



Episode 20

Emotional Attunement & Shame

HCH Narrator 1:21

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 2:19

Hello everyone, welcome to the Helping Couples Heal podcast. This is Marnie, and I'm here with Duane. And we are, as always, so grateful for your continued support and we're happy you're here.

Duane Osterlind 2:32

Thank you for listening to the podcast. And if you're really enjoying the Helping Couples Heal Podcast, please think about going to iTunes and leaving us a review. We really appreciate it. It really helps the podcast get found by people who may really need it. And it's a great way to support us.

Marnie Breecker 2:51

Yeah, and thank you to all the people who have already reviewed us, we appreciate it, we read every review. And we are truly humbled by your support and feedback.

Duane Osterlind 3:04

And don't forget, we have an incredible resource out there. We have a Facebook group that you can join and get support online there as well. So just go to Facebook and type in Helping Couples Heal. Click join in and agree to the rules of the group and get some extra support.

Marnie Breecker 3:24

Yeah, and I tend to come into that group from time to time and do some Facebook Lives and just you know, just offering my support and answering listener questions and things like that whenever I can. So hopefully, hopefully I'll see you there.

Duane Osterlind 3:37

So let's get into our topic today.

Marnie Breecker 3:39

Yeah, so Duane and I have gotten actually quite a bit of feedback since our last podcast aired. And that last one was on attunement, and empathy. And we've gotten some feedback that's been very universal in nature about "this really resonates for me, this is exactly the dynamic that occurs in my relationship. But how do we get out of this dynamic? So can you do a part two to the attunement episode so that we know okay, we get the problem, but how do we actually solve it? How do we make some progress right and move through this?" So I'm going to go ahead and read an excerpt from an email that I got from a listener asking us to continue the conversation about attunement. Okay, so she says, "the most recent podcast episode absolutely resonated with me. This is by far and large, the hurdle that has caught us up and keeps catching me up the most on this journey. Unfortunately, my pain seems to create shame in my husband and we can't seem to figure out how to move through this. Somehow his shame and following defensiveness and his complete overwhelm and shutdown prevent me from feeling safe enough to share my pain. I would love a podcast that digs deeper into this topic and provides additional strategies for the partner and the couple about how to bridge this divide. Maybe the work is not my work to do. But perhaps there are some trust building activities, akin to team building exercises, I don't want to speak in a way that creates such overwhelming shame, I do have empathy for his hardship and struggle, I do forgive what has been done. But even living in forgiveness, there are moments when it comes rushing in, and I'm terrified or pissed or disgusted or heartbroken. I want to share all of myself with my partner, and I just don't know how to do it. What can I do as the partner beyond being patient with my husband and guarding my own hurt?" So thank you to that listener for taking the time to write and ask for more support around this.

Duane Osterlind 3:52

And, you know, I think there's so much in that question and a lot of complexities. But the first thing I think about when I think about this process, is getting to that core emotional regulation, to be able to be present with each other. So when someone is feeling overwhelmed with shame, that they're working very hard to regulate that, so that they can actually show up and in a way be able to take that shame, and maybe not ignore it, but be able to put it to the side as they pay attention to their partner's feelings and tune into that. Now, this is the problem, right? This is hard. This is not easy. How do we do that? That's the question.

Marnie Breecker 6:37

And I think that this is where making sure that everybody's with a specialist, a specialist in betrayal trauma, is so important, because there are a lot of addicts and a lot of men who have betrayed their partner who are in therapy, and they're working on stopping the behavior, stopping the sexual acting out, and the lying and the deceiving. And that's, of course, incredibly important, however, because of this universal dynamic that exists with couples recovering from betrayal trauma, which is the incredible pain and trauma that the partner is experiencing, and the unbelievable shame that the addict is holding, makes recovery and healing so difficult. Because that's such a huge dynamic here, it's really important that whoever the addict is working with, whatever therapist they're with, cannot stop the work at just sobriety and relapse prevention, it has to go further. And there needs to be a deep dive into shame reduction, because you can have a person who has fantastic sobriety, right, they're not doing the behavior anymore, they're not continuing to lie, or deceive or betray in the present. But if that person has shame that's preventing them from being able to have empathy, and tolerate their partner's pain, then the relationship, it's not going to get better.

