



**NCAMFT**

*Strengthening family, couple, and individual health*

**General Session**  
**From Reactivity to Empowerment in Couple Therapy:**  
**A Neurobiological-Relational Approach**

Mona Fishbane, PhD

**From Reactivity to Empowerment in  
Couple Therapy: A Neurobiological-  
Relational Approach**

Mona D. Fishbane, Ph.D.  
Keynote, NC AMFT Conference  
March 13, 2020

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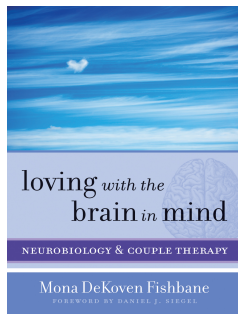
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**Love**

- *Avatar*: 'I see you'
- Passionate Love, Companionate Love
- Relationship satisfaction tends to deteriorate over time
- "Can love last?" (Mitchell)
- The Chemicals of Love
- Intimate Relationships & Health

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**Cultural beliefs about love & intimacy**

- Cultural differences around love & intimacy
- Happily ever after
- Entitlement to be loved
- Values of individualism & competition: Impact on love
- “Falling in love,” “Falling out of love”: A passive view of loving

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**Becoming a Proactive Lover**

- Proactive-vs- passive view of loving
- Relational Empowerment: Emotional & social intelligence
- Self-responsibility, Relational responsibility
- Nurturing the “We”
- Thich Nhat Hanh: Water the seeds of love
- Barbara Fredrickson: Positivity Resonance

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**Gottman’s Happy Couples**

- Friendship, mutual admiration, respect
- “We”-ness; partners turn toward each other
- Nurture a culture of positivity; 5:1 ratio
- Constructive Conflict
- Don’t get physiologically overaroused in conflict
- Repair: Trust is built through repair

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*Couples in Distress*

- Mutual Activation Process
- Emotionally/physiologically dysregulated
- Reactivity, Defensiveness
- Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling (Gottman)
- Sense of defeat, don't know how to get through to each other
- Power struggles & the blame game

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Cultural Influences on the Blame Game

- Competition -vs- Collaboration
- Debate -vs- Dialogue
- Independence -vs- Interdependence
- Individualism -vs- Relational Self
- Rights-vs-Responsibilities
- Naïve idealization of marriage/intimate relationships
- Isolation of nuclear families

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Neurobiology & The Blame Game

- We are wired to protect ourselves when we feel attacked or criticized
- Fight/Flight
- Attack/Defend; Attack/Counterattack; Attack/Withdraw
- This happens automatically, beneath awareness
- We then justify our upset: 'The Interpreter'

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## Erik & Lisa

- Current relationship impasse
- History of relationship
- Family of origin history of each partner

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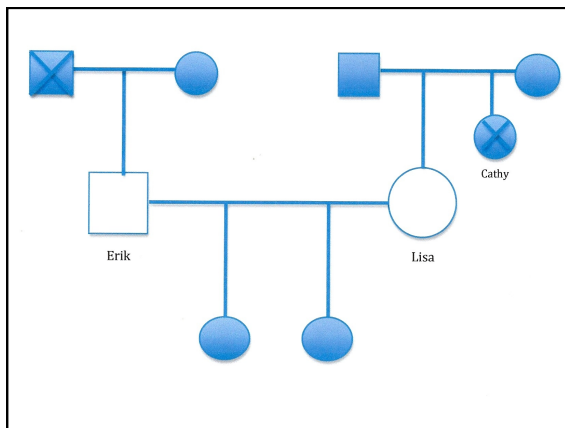
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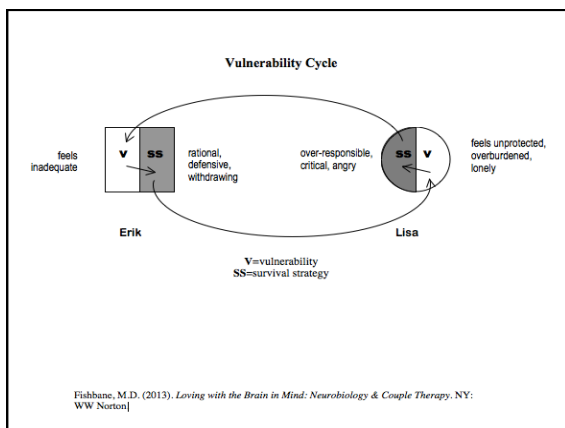
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### Automaticity vs. Choice

- We live much of our life on automatic pilot, driven by our lower brain
- Choice: A prefrontal process
  - “The pause that refreshes” (Siegel)
- Hot vs. cool systems: Mischel (The Marshmallow Test)
- Facilitating Choice in Couple Therapy

