



Episode 19

Emotional Attunement & Empathy

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, Los Angeles, and San Diego, California. Marnie and Duane co-created Helping Couples Heal, a comprehensive program for couples recovering from betrayal trauma including an in person two day workshop, an online aftercare program, 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 honored 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 2:15

Hello, everyone, and welcome back to Helping Couples Heal. This is Marnie, and I'm here with Duane.

Duane Osterlind 2:21

Hello, everyone.

Marnie Breecker 2:22

And it's been quite a few weeks since we've actually sat down to record and to be honest, it feels a little bit scary. Again, I feel a little bit nervous. It seems that we have now reached over 40,000 downloads, and we are so grateful and so humbled by your support. So to all of our listeners, thank you.

Duane Osterlind 2:42

Yeah, I really want to say it's been awesome to get the emails from people who have listened to the podcast and really told us that it has been so meaningful to them, to have this information and to understand the trauma that they're going through from this perspective, both from addicts and from partners.

Marnie Breecker 3:06

Yeah, I've actually been really, again, humbled by hearing from addicts who have said that, you know, particularly in regards to the interviews we did with Dr. Minwalla, that they listened to them several times. And it was incredibly challenging, and really hard, but helpful, and they really found the value. And so that's really wonderful, because we're putting those out there knowing that they're there, they're going to be hard to hear for a lot of people, and yet, if people are able to stick with it and tolerate the discomfort that comes up, ultimately, it's really going to bring about a lot of healing and insight and awareness. So really to all of you who are stepping out of your comfort zone and being willing to jump in and listen and hear with an open mind and confront either shame or the feeling of wanting to be defensive, or wanting to react, and to just listen and be open. Thank you.

Duane Osterlind 4:03

And I also want to say if you guys are enjoying the Helping Couples Heal Podcast, and it's meaningful to you, please rate and review it in iTunes, that really does help get us a lot of exposure and helps people who need this find this content.

Marnie Breecker 4:22

And feel free to find us also on Facebook, we have a support page there. And there's been a lot of involvement with community members just supporting one another sharing resources and just being there for each other. So again, just go to Facebook, punch in Helping Couples Heal. And there's just a couple of quick questions and then we will approve you and you can come in and join.

Duane Osterlind 4:43

And I also wanted to add that we now have a newsletter that you can sign up for and you can just go to the website and sign up for that newsletter.

Marnie Breecker 4:53

And finally, we have modified our in-person workshop due to the pandemic and really wanting people to be able to have access to this information. And so we had our first online workshop last week, it was very successful. And based on that we have scheduled our next workshop for June, which is almost full. So we will be putting updates for July and August and we'll continue to do monthly workshops online until it is safe to resume being together again in the same room.

Duane Osterlind 5:23

Right? I would just encourage you guys to check that out.

Marnie Breecker 5:27

Yeah, everything is listed, all the dates of the workshops, is listed on the website at Helping Couples Heal. So because it's been a while since we've recorded, we wanted to choose a topic that we felt could be really helpful to people, especially now as a lot of couples are home together, you know, in the middle of all this betrayal trauma and stuck at home in a quarantine and in the middle of a global crisis. So we thought about what are the topics that we are asked about most often, let's pick one of those and speak to it. And the one that we chose is emotional attunement. And also empathy, which goes hand in hand, these two things go hand in hand. And what we mean by this is, one of the greatest complaints that we hear from partners is that when their husband is able to even find the words in the language to validate their trauma and their pain, that often there's something that's missing from it. So they hear the words, but they look into the face of their spouse, and they don't see any actual emotional connection. They describe it as you know, he's saying this, but it doesn't seem congruent with what he's really feeling because there's no expression, there's no felt sense of empathy, or felt sense of connection or attunement. And this is a big barrier for couples. So we felt like it would be great to come on and talk about the importance of attunement, and what do you do if you're having trouble attuning? And what do you do if your partner is not able to attune and you're needing that in order to heal?

Duane Osterlind 6:55

Right? I mean, I see that so often, when I'm working with addicts, in a way, they're so overwhelmed with their internal guilt and shame about their behavior, because it's violated so much of their own value system, that when they do try and attune or be present or be empathetic, they're really just overwhelmed with their own shame. And I think that's what the partner picks up. Right? "They don't really get me, they're more into their own experience."