Duane Osterlind 8:03

And I would add that if you've done the betrayal, and you're talking to your partner, and your partner brings up something maybe about the betrayal, or some dissatisfaction, or some emotion and you feel in your body, a visceral urge to push back or walk away, that probably right there in and of itself is a sign that you got some work to do. Right? Some of this is automatic, and we just get defensive, because our shame comes up or not even our shame necessarily comes up in the moment, we're anticipating that our shame is going to come up. So we get defensive before the shame even arrives. Right? So it's important to remember that as well. And there are skills that you can do that can help you manage that. And that goes back into that shame reduction work. There's a lot of great authors out there. I think one of my favorite books in recovery, it's a recovery classic, is Bradshaw's book, "Healing The Shame That Binds You", to really understand how shame operates and how it manifests itself in you, and give you some real tools to be able to deal with it. I think another person too is Brene Browns work on shame is also really great, too.

Marnie Breecker 9:28

Yeah, because a lot of times I think that people think that the addiction or the addictive behavior, the sexual behavior, is what is going to ultimately destroy a relationship. The truth is that's not the case, the addictive behavior or the betrayal is what brings the couple into the therapy room or brings them into a place where they're needing help. It's the shame that's going to actually keep the relationship from moving forward and healing.

Duane Osterlind 9:52

And I would encourage anybody when, if shame is becoming an issue in the relationship, it's just deep breaths, just sit there, try not to respond in that moment. So you can begin to sit with it. I think, really intimate relationships, when we're in an intimate relationship, is that discomfort of being vulnerable with your partner with your significant other, that can feel very overwhelming, especially if you've grown up in a less-than-nurturing environment. Vulnerability was scary.

Marnie Breecker 10:31

Yeah. And in terms of, you know, a team building exercise, I wish that we could just rattle off a whole bunch of ideas for you guys. The truth is, as we've said, this shame reduction is actually quite a deep dive. It's not an easy fix. It's a, you know, a lifelong- Developing shame? Cultivating shame? Takes a lifetime. And so to work through, it takes a lot of work too. However, Duane and I were brainstorming about what could be something that would be helpful. And quite honestly, listening to this podcast together can be very helpful. We do know that there are listeners who say we, you know, "My husband and I listened to this together, and it's really helpful." But for a lot of our other listeners, they will tell us that they're listening, but that their husband or their partner is not. And so this could be a first step, just making a commitment to sit down, and listen, and breathe. Right? When we're not breathing, we're constricting, and we're closed off. And so if just listening to the podcast together, in an effort to start the healing process, and you know, likely, I would say extremely likely, his shame will be triggered, you know, a big barrier. I think, for a lot of men in healing, their shame is that often they don't identify that they have shame. You know, they'll say, "I don't have shame. No, that's not something that I resonate with." And that is typically, when it's really important to do that deep dive and to figure out what's going on. Many men will say, "Listen, I have no problem being empathic. In fact, I cry at commercials, you know, I cry when I hear other people sharing pain." And so to them, when they hear from their partner, you know, you can't be empathic. They say, that's just not true, I am empathic. But it's important to recognize that when you're hearing other people or watching a commercial with characters that, you know, first of all fictitious characters, and you don't know them personally, and you certainly haven't caused their pain, it's a lot easier to be empathic, and compassionate. But when you've betrayed your partner in a really significant way, and over the course of many years, and your partner is in horrible pain and trauma, looking at her in the face, and listening to her, share her pain, and knowing that you caused it, can be the source of an incredible amount of shame. And that's what can create that barrier to know, "I refuse to listen to this, I can't listen to this, this is too much." And there's the shutdown. And then there's the defensiveness and the transferring of blame. And it's really an awful cycle that perpetuates relational discord. So this shame reduction, which, you know, we're talking about it, but again, we're not, we're

certainly not healing it, we're just talking about how it's something that really needs a lot of attention. And we encourage people, if you have not yet found your therapy team or your treatment team to make sure that this is something that is not just addressed, but actively dealt with.

Duane Osterlind 13:33

And I would say also, what I would add to this is that you don't have to do it perfectly. You do it in pieces, you do it in moments. And so you keep practicing. And if it doesn't work, you try something a little different. Every couple that comes in has different ways of activating each other's attachment, trauma, and betrayal, trauma. And so couples are going to have to figure this out together, and know that it's okay to have these difficult feelings. It's what you're going to do with them that really counts and what's really important. And you can, you can get the skills so there's tons of ways to manage all these painful feelings. I mean, you can go into mindfulness, which I love, relaxation, trauma work, shame reduction work, and you build it over time. And as a team, you work on it together.

