



From Trauma Bonding to Trauma Healing: How Early Trauma Creates, Enhances and Injures Couples' Relationships.

Justin Levitov, Kevin Foose

Institute for Tandem Therapies, ITT, PLLC

Stephanie Robinson, Ph.D., LCMHC-S, LCAS, CCS, AADC, NCC

UNC Pembroke



Broadly define early trauma.

- Fractures in expected milestones and developmental stages.
- Missteps in managing basic needs (safety and security).
- Physical trauma
- Emotional trauma
- Intergenerational Traumas
 - Epigenetics
- Witnessing or secondary trauma.
- Consistently dysfunctional familial and societal structures



Trauma Effects Personality and Character

- ▶ Thought processes
- ▶ Emotion management
- ▶ Limbic System
- ▶ Regulation
- ▶ Coping skills
- ▶ Authenticity
- ▶ Genuineness
- ▶ Collectively these effects dictate self image and self concept.
- ▶ All of the factors dictate what a person expects from relationships, for better or for worse.



Jenifer and Jack Chaos

Jenifer (42) and Jack (40) have been married for ten years and have two children, ages 8 and 5. They have sought couples counseling due to what they both describe as a "communication problem." Jenifer feels that Jack does not understand or appreciate her in ways that truly matter. Jack, in turn, believes Jenifer is too busy for him, he cannot do anything right so he admittedly doesn't try to help, and feels he has become an afterthought in their marriage.



Jenifer and Jack Chaos Continued

Jack was raised by a single mother after his biological father left when he was around 10 years old. Jack has vivid memories of his father being physically abusive to both he and his mother. Jack had no contact with his father after he left. He thinks his father died about 5 years ago. Jack shared his mother is “really loving, but unstable.” He recalled that his mother was always on some type of medication and that she was hospitalized several times for suicide attempts. Jack sees his mother as a kind of “Jekyll and Hyde.” She would be overly loving and kind one day and then, without cause, mean, hurtful, and angry. She would often blame Jack for his father leaving. When able, Jack’s mother worked as a clerk in grocery stores, but they often lived with and relied on Jack’s grandmother for support. Jack is an only child.



Jenifer and Jack Chaos Continued

Jenifer grew up in an incredibly wealthy home. Her father was a high-powered and well-connected entertainment lawyer. Her mother was a “socialite” and expected to host parties and attend events with her husband. Jenifer and her younger brother were primarily raised by nannies and all their needs were attended to by hired caretakers (housekeepers, chefs, etc.). Jenifer’s parents would regularly have celebrities at their home often for meetings and parties. During these activities, Jenifer and her brother had to stay in the guest house. Some parties could last several days. Jenifer added that her mother was “drunk” all the time and only focused on her appearance. Her mother was never close with her father. Jenifer’s mother died from an accidental overdose after taking too many “sleeping pills.” Jenifer’s father is still alive, but she has no contact with him.

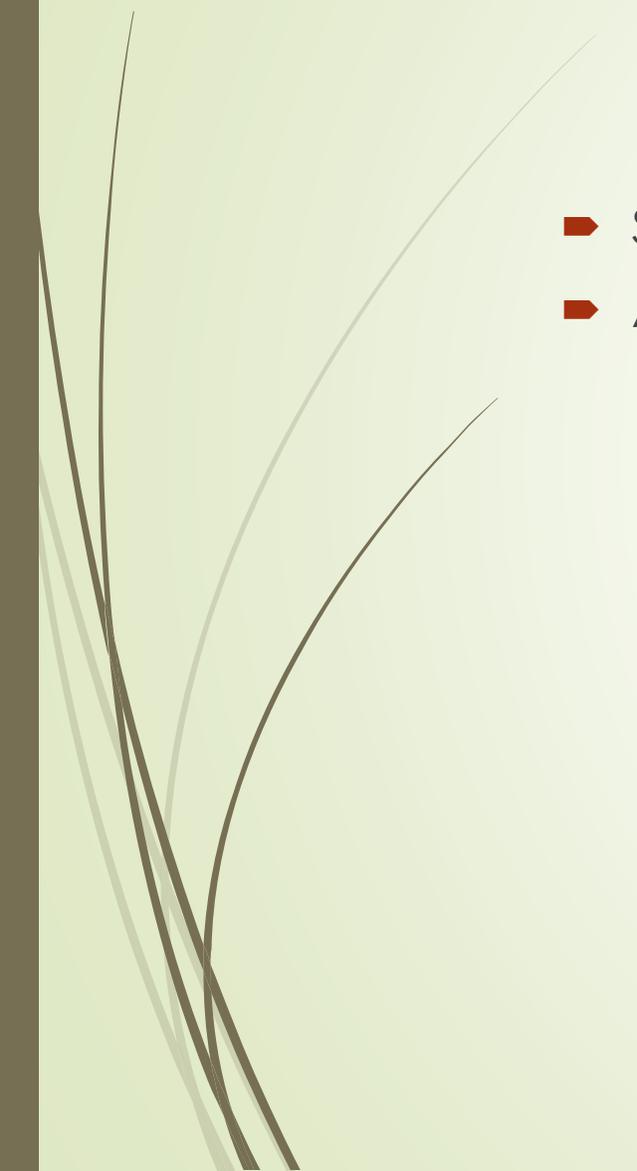


Illustrate how reciprocal trauma works within a relationship.

- ▶ Consider the case of Jack and Jenifer Chaos.
- ▶ They characterize their lives as both very busy and very contentious.
- ▶ They never seem to be satisfied with virtually everything in their lives:
 - ▶ Communication, emotional investment, work, recreation, extended family interactions.
- ▶ They claim to suffer from a “Communication Problem”. According to Jenifer, Jack never seems to understand and appreciate her in ways that make any difference to her. According to Jack, Jenifer is too busy to have anything to do with him.
- ▶ Most recently they have been having arguments about their decision making, their relationship and whether they have any future at all together. Ironically, they do not question that they “love” each other.
- ▶ While they would never use these words, they seem have come to the limit of their trauma bond.

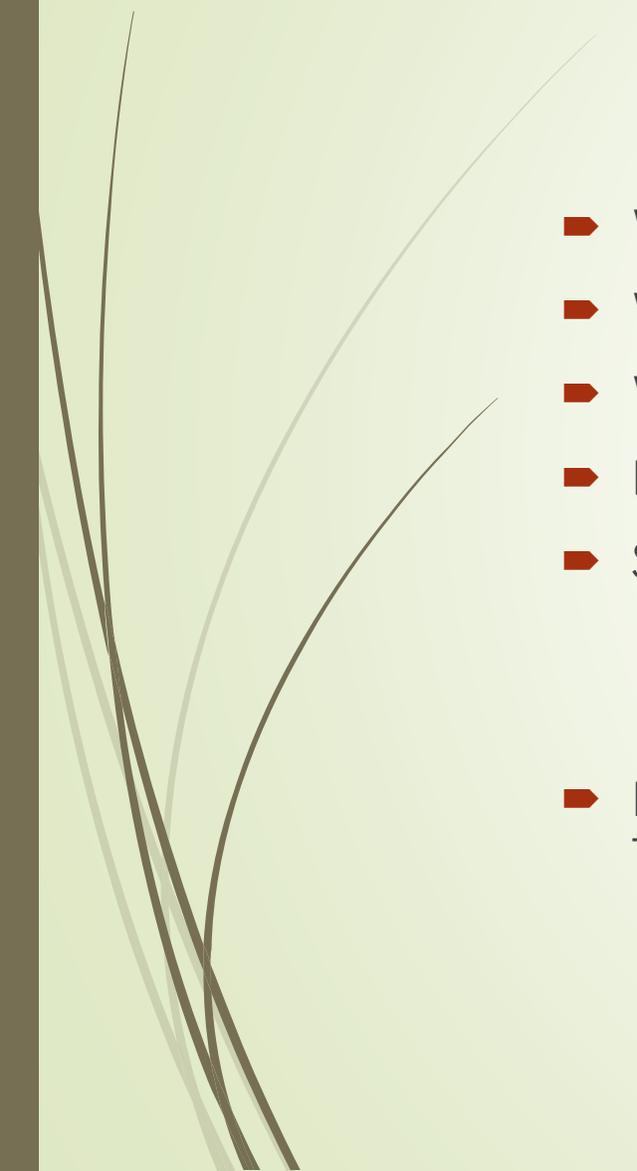


Volunteers for Jack and Jenifer

- ▶ Selecting each member of the couple.
 - ▶ Assigning group members to support each character.
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Understand trauma bonding and how it functions.

- ▶ We are attracted to what we know,
 - ▶ What we learned,
 - ▶ What we come to understand as “normal.”
 - ▶ Parallel experiences create their own kind of relational safety.
 - ▶ Such connections create very “exclusive” relationships.
 - ▶ Nobody else could really understand me.
 - ▶ Nobody else could really accept me.
 - ▶ Parallels in the pair’s limbic systems create an interesting sense of closeness. They sense it as a kind of intimacy.
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Identify the positive elements of trauma attraction.

- Resiliency
- Passion
- Navigating complex situations
 - Sense needs and deficits.
 - Ability to read a room.
- Familiarity with similarly effected people.
 - Ability to identify other folks with similar struggles
- Altruistic ideas about being helpful to others who have wounds.
- More patience with others.



Identify How a “Couple’s Corners” Are Activated By Early Trauma.

- ▶ Places where people find refuge when anxiety builds in the relationship.
- ▶ They are often opposite each other (e.g. Pursuer-Isolator).
- ▶ They are based upon the history that predates their relationship.
 - ▶ They are often survival efforts drawn from the family of origin.
- ▶ How about Jack and Jenifer.
 - ▶ Jack’s History – He often texts an old girlfriend to calm himself.
 - ▶ Jenifer’s History – Activity and involvement with caring for others.
 - ▶ Their corners are mutually aggravating.



Delineate trauma, trauma bonding, and trauma resolution within a sample case.

- ▶ Trauma in Jack and Jenifer
- ▶ What messages did they receive about what a relationship looks like.
- ▶ Their relational trauma Bond
- ▶ Goals for resolution – Trauma Bond to Trauma Intimacy
 - ▶ Knowing what a healthy relationship actually looks like.
 - ▶ Emotional Intimacy
 - ▶ Physical Intimacy (*assess counselors comfort levels with this topic.)
 - ▶ Compassion
 - ▶ Empathy
 - ▶ Acceptance
 - ▶ Applying these goals to yourself and your partner **simultaneously**.



Trauma Bond Resolution Steps

- ▶ Prioritizing the relationship over the individual (notwithstanding safety concerns).
 - ▶ Understanding that 80% of the conflict in a couple is caused by the history each brings to the relationship.
 - ▶ Compassionate listening as a treatment option for suffering.
 - ▶ The shared understanding of one another's developmental experiences.
 - ▶ Both members of the couple are emotionally injured in the same place but by very different means. For example, two people may suffer from chronic loneliness while the life experiences that spawned the symptom may be very different.
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Develop interventions that honor early injuries as you guide a couple toward healing.

- ▶ Overarching goals:
 - ▶ encouraging the couple to help one another heal from the injuries sustained earlier in their lives.
 - ▶ protect their children from being traumatized intergenerationally.
- ▶ Methods:
 - ▶ Identify relationship themes that resemble the family of origin patterns.
 - ▶ Anger management focused on controlling fear in the relationship
 - ▶ Creating “unhad” conversations.
 - ▶ Acting replacing reacting.
 - ▶ Inner child work.
 - ▶ Managing fear



Assess the effectiveness of a couple's efforts to heal their relationship.

- ▶ What would the measures and behaviors look like if the couple began to resolve the trauma in their relationship?



References

- ▶ Levitov, J.E. & Fall, K. A. (2020). Tandem Couples Counseling: An Innovative Approach to Working with High Conflict Couples 1st Edition. Routledge.
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Description

Because early trauma deeply impacts our relational lives, to be relationally successful we must understand how we are affected by these early experiences and what