Marnie Breecker 7:30

Yeah, and the feeling of he or she doesn't get me that's really felt, especially in the context of betrayal, trauma, that's, that's experienced as like a mortal injury. And, you know, take a second to think about that it's experienced by a partner as a mortal injury to not be, did not have a felt experience of being seen.

Duane Osterlind 7:49

So this is something that definitely takes work. Like I don't think that we just turn it on or turn it off. If we're struggling with shame and guilt, and we've been self absorbed in our own addiction, to suddenly just be present is probably not going to happen right away. It can take some time to learn how to be present and to practice being present,

Marnie Breecker 8:17

And also not just being stuck in one's addiction. But often, addicts have no empathy for their own experiences and their own trauma. I, in my early days working as a sex addiction therapist, I would work with men who had zero empathy for themselves. And when I would ask about their own trauma history, sometimes they would deny trauma altogether. And once I looked further, I mean, there was a significant trauma history that was heartbreaking, but a complete resistance or even awareness to them of that, of that trauma, or there's an awareness that the trauma existed, but still just a real disconnect from it, and a real repression of any feelings and emotion around that. And so, if it makes sense that if one person is not able to have self compassion or empathy for oneself, it's going to be really challenging, if possible at all, to have empathy for another. Especially - let's throw in there. Now on top of that, that you are the person that is the cause of that person's trauma.

Duane Osterlind 9:19

And this is such a hurdle to healing, because the partner needs this so badly, right? Yet the addict here is stuck in their own trauma, and their own process that they really struggle to give it and it does take time to develop, but it's something that you can learn how to do and you can practice being there, especially for the addict when they have a lot of trauma, they have a lot of emotional dysregulation. So once they start to dig in and do their work, they're able to emotionally regulate themselves. They're more able to begin to show up and heal, you know, help heal their partner.

Marnie Breecker 10:04

Yes. And if you're wondering, as you're listening to this, if you're a betrayed partner and you are unsure whether your husband or spouse, or partner has an issue with attunement, or if you are an addict, and you're wondering "Hmm, I wonder how I am perceived my partner," I'm going to share a quick example of when I've personally witnessed this lack of attunement and how devastating it can be to the partner and to the relationship. So this occurred probably at least eight years ago, and I was sitting in and facilitating a disclosure. And the addict had done a clearly a very thorough and comprehensive job with writing his disclosure. And he was reading it. And as he was reading it, the partner began to sob. And she was sobbing more and more, and he didn't stop reading, he kept reading. So right there, there's an issue with attunement, I want to say that for him, I don't believe for a second that he was consciously ignoring her pain that he was saying, "Oh, I don't care. I'm just gonna keep reading." I think that he had his own process going on and his own shame, and it was intolerable. So all he could do was continue to read. So I actually intervened, and I asked him to stop. And I ultimately asked her if she needed to take a break. And if she wanted him to leave the room, and she said yes, so again, he was very cooperative. And he left the room with his therapist gave us the space that we needed. But what he didn't do is he didn't attune to his wife. She was listening to him list, one by one, all of the behaviors and actions and lies and betrayals, right, that he had caused her. And she was heartbroken. And she was sobbing and experiencing all of that pain. And he, his experience was like it wasn't even happening. There was no attunement. And what a partner needs, especially in a moment like that, is to see, to look at you and to see that you are able to feel the pain that she's in. And not just that you're able to feel it but that you're willing to, that you're willing to sit

in it with her and feel it. So that disclosure while you know, many people would say that it was a huge success in the sense that they got through it, and both people survived it. And, you know, it's hard to explain how a disclosure could be successful. But I would say that it was in many ways the real missed opportunity there. And where there was a lot of work that had to happen after was around this, this idea of emotional attunement, because the partner felt further traumatized by walking in and hearing this disclosure, but seeing that her husband was not able to recognize the pain that he had caused based on all of these events that he was reading to her.

Duane Osterlind 12:55

Right. And I think that's why an addict has to have a very talented therapist that can walk them through that process so they can understand it, they can work through their shame. And they can show up and be with the partner's pain, and just be with the pain and be able to, in a way, take their own shame and guilt. Put it to the side in that moment. And the partner can feel when that happens. The partner knows it. This is a visceral body experience. And but yeah, that takes practice that takes time. And the addict has to be willing to keep trying and keep trying and not get it right and then come back and try again. Sometimes they have to use, you know, language that might feel a little rehearsed as they practice that. It gives them the structure to modulate their own guilt and shame so they can work to show up.