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### *We are social animals* We are wired to connect

- Child’s brain is wired through connection with parents
- Humans are social, need attachment with others for survival--throughout life
- “Tend & Befriend” (Taylor)
- Attachment, Attunement
- Trust

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### Neurobiology of Empathy (Decety & Jackson)

- *Resonance*: subcortical, automatic feeling in one’s body what the other feels
- *Cognitive Empathy*: consciously putting oneself in the other’s shoes
- *Boundary* between self and other
- *Self-Regulation* in face of other’s pain

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## Emotions and the Brain

- Emotions: Body sensations
- William James: We don't smile because we're happy, we're happy because we smile
- Interoception: Ability to read own body states
- Alexithymia
- Integration of emotion & thought
- Emotions are communications to others

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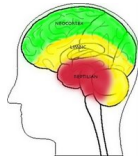
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## Tripartite Brain

- Tripartite Brain: Brain stem, Limbic system, Prefrontal Cortex (PFC): Interconnected
- More primitive brain circuits can overwhelm higher functioning when we feel threatened



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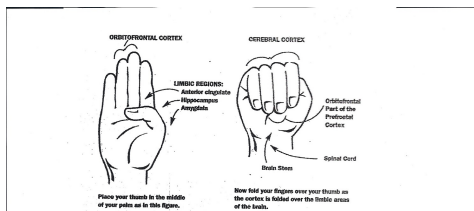
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## Hand Model of Brain (Siegel & Hartzell)



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### A Tale of Two Roads

- Low Road: Amygdala
  - Online at birth
  - 'Fear Central': Sets off fight/flight response
  - 'Quick & dirty'
  - Stores emotional components of memories
- High Road: Prefrontal Cortex
  - Wiring not complete until one's mid-20's
  - Response flexibility; regulates amygdala; self-control; thoughtfulness

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### The Brain is Embodied

- Constant flow between brain and rest of body, back and forth
- Vagus Nerve between viscera and brain; afferent fibers bring information from gut to brain: 'Gut feelings'
- Interoception: reading our body
- Hormones: Cortisol, Oxyocin, Testosterone

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### Memory, Trauma, & the Brain

- Memory
  - Implicit
    - Most memory is implicit, especially early memories
    - Amygdala involved in emotional memory
  - Explicit
    - Hippocampus involved; develops after first year
- Trauma
  - Negatively affects the developing brain

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### Nature & Nurture

- Nature & nurture are intertwined
- “Experience shapes the brain throughout life by altering connections among neurons” (Siegel)
- Experience affects the expression of genes

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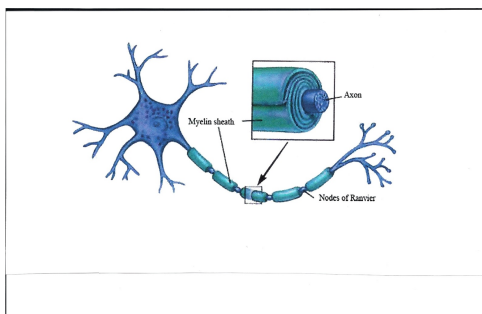
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### Neuron



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### Habits & Change

- We are wired for habit
  - Hebb's Theorem: "Neurons that fire together wire together"
  - Habits become self-perpetuating
  - You are what you do
- We are wired for change
  - Neuroplasticity: Ability of the brain to change
  - Continues throughout life
  - What facilitates neuroplasticity: Exercise, paying attention, learning new things
  - Dweck: Growth Mindset, Fixed Mindset

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**COUPLE THERAPY:  
Interventions Informed by  
Neurobiology**

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***Challenges of Change***

- Couples come to therapy to change  
--or to change each other
- Fears of change: 'Resistance'
- Stability/Change: a natural ambivalence
- 'The Giant Exercise'

- Facilitating Neuroplasticity  
& Relationship Plasticity

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**Goals of Couple Therapy**

- Identify the couple's dance or impasse, the "dance of amygdalas"
- Look 'behind the scenes' at each partner's reactivity
- Identify intrapsychic, interpersonal, intergenerational, contextual, & neurobiological factors fueling the dance
- Give partners tools to manage their own reactivity and make more thoughtful choices
- Develop relational empowerment & resilience
- Facilitate empathy, generosity, trust, intimacy

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### *Couples' Dances*

- Pursue/Withdraw
- Criticize (Attack)/Withdraw
- Attack/Defend
- Attack/Counterattack
- Withdraw/Withdraw

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### Escalations: The Vulnerability Cycle

