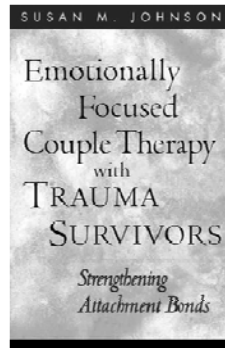


## Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy for Trauma Survivors



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### Dealing with trauma together ...

- “Emotional attachment is primary protection against feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness.” (*MacFarlane & van der Kolk, 1996*)
- *A deep sense of belonging results in the “taming of fear”.* (*Becker, 1973*)
- Proximity to an attachment figure “tranquilizes the nervous system”. (*Schore, 1994*)
- When one is confident an attachment figure will be there when needed, a person, “will be much less prone to either intense or chronic fear than will an individual that has no such confidence.” (*John Bowlby, 1973*)

## Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Follows exposure to extreme stressors involving intense fear, helplessness or horror. Especially severe effects if stressor is "of human design".

"Violation of human connection" (Herman, 1992)

### SYMPTOMS:

#### **PERSISTENT RE-EXPERIENCING**

Being "there not here"

#### **AVOIDANCE and NUMBING**

Avoidance of internal and external cues associated with trauma.

Detachment/Dissociation/Restricted Affect/Estrangement from Others/Sense of Foreshortened future.

#### **HYPERAROUSAL**

Hyper vigilance/Anger Fits and Irritability/Sleep Disorders/Exaggerated startle response.

General impaired affect regulation and extreme fight or flight, freeze responses.

Prevalence 1 – 14% in general population

Mediators: Severity, duration, proximity of stressor, resilience of victim --- attachment style.

## Trauma and Marital Distress

- Trauma/violation of human connection ----- increased need for safe haven/secure attachment + lack of trust and vigilance for danger....
- Paradox: other is safety, solution/danger, source of fear
- Fearful avoidant attachment style – problem in affect, regulation, information processing and communication
- More distress in Relationship – more risk of reoccurrence of violation
- Maintenance of symptoms

**Lack of safe haven perpetuates effects of trauma and effects of trauma perpetuate distress/lack of secure base.**

## Recovery from trauma includes:

1. Construction of a clear integrated narrative of trauma and consequences for self and for relatedness – meanings. Mastery, coherence, integration. See the dragon in the dance.

“By putting it into words, I can make it whole: this wholeness means it has lost the power to hurt me.”

Virginia Woolf – A Sketch from the Past.

2. The regulation of affect – positive strategies. Less flooding.
3. A new corrective experience of relatedness – more secure connection – less isolation. Antidotes to “violation of human connection”

<u>TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE</u>	<u>SECURE ATTACHMENT</u>
Floods us with physical fear/helplessness	Offers a safe haven
Colors the world as dangerous/unpredictable	Promotes affect regulation/integration
Creates overwhelming emotional chaos	Promotes personality integration
Threatens a cohesive sense of self	Promotes confidence/trust in self and others
Assaults self-efficacy and a sense of self control	Promotes openness to experience, risk taking and new learning
Scrambles the ability to engage fully in the present, and so to adapt to new situations	Promotes engagement in here and now and resonance with others

## A Safer Relationship:

1. Creates a healing environment that regulates negative affect and re-experiencing symptoms.
2. Fosters specific new learning re others – incompatible with effects of trauma. (others are source of comfort)
3. Shapes confiding that promotes integration of trauma experience, numbing lessons.
4. Lessens numbing, promotes positive emotional engagement with others.
5. Shapes new definitions of self as worthy and competent.
6. Protects against re-traumatization. Creates resilience and an antidote to isolation.

## How is relationship repair different with traumatized couples?

1. More distress. Absorbing negative affect states. Intense cycles of distance, defense and distrust.
2. Psycho-educational component regarding trauma and how it impacts victim's responses in relationship is necessary.
3. Violence and substance abuse are more endemic.
4. Alliance is always fragile, monitor it. Collaboration and transparency.
5. Emotional storms and crises must be expected.
6. Emotion must be contained as well as heightened. Defenses are validated.
7. Shame overrides even positive cues. Addressing model of self is crucial.
8. Destination is different, eg. Limits on sexuality.
9. Need to co-ordinate with other therapies.
10. Safety is everything, risks must be sliced thin and supported at each step.