Marnie Breecker 14:02

And the structure provides the safety that's needed to do that. I have also heard partners that say that they're angry, because their husband or their spouse might say something like "I understand how you feel." Or "it makes sense that you feel that way." So it's delivered, the words themselves actually are quite nice. But if delivered in a different way and more authentically felt, you know, in attuned way, I think that it would fall or land on the partner in a very different way. So again, for an addict, this can be hard because when they are learning these new skills, they're learning about how to communicate differently. They're learning how to attune, they're learning how to practice the skill of empathy, they're doing their best and sometimes the best for them in that moment is to just say what they've learned, which is to say the words like I hear what you're saying, I know that I've hurt you and so it can be a source of great frustration for them too, to be trying their best, but that's not enough. Because what's missing behind the words is that attunement, that's going to tell the partner "you really get me."

Duane Osterlind 15:10

And that's where deep healing happens. It happens in that attunement.

Marnie Breecker 15:16

Yeah, actually, when there is real deep felt experienced attunement, the words are a little bit, or can be, a little bit less important. There are some people, especially people whose love language is, you know, words of affirmation, the words can be really important. But what I do hear more often than not from partners is that when they know that their husband, or their partner gets them and gets the pain and release, they see it in their, in their partner's eyes, and they feel it in their body. For many of them, they say, "I don't even care what he's saying, because I know that he is attuning to me, I know that he gets me, I know that he's there with me." And that's what they need. So, to that end, you know, we've done a, I think, a pretty decent job of explaining up until this point, why emotional attunement is so important, especially in the context of betrayal. And now you might be wondering, okay, well, I, you know, I'm one of those people that has trouble attuning or "well my partner, somebody who has trouble attuning, what do I do about it?" And so we're going to take the next couple of minutes to just offer a little bit of support, encouragement and guidance in that area.

Duane Osterlind 16:23

Right, definitely, that structure can help a lot. And one thing that I was going to add to this too, is that addicts, a lot of times when they start to do this work, and they actually start to attune, their partner feels safer to express some of this pain. And a lot of times, the addict takes that as failure. But in reality, as the partner feels safer, they're able to express it. So the addict has to remind themselves that just because they're expressing their pain and their inner hurt, if you can attune to them, that's actually good. That's actually progress. That means that they're trusting you enough to be vulnerable with it. I think that's really important for addicts to know, too.

Marnie Breecker 17:14

Yeah. And I think that it's very helpful to know that research has shown that empathy is not simply inborn. But it can actually be taught. So for people that think, "well, I'm never going to be able to do this, this is not something I've ever known how to do. It's never been a part of my life, it was never modeled to me," that's just not the case. It might, it might be harder for you than it is for others. And it might take. as Duane said, some work. But it's very possible.

Duane Osterlind 17:37

Yeah, it's something that you do regularly, and you practice. And so with practice, you can develop that. And that's where you can use different tools like the imago dialogue, or the talking format. There's different ways to get there. But you can use structure to do it. So that's something you can definitely look into as well.

Marnie Breecker 18:01

Empathy is developed by regularly listening to another person's thoughts and feelings. And empathy helps to build closeness and respect in a relationship. And in the context of betrayal, empathy serves to heal a relationship that's been traumatized. And for real healing to occur for couples impacted by betrayal trauma, it's important that eventually, both partners are able to have empathy for one another. However, it's important to note that with our model of relational triage, the reality is that the addict is going to have to take the first steps with regard to empathy, because most partners will not feel safe enough at the beginning of recovery. To do that, they just won't take that first step. And that makes sense, because they're in trauma, they don't feel safe and trust has been destroyed. And often, I've seen amongst many partners that there's a fear, even as their partners recovering and doing really well in their recovery, they're still afraid sometimes of showing empathy or even forgiveness because they're scared of possible relapse, or that if now they show empathy, and maybe they're forgiving, that their partner will return or regress to old behaviors, which just goes to show how much fear there is. And it's very, it's a vulnerable and sensitive topic. So what we're saying here is both people do need to learn to be empathic for one another, but it starts in recovery with an addict learning empathy and starting to attune to their traumatized and betrayed partner. And we know this is difficult and so that is why learning models like the imago dialogue, Pia Mellody has some great language that she teaches for helping couples to communicate with each other in a safe and structured way. And I'm sure there are lots of others out there.

Duane Osterlind 19:51

I was also gonna say there's like nonviolent communication is another, one all these tools kind of come back to the same thing which is learning to talk in a way that attuned to the person you're talking to. And when you do that to each other, we feel heard, we feel understood. And we can heal our wounds.

Marnie Breecker 20:12

And we don't, we do not need to agree with another person to empathize. That's also really important. Because a lot of times people are like, well, but I don't agree. So why would I do that if you're not being asked to agree with what's being said, you're asked to feel, you're being asked to feel, and to have had an experience to have a feeling of experiencing the other person's pain or the other person's emotion. So why don't we jump into a little bit explaining what we mean by that? So kind of talking about the three types of empathy and how understanding that and shifting that can be very helpful for couples recovering from betrayal trauma?

Duane Osterlind 20:47

Yeah, I think this can be really, really helpful to talk about the different kinds of empathy and how those work together. So there's three types of empathy. And the first one is cognitive empathy. And cognitive empathy is where we know how another person probably feels. But we'd actually don't experience it at all right? We don't experience it internally. But we can say that person is sad, or that person is in pain.

Marnie Breecker 21:20

That's as far as it goes as literally being able to, to see and identify that that other person's having an emotion. So, "I get that you feel sad."

Duane Osterlind 21:29

Right? And this is what a lot of times, addicts in the beginning, this is where they start. They start with cognitive empathy. And the partner can feel that because they go, "Oh, he understands I'm in pain, but he doesn't know my pain." So the addict who's going through this is like, well, I'm reflecting back what I know she's in. So isn't that it? Not totally. Right? But this is where we usually start, and then, and then we move into a second type of empathy. And that's emotional empathy. And in a way, that is fully feeling what the other person is experiencing, and in a way, becoming engulfed in that person's experience.

Marnie Breecker 22:12

So you're feeling what the other person's feeling as if you were that person.

Duane Osterlind 22:15

Absolutely. Yeah, exactly.

Marnie Breecker 22:18

Now that could feel, to a person who is in pain, really supportive and comforting for them to feel that. However, that's not actually a very healthy way to practice empathy, because what it can do is overwhelm somebody. And it's very difficult if we take on another person's emotions, very, very hard for us to be able to stay supportive and neutral, and even be of service and help them.

Duane Osterlind 22:44

Right. And I would even say that sometimes that kind of emotional empathy can also feel disconnecting, because the person who's doing that is now overwhelmed as well,

Marnie Breecker 22:53

Right. And it can seem like it's now become about them.

Duane Osterlind 22:56

Right. And so there can also be a disconnection there, too.

Marnie Breecker 23:00

I'd like to give a quick example, to demonstrate or illustrate emotional empathy. Because I do think that people often think that this is what - this is what we need, this is what will help us heal. But here's how it can be destructive. And this is an experience that I had when I was very new to the therapy field. So I had a supervisor, and I was talking about a case with my supervisor. And it was a complicated case that I was dealing with, regarding a couple I was working with. And I was getting incredibly overwhelmed and activated as I was talking. And it soon became clear to my supervisor that I was having a reaction almost as if I was the couple. And the way that she pointed this out to me and helped me see it, so clearly, was she said, "you know, what's going on is, you know, if your couple is now going on a roller coaster, it is wonderful for you to stand on the platform and watch them from below and cheer for them and clap and wave. But it's not okay for you to get on the roller coaster with them. And you're on the roller coaster with this couple." And that was one of the greatest moments of learning that I've had as a therapist. And I've thought about that so often. And that's an example when having emotional empathy, even if it comes from quote, unquote, a good place or being a good person is not in your best interest. And it's not in the best interest of the people that you are feeling emotionally empathetic towards.

Duane Osterlind 24:27

I think that is a great example because that really captures it, you know, now you're on a roller coaster with them being twisted and turned and you can't really help from that. And a lot of times people can then then, in a way, feel abandoned too. So this goes back to our, now our third type of empathy is compassionate empathy, and that's understanding a person's predicament and feeling with them. So it's informed by both cognitive and affective empathy. But you're also moved to help them where needed, so you're not engulfed by their emotions, you can feel it, you can understand it, and then you're moved to help them in some way. And sometimes that can be just listening and being there, that's how you help them or reaching out to them. But you're moved in some way to help.

Marnie Breecker 25:26

Yeah, and I mean, help can look so many different ways. I mean, in the event that you are being empathic towards a friend who has an illness, you know, being able to stay in that place of compassion, and empathy allows you to feel for them and have have compassion, but also to be able to say I can, I can be helpful in practical ways, like, I can go and drive you to appointments, or I can, you know, cook food and bring it over to your family. But if I was as impacted and overwhelmed by your illness and your trauma as you, I wouldn't be able to take action, I would be, you know, incapacitated in that way.

Duane Osterlind 26:03

So in a way, this is, this is what you're trying to get to, if you've betrayed your partner, you're trying to get to that compassionate empathy. And once again, that's going to take work, that's going to take your own emotional regulation, so you're out of your own shame and guilt, so that you can be there, you can show up and you can offer that support because you're attuned, you're not into your own hurt and pain. And it's something that you can practice and work towards. As you grow in your recovery and you learn emotion regulation skills and distress tolerance skills, you can begin to show up. So there's real hope there.

Marnie Breecker 26:44

Yeah, I mean, that's, I think one of the reasons why Duane and I love doing our workshop and why we enjoy working with couples, because we actually see this, as it transforms over time you see couples come in. And there's such a huge disconnect, both want to be connected, both want to heal the relationship, the addict feels completely incapable of doing so. And he says, often, "I've tried, and I do validate her," and, and she will even say, "Yes, he does, but he doesn't mean it,"

Duane Osterlind 27:13

Or he doesn't really get it.

Marnie Breecker 27:15

He doesn't get it, right. And that can be learned. And it does get learned. And when it's learned, relationships can heal, and they can thrive. And so we're, we also don't want to minimize the fact that this, you know, understanding the difference between, you know, cognitive, emotional and compassionate empathy is not going to be the key that's going to literally transform your relationship and heal it overnight. However, over time, this absolutely can become a game changer. And I do want to just say one last thing, which is, because we see this a lot with betrayal trauma, is that oftentimes, when an addict becomes overwhelmed, and he's maybe more in that emotional empathy pattern, he might then become so overwhelmed that he says something like, "can't you see how awful I am? Why are you even staying with me, you should leave. How could you be with someone like me?" And that is not helpful, because for the partner, again, there's a huge miss, she wants him to empathize with her and to feel her and to feel her pain. And he now has just made it all about him.

Duane Osterlind 28:18

And I would say that addicts often mistake that as empathy. And it's really not. But that's maybe how they experienced empathy in their own early life and in childhood. So it's the only kind of response that they get, and they understand. But that, yeah, that's just not really empathy. That all ends up all about you. So but, you know, forgive yourself, move forward, keep practicing and keep trying.

Marnie Breecker 28:52

And as a partner really recognize, I know that it's probably so difficult because you have been so hurt, and there's been so much trauma and so much pain. And if you are able to recognize that your partner is making an effort and trying and that this does not come naturally to them, if you're able to even acknowledge that you see that they're trying, say that, that will go a long way. And listen, some people might be way too traumatized. And it might not be possible to even allow that kind of an acknowledgement that somebody is trying. I get it, every couple is different, every person is different, you're going to be in a different space. And if you are in a position where you recognize that your partner is really trying and might not be there yet to even acknowledge that can make a huge difference. And whenever possible, we encourage you to acknowledge even the smallest shifts and changes

Duane Osterlind 29:47

Definitely for each other.

Marnie Breecker 29:48

So if this resonates with anybody, what we suggest is that you talk with your therapist, maybe about giving you some kind of a structured dialogue like the Imago dialogue to work with and to learn the skill of empathy and practice it.

Duane Osterlind 30:05

Alright everybody, we hope this is helpful. Thank you for listening. Don't forget, if this is really helpful to you, please share the podcast with a friend or rate and review us in iTunes. Think about signing up for our newsletter so we can let you know when we create new content and you can get access to it. And also, don't forget, join our Facebook group. You know, go to Facebook and type in Helping Couples Heal and it's a great supportive community.

Marnie Breecker 30:34

So reach out as always, you're not alone. I know especially now during this current pandemic and global crisis, it can feel very isolating and alone and just please just make sure to reach out to other people for support. More important than anything, please keep yourselves safe and healthy.

Duane Osterlind 30:51

Thank you for listening.

Marnie Breecker 30:52

Thanks so much for listening. We'll see you guys soon. Take care.

HCH Narrator 30:57

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're finding the podcast helpful, please support Duane and Marnie in continuing to reach others impacted by betrayal trauma. 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.