Marnie Breecker 14:36

Yeah, we know that, you know, 99.9% of the time for an addict in recovery who's struggling with shame. This is not something that they are doing consciously, they're not saying oh, I want to have the shame so that I can build a wall and you know, prevent myself from being able to empathize with and validate and be there to hold my partner's pain. It's a primal process that's happening and likely has taken many, many years to evolve. And so again, we recognize that it's not coming from this, you know, this ill-intentioned person. However, it is important to say, "okay, I can recognize it, I am aware of it, I can see how shame is really preventing me from showing up, you know, my shame is making me defensive, my shame is causing me to transfer the blame to my partner, my shame is causing it to shut down completely and walk away. And that is not how I'm going to heal this relationship that has been traumatized by my betrayal." So it's the opposite, it's being willing to face it. And you guys, it takes courage, because it is scary to face your own shame, it is scary to face the pain that you have caused to the person that you love the most. And we know that, and that's probably why, you know, healing a relationship from betrayal is one of the more difficult relationships to heal. But it's really possible. And we will remind you of that over and over again, we see it happen all the time, relationships and couples can thrive after betrayal. But please recognize that ignoring the shame component is not going to allow for a healing process.

Duane Osterlind 16:18

If you, like this listener who sent this question, if you are stuck in a loop, and you kind of feel like you're having the same argument over and over, you probably need a good couples therapist that can help you step out of that cycle and see it so that you can try different things. Sometimes, when we are in our own cycle, we can't see it because we're actually inside of it. And we need someone else who can show us in a compassionate way. What are our parts of the cycle, and then give us some alternatives. So that we can try different things. And sometimes, once you disrupt that cycle, you create a different feedback loop, you can create a positive feedback loop that grows in a positive direction over time. But you know, we need support, sometimes we need other people's eyes to be able to see what we're in, we can't see it ourselves. And that's where professional help comes in.

Marnie Breecker 17:23

That's a great point, Duane. Absolutely. And, you know, I was just thinking, as you were talking, I was thinking about our listener who shared this, who wrote in to us, the person who wrote what I read earlier at the beginning of this podcast. And in that case, you know, she was quite advanced, in my opinion, in her healing, because she had talked about having compassion for her husband's suffering and his own pain. I want to say that for many partners, especially in the beginning, and before they're receiving empathy and compassion and validation from the person who betrayed them, often, you're not even going to get that kind of empathy and compassion from them. Right? So, I mean, that is ultimately the goal, because we can't really heal a relationship where there's no empathy going both ways. But that's typically not something that we see in the beginning, usually. And so it's important for you as the addict to know that and to manage your expectations, to expect your traumatized betrayed partner to be able to empathize with your pain and suffering, especially in the beginning, when you're not necessarily getting their pain. That's unrealistic. And that's where talking to a sponsor comes in, or having a 12-step program and your own therapist and a support group or a therapy group with other men that you can talk to, and you can be, you know, receiving empathy from them. But again, recognizing that a partner who's been traumatized by your behavior is not going to be the first person who's able to look at you and feel empathy and show empathy and give empathy willingly and lovingly. But ultimately, if you keep working out this, that is what we see happen. We do see the traumatized partner heal, and then openly and lovingly, empathize with the person that hurt them.

Duane Osterlind 19:16

And then, what the beauty of it is, once they get through that, is they help each other heal their early traumas, their early attachment traumas within the relationship. And that's the other beautiful part, but you gotta get through this betrayal trauma first. So you have to be there and be empathetic to that. And that's where that shame reduction work really is necessary. And really a big component of healing the relationship.

Marnie Breecker 19:44

I want to end with this. A lot of our listeners have asked us and asked us probably the biggest question we get is, can you help us find referrals in our area? You know, we listen to this podcast. This really resonates for us, but we can't find anybody. So we have created a training that we will be starting, launching next month for, you know, for professionals that work with betrayal, trauma, and we're going to be creating a referral network through that training. So hopefully, as time goes by, and more and more people are getting trained in this model, we will be able to give you more and more referrals for local clinicians in your own areas. So please know that we're working on that. And our goal is to be able to work with the community and to collaborate so that you're able to find help wherever you are.

Duane Osterlind 20:32

So thank you, everyone, for listening to the Helping Couples Heal podcast, and also if you know anybody that could benefit from this podcast, please share it with them, let them know that there's a resource out here for them.

Marnie Breecker 20:46

And as always, we look forward to continuing to support you. We welcome your feedback and your ideas for future podcasts. We encourage you to join the Facebook group if you're looking for additional support, and we send you so much love and light and wish you a beautiful day, a beautiful week and a beautiful life.