.

Duane Osterlind 9:41

Absolutely.

Marnie Breecker 9:42

And your example is a fantastic example of a specific behavior that an addict would want to avoid if compulsive pornography use is in his inner circle. Another example of something that can go in the middle circle would just be an internal feeling state, right, so somebody who has a lot of anxiety, or suffers from depression, or fear, those things would go in there or you know, some people when they get into financial fear, that's a big trigger for them, right? Some people put in talking to their mother in the middle circle, because that can be quite triggering.

Duane Osterlind 10:15

Right? And they begin to see when they're triggered to act out. By doing that, they can see how the compulsive behavior starts to manifest itself. And as they get more information and learn about their recovery, they may include more things that they never saw before. But they realize, "you know, every time I'm feeling lonely, I am find myself picking up my phone to look at porn, and I don't want to do that. So I need to really watch that feeling."

Marnie Breecker 10:40

Exactly. So. So even creating the surface circle plan involves a lot of self awareness and insight. And oftentimes, in the early stages of recovery, an addict doesn't have that self awareness and insight, which is exactly why doing this with a specialist is so important.

Duane Osterlind 10:56

Right? Right. So let's talk about the outer circle.

Marnie Breecker 10:59

So the outer circle, as I said earlier, is what's going to keep you from getting into the inner circle. So I always say, first, let's look at all of your therapy. So that could be your individual therapy, group therapy, 12 step program, sponsorship, literature, going to meetings, but then it's also what brings you joy, what are the things that help you feel connected? So spending time with family and friends and pets and children, going to the movies, reading, exercise, going to the beach, again, the outer circle is going to look completely different from one person to another too because what we value as recreation and social activity, and enjoyment and intimacy and connection is different for each person.

Duane Osterlind 11:43

So all the positive things that you do that build the life you want.

Marnie Breecker 11:47

Exactly.

Duane Osterlind 11:48

And so this three circle plan has been around for quite a while, I think, since the beginning of SAA, and is used by addicts a lot to help them define their behaviors, create structure in their recovery, and pursue the things that are good in their life. This is where we get to the fourth circle. Because as we've been doing this work, we realized there was really a missing component to this. And so Marnie, you want to talk about this fourth circle?

Marnie Breecker 12:20

Yeah. And I think it's important to say that not everybody is using this four circle plan.

Duane Osterlind 12:25

That's true.

Marnie Breecker 12:26

Which actually is what inspired us to want to do a podcast episode specifically devoted to the circle plan, right? So something that happened back in April, when we were at our conference, our annual conference that we go to, you know, with all certified sex addiction therapists, that was very eye opening for me. And what that was, is I went to a lecture that was being given by two CSAT therapists, about couples recovery from betrayal trauma. And it was a great presentation, and I was really enjoying it. But what I found was that throughout the presentation, the facilitators kept referring to the three circle plan. And I found myself feeling very, very confused, because both of these facilitators were clearly partner sensitive. And they approach treatment clearly from the trauma model. So it was confusing to me why they would be referring to the three circle plan when in my mind, and this was just me being naive at the time, and not realizing it, I thought everyone was using the four circle plan, which is what I've been using, since it was created. And I think it was created in 2012, but I could be wrong about that. And so that was a real wake up call for me. And as I started to have conversations with other CSAT therapists, I found out that many people were not aware of this fourth circle. So this is something that was created by Dr. Omar Minwalla, who we've had on our podcast before. And the fourth circle was created in order to challenge the narcissistic frame of the three circle plan, because the three circle plan is all about the addict and does not include any of the people or others that are impacted by his relapse, as well as by his recovery. And so this really brings in the others who are impacted. So the fourth circle plan does not take away anything from the original three circles, those three circles remain exactly as they have always been. The fourth circle is an add on. And it's a play on words because it's called the other circle. So again, these are the others who are impacted by the addict's sobriety and recovery. So right from the beginning, by having to include these, it tells the addict that his behavior has consequences on others, and that his sobriety is not occurring in a vacuum. And so to Duane and I, this

fourth circle plan is one of the best strategies and tools that can help an addict, from day one in his treatment, start to integrate the partner and the partner trauma model.

Duane Osterlind 15:07

Absolutely, it is relational. And that's why I like it as well. Because it really makes the addict who, sometimes when we're in addiction, we're pretty self focused individuals. So we need that cue to be able to think outside of ourselves, how does this impact others?

Marnie Breecker 15:26

Exactly. And that sort of self focus and narcissism is really one of the, it's the nature of addiction, all addiction, right? We're just looking at ourselves, and it's very difficult to see outside of ourselves. So what I've learned over the years is that using this four circle plan really does help to challenge denial, which is one of the first tasks of addiction work. So challenging denial by acknowledging who the others are that are impacted. And some of the things that I've seen clients put in here, of course, would be a significant partner or spouse, but also children, friends, I have seen people put in pets, because they'll say, you know, "my god, I neglected my dog when I was holed up in my room for hours looking at pornography. You know, I didn't take my dog for walks." People can put in employees, again, just like all the other circles, the fourth circle will often look different depending on who is creating it.

Duane Osterlind 16:25

Right. And I think this is such a - the circle plan is such an important part of an addict's recovery. To make this all concrete, look at it, put it all down, helps addicts in their recovery create that structure they need.

Marnie Breecker 16:41

Yes. And I have heard over the past couple of months, as I've been talking more and more about the fourth circle, I've heard quite a bit of pushback and some resistance from other therapists who are challenging it saying that, you know, because it was created in SAA, that those circles are sacred and not wanting to add this fourth circle, because somehow it changes, you know, the circle plan. And what I would say to that is that change is an important part of life. And when we fail to include something that's helpful, and then we realize that, change is the very thing that allows us to learn and grow and do things differently. So while the three circles are sacred, and I agree with that completely, my opinion is the fourth circle doesn't take anything away or diminish from that sacredness of those three circles, it just adds a fourth sacred circle. And I cannot find, and I've thought about this, by the way, a lot. I've tried to come up with some reasons why I might agree that the fourth circle might not be a good idea. And after much thought and consideration, what I believe is that the fourth circle does not take away in any way. But it only helps the addict both in terms of his own recovery, you know, by recognizing that his actions impact other people. And it also is a huge, huge benefit for the couple's ship. The fourth circle basically takes that three circle plan and makes it relational, which is so important for couples that want to recover and try to repair and heal their marriage.

Duane Osterlind 18:16

Yeah, and I think relational healing is key to also healing the addiction as well. And we have to add as many components of that into addiction treatment as possible.

Marnie Breecker 18:26

Absolutely.

Duane Osterlind 18:27

So I hope that is helpful for everyone. I hope that explains the circle plan. And we'll include a link on the website as well.

Marnie Breecker 18:37

Yeah, we'll definitely put that up there. I really do hope to any other clinicians that are listening, that you will consider this and think about the benefits that it might have for your clients moving forward.

Duane Osterlind 18:48

Thanks, Marnie.

Marnie Breecker 18:49

Thank you, Duane.

HCH Narrator 18:52

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.