- Impasses
- Core Impasses
  - Vulnerabilities
  - Survival Strategies

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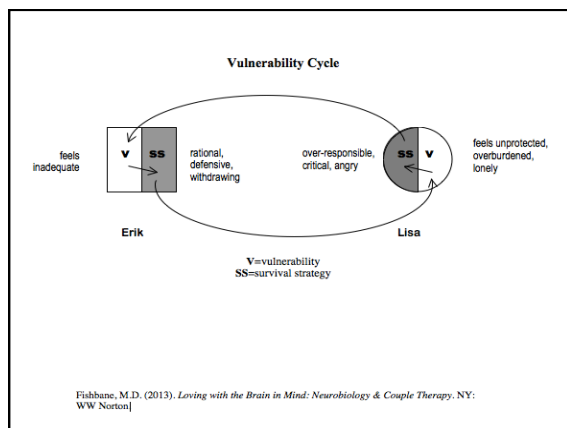
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### Transforming the Vulnerability Cycle

- Help couple get “meta” to their own vulnerability cycle
- Identify the circular, recursive nature of the cycle
  - From a linear view to a circular view
  - Both partners are victims of and (inadvertent) co-creators of the vulnerability cycle
- Learn to notice when feel vulnerable & survival strategy is getting activated
- Speak from vulnerability (which elicits empathy rather than defensiveness from partner); hold each other’s vulnerability with care
- ‘Grow up’ own survival strategies
- Separate present from past: ‘The Magic Question’

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### Challenge the Blame Game

- Power struggles & blame
- Invite blame to leave
- Therapy office as a shame-free, blame-free zone
- Help partners shift from self-protective positions to self-responsible & caring positions
- ‘I’ -vs- ‘You’ statements

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### *‘Power Over’*

- There are real power imbalances in couples’ relationships
- Physical size differences
  - Potential for physical violence
- Financial resources differences
  - How this affects who makes decisions
- Differences in class, race, education that affect power & privilege
- Options each has to leave the relationship
- Power & Gender

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## Managing Conflict

Gottman:

- Conflict is normal even in happy relationships
- Manage conflict with respect & curiosity
- Don't use 4 Horsemen
- Self-soothe in conflict, manage DPA (flooding)

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## *'Power To'*

- Power to be the kind of person you want to be
- Emotional & social intelligence
- Relational empowerment: Loving intentionally
- 'Tools for your relational toolbox'
- 'Making a relational claim'
- Emotion regulation

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## Emotional Resilience

- Ability to recover from a stressful experience & modulate own emotional response
- Neurobiology of emotional resilience
- "Affective chronometry" (Davidson):
  - How fast you get upset
  - How upset you get
  - How quickly you can calm down
- Genetic & experiential influences:
  - Individual differences

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### Techniques for Emotion Regulation

- Self-soothing: “parenting yourself from the inside out” (Siegel)
- Hand on heart; belly breathing
- Identify own emotions: “Name it to tame it” (Siegel)
- Imagery exercises:
  - Dialogue between PFC & Amygdala
  - IFS Parts work
- Mindfulness Meditation
- Reappraisal
- Soothing each other

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### *‘Power With’*

- Proactive loving: Shared relational responsibility
- Respect, equality, accepting differences
- Nurture the “We”: Work as a team
- Build Positivity
- Empathy

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### Facilitating Attachment in Couple Therapy

- Sue Johnson: EFT with couples
- Couple as victims of and creators of their cycles
- Trust & violations of trust

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**Facilitating Empathy  
in Couple Therapy**

- Eye contact
- Gender & empathy
- Learning self-empathy
- Learning empathy for the other
- “Behind an angry partner is a hurt partner”

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**Blocks to Empathy**

- Anger, Blame, Defensiveness
- Anxiety
- Fear of losing self in empathy for the other:  
Boundary issues
- Guilt  
–“I feel bad for you” translates into “I am bad  
because you’re unhappy”
- Rigidity, Imperiousness
- Gender Training

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*Care & Repair*  
**Nurture Friendship & Passion**

- Turn toward each other (Gottman)
- Protection & care: Tend & Befriend
- Nurture micro-moments of positivity  
resonance (Fredrickson)
- Importance of touch, sex, massage:  
oxytocin’s magic charms

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### Rupture & Repair

- Connection-disconnection-repair
- The power of apology: Love means having to say you're sorry—a lot!
- Apology as self-responsibility
- Repair when calm
- Repair can increase intimacy
- Blocks to apology

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### Guilt & Forgiveness

- Guilt: Healthy, neurotic (Buber)
- Forgiveness as a dyadic, relational process-vs-a unilateral one (Abrahms-Spring)

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### Acceptance

- Couple Serenity Prayer
- 'Take the best and leave the rest'
- Acceptance-vs-Resignation
- Resignation: a sense of defeat or bitterness
- Acceptance: Holding the good aspects of the relationship while accepting partner's limitations
- Knowing one's bottom line: When acceptance is problematic or dangerous

