Couples Conference
2012
Attachment Differentiation & Neuroscience In Couples Therapy
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Paper Tiger Paranoia:

Undoing Threat Reactivity And Cultivating Strength And Realistic Safety

Love & Intimacy: The Couples Conference
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Topics

- Brain evolution
- Threat reactivity
- On your own side
Brain Evolution
Evolution

- ~ 4+ billion years of earth
- 3.5 billion years of life
- 650 million years of multi-celled organisms
- 600 million years of nervous system
- ~ 200 million years of mammals
- ~ 60 million years of primates
- ~ 6 million years ago: last common ancestor with chimpanzees, our closest relative among the “great apes” (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, humans)
- 2.5 million years of tool-making (starting with brains 1/3 our size)
- ~ 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*
- ~ 50,000 years of modern humans
- ~ 5000 years of blue, green, hazel eyes
Evolutionary History

The Triune Brain - (P. MacLean 1990)
Three Stages of Brain Evolution

- **Reptilian:**
  - Brainstem, cerebellum, hypothalamus
  - Reactive and reflexive
  - *Avoid* hazards

- **Mammalian:**
  - Limbic system, cingulate, early cortex
  - Memory, emotion, social behavior
  - *Attain* rewards

- **Human:**
  - Massive cerebral cortex
  - Abstract thought, language, cooperative planning, empathy
  - *Attach* to “us”
Home Base of the Human Brain

When not threatened, ill, in pain, hungry, upset, or chemically disturbed, most people settle into being:

- **Peaceful** (the Avoid system)
- **Happy** (the Approach system)
- **Loving** (the Attach system)

This is the brain in its natural, **Responsive** mode.
The Social Brain

- Social capabilities have been a primary driver of brain evolution.

- Reptiles and fish avoid and approach. Mammals and birds *attach* as well - especially primates and humans.

- Mammals and birds have bigger brains than reptiles and fish.

- The more social the primate species, the bigger the cortex.

- Since the first hominids began making tools ~ 2.5 million years ago, the brain has roughly tripled in size, much of its build-out devoted to social functions (e.g., cooperative planning, empathy, language). The growing brain needed a longer childhood, which required greater pair bonding and band cohesion.
All sentient beings developed through natural selection in such a way that pleasant sensations serve as their guide, and especially the pleasure derived from sociability and from loving our families.

Charles Darwin
The Responsive Mode

![Diagram showing the relationship between Wisdom, Contentment, Love, Attach, Peace, Avoid, Approach, and Happiness.](diagram.png)
But to Cope with Urgent Needs, We Leave Home . . .

- **Avoid**: When we feel threatened or harmed
- **Approach**: When we can’t attain important goals
- **Attach**: When we feel isolated, disconnected, unseen, unappreciated, unloved

This is the brain in its **Reactive** mode of functioning - a kind of inner homelessness.
Us and Them

- Core evolutionary strategy: within-group **cooperation**, and between-group **aggression**.

- Both capacities and tendencies are hard-wired into our brains, ready for activation. And there is individual variation.

- Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.

- That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.

- Two wolves in your heart:
  - Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
  - Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

*Which one will you feed?*
The Reactive Mode

Avoid
Hatred
Greed
Approach

Ignorance
Suffering

Heartache
Attach
Psychopathology as Reactive Dysfunctions

- **Avoid** - Anxiety disorders; PTSD; panic, terror; rage; violence

- **Approach** - Addiction; over-drinking, -eating, -gambling; compulsion; hoarding; driving for goals at great cost; spiritual materialism

- **Attach** - Borderline, narcissistic, antisocial PD; symbiosis; *folie a deux*; “looking for love in all the wrong places”
Threat Reactivity
A Major Result of the Negativity Bias: Threat Reactivity

- Two mistakes:
  - Thinking there is a tiger in the bushes when there isn’t one.
  - Thinking there is no tiger in the bushes when there is one.

- We evolved to make the first mistake a hundred times to avoid making the second mistake even once.

- This evolutionary tendency is intensified by temperament, personal history, culture, and politics.

- Threat reactivity affects individuals, couples, families, organizations, nations, and the world as a whole.
Results of Threat Reactivity (Personal, Organizational, National)

- Our initial appraisals are mistaken:
  - Overestimating threats
  - Underestimating opportunities
  - Underestimating inner and outer resources

- We update these appraisals with information that confirms them; we ignore, devalue, or alter information that doesn’t.

- Thus we end up with views of ourselves, others, and the world that are ignorant, selective, and distorted.
Costs of Threat Reactivity (Personal, Organizational, National)

- Feeling threatened feels bad, and triggers stress consequences.
- We over-invest in threat protection.
- The boy who cried tiger: flooding with paper tigers makes it harder to see the real ones.
- Acting while feeling threatened leads to over-reactions, makes others feel threatened, and creates vicious cycles.
- The Attaining system is inhibited, so we don’t pursue opportunities, play small, or give up too soon.
- In the Attaching system, we bond tighter to “us,” with more fear and anger toward “them.”
On Your Own Side
Self-Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that a being not suffer, combined with sympathetic concern. Self-compassion simply applies that to oneself. It is not self-pity, complaining, or wallowing in pain.

- Studies show that self-compassion buffers stress and increases resilience and self-worth.

- But self-compassion is hard for many people, due to feelings of unworthiness, self-criticism, or “internalized oppression.” To encourage the neural substrates of self-compassion:
  - Get the sense of being cared about by someone else.
  - Bring to mind someone you naturally feel compassion for
  - Sink into the experience of compassion in your body
  - Then shift the compassion to yourself, perhaps with phrases like: “May I not suffer. May the pain of this moment pass.”
Feeling Stronger and Safer

- Be mindful of an experience of strength (e.g., physical challenge, standing up for someone).

- Staying grounded in strength, let things come to you without shaking your roots, like a mighty tree in a storm.

- Be mindful of:
  - Protections (e.g., being in a safe place, imagining a shield)
  - People who care about you
  - Resources inside and outside you

- Let yourself feel as safe as you reasonably can:
  - Noticing any anxiety about feeling safer
  - Feeling more relaxed, tranquil, peaceful
  - Releasing bracing, guardedness, vigilance
True Nature

Peaceful

Happy

Loving
Where to Find Rick Hanson Online

http://www.youtube.com/BuddhasBrain
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