

AEDP For Couples: A New Paradigm in Couples Treatment

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AEDP for Couples is based on Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy (Fosha, The Transforming Power of Affect, 2000). AEDP is a powerful modality that draws on current and emerging affective neuro-science and research on attachment to create a deeply relational, somatically attuned, transformation-oriented treatment of attachment level trauma and deprivation. One of the defining characteristics of AEDP is that, from the first session of treatment, the therapist seeks to provide the client with an experience of safety. This softens defenses, which can then energize a forward momentum that feels wholesome and natural. When AEDP is applied to couples treatment, the therapist seeks to generate the same sense of safety and trust in an atmosphere that welcomes both clients who make up the couple to be safely seen, heard and reflected. This felt sense of safety facilitates new openings to speak the truth and whets the appetite for deeper connection to self and other.

Disconnection and “Being Disappeared”

The underlying difficulty that brings most couples into treatment is a disturbing sense of disconnection. Both individuals feel misperceived and triggered into defensive reactivity and are feeling too unsafe to give and receive comfort and support. In fact, often, both partners feel that their “best self” is “disappeared” by their partner.

This “disappearing” is real, but it is a co-created process. For example, when the attachment system of each couple member is activated in a defensive stance, defensive exclusion, or the disconnection from awareness of feelings increases dramatically. During periods of relational distress in avoidantly-attached partners, closeness itself is provocative of defensive and reactive anxiety and irritation, causing a moving away from a feeling connection with self and other. The relational and emotional distancing of the avoidant partner then generates an intensified abandonment experience in the more preoccupied or pursuing partner, triggering defensive angry protests, dissociation or clinging. These hard-wired attachment-based reactions “drive” the more avoidant partner farther away. Both partners go into “worst self” mode, unintentionally

bringing forward the interlocking dynamic of the other partner in a rapidly intensifying vortex of mutually created suffering, distancing and loss of internal awareness. Unfortunately, not only do both partners lose contact over time with the partner they fell in love with, but also they often progressively lose contact with themselves and their own agency to consciously choose their responses.

AEDP for Couples offers the opportunity for the most loving “self at best” of each partner to come forward into view, so it can be seen, heard and responded to. Like in AEDP for individuals, we seek to evoke and reflect self at best in each couple treatment session. We intend to help the couple create and shape a resilient safe container, which potentiates the natural experience of love to flow toward the partner and builds courage to allow contact with the felt longing to love and be loved. This experience activates

elements of the original experience of falling in love. Remember, if you will, how within the process of falling in love there is a powerful experience of “bringing out the best in each other” that confirms, “this is the one”.

The Therapist in AEDP for Couples

Treatment within the AEDP for Couples model relies on the relationally and emotionally attuned therapist being energetically available and productively transparent in treatment sessions. This approach is the opposite polarity from seeking to create a transference relationship by attempting to provide a “blank screen”. The healing pathway provided instead is one of establishing a palpably safe relational connection that is based on moment-to-moment tracking and appropriate titration of the evolving experiential intensity in the room. The therapeutic transparency and vitality of the therapist in the couple’s therapy sessions provides a rich intersubjective field into which each couple member is drawn to connect more openly with the other. This “starting over again” with the one they each fell in love with stimulates powerful longings that can embolden each couple member to come forward with expressions of what is wanted rather than what is distasteful or anxiety provoking about the partner.

As Bowlby (1988) pointed out, the need for attachment to a primary other is a *powerful* biological drive that begins at birth. As the research of Ainsworth and others who have conducted studies of videotaped mother-infant interactions further underscore, relational attunement is essential for healthy attachments to form and evolve. The methods of AEDP for Couples are designed to evoke the discovery of a primal reservoir of hard-wired capacity for connection and attunement between the marital partners. What is remarkable is that, just as a baby who is soothed and begins to feel secure moves toward relaxation and creative play, so do couples come forward and “experiment” when the therapist safely holds the relational container for each member of the couple. Modeling after the therapist’s embodied, relational stance, the couple members learn to safely “witness” (Adler, 2002) each other despite reflexive impulses to attack and blame each other. The intention of the treatment is for that safe container of body-based awareness to progressively go home with the couple. Consider how often have we heard couple members say, “Can we take you home with us?”

Once the couple has established that there is a felt experience of longing to be together and “remembering” each other in an affirming way, relational repairs can and must be made. The AEDP for Couples method seeks to provide an accelerated medium for truth, reconciliation, and relational repair. When airing past hurts, rather than describing the

other, the therapist supports each partner to speak of his or her own experience in an embodied way through practicing witness consciousness. As the members of the couple continue feeling, expressing and receiving each other with a combination of owned experience and direct honesty, a foundation is laid for the rest of treatment.

Ultimately, AEDP for Couples is designed to treat overt and covert attachment-level wounding that has its roots in early life in the mother-infant bond (or the relative lack thereof). Chronic mis-attunement or unrepaired ruptures in those first months and the formative years that follow, entrain brain development that creates defensive structures and reflexive behavioral patterning (Schoore, 2011) that make loving and peaceful coexistence in a primary attachment relationship difficult or impossible. Attachment level healing in couple treatment involves cultivating alternate brain pathways and opening up new choices for moving forward together developmentally. Transparent expressions of what is real, true, loving and especially joyful (Frederickson, 2010) opens both members of the couple (and the therapist as well) to transformative healing experiences by activating mirror neurons (Gallese et al. 1996, Rizzolatti et al. 1996a). AEDP for Couples is harmonious with and provides an experience-rich and process-oriented complement to other attachment-based treatment approaches such as Emotion Focused Therapy (Johnson, 1996, 2004) and Attachment-Based Family Therapy (Hughes, 2007) and PACT (Tatkin, 2015) and others.

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