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## Gratitude

- Appreciate the blessings in the relationship
  - The Blessings Jar
- Research: gratitude facilitates happiness, contentment, connection
- Scarcity -vs- abundance

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## Generosity

- Generosity activates reward centers of brain
- Oxytocin increases generosity
- 'Least pathology assumption': Benefit of the doubt

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## *Healing Intergenerational Wounds*

- Family-of-origin issues & couple therapy
- Implicit memories from childhood affect current couple relationship: Amygdala role
- The 'Magic Question'
- Impact on couple relationship if partners are stuck in anger & sense of victimization with their parents, or cut off from parents
- Self as victim-vs-author of own life
- "Waking from the Spell of Childhood"
- The "Loving Update"
- Synergy between personal, intergenerational, & couple transformation

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### Position of the Therapist

- Therapy as “limbic revision”
- Creating safety: Offer a shame-free, blame-free zone
- Therapist is not a judge; “multidirectional partiality” (Boszormenyi-Nagy)
- Witness, coach, facilitator
- Accept & challenge
- Transparency & collaboration with couple
- Facilitate change, don’t take responsibility for change

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### Choosing Change: The Fork in the Road

- Growth mindset-vs-fixed mindset (Dweck)
- Revisiting the script: What could I have done differently?
- Making a different choice in the moment: The Fork in the Road
- Celebrate these “sparkling moments” (White) with the couple

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### Change: In the Dance, in the Self

- New Dances, New Pathways:
  - As couple develops new dances that support intimacy, they are developing new neural pathways.
- “Massed practice”: With time, the new pathways, the new behaviors and new dances become automatic & natural.
- Setbacks when partners are stressed or tired; the old pathways are still there.
- Maintaining change: Rituals & reminders to nurture intimacy; strengthening new pathways-vs-falling back into the old ones

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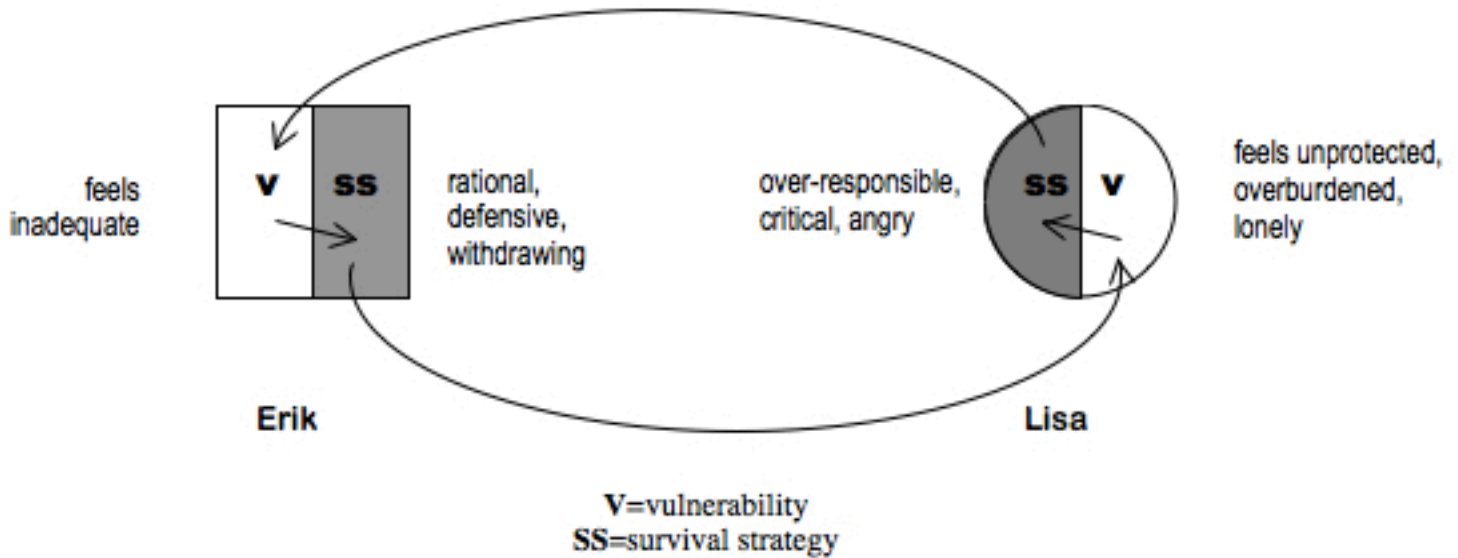
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## Vulnerability Cycle



# Vulnerability Cycle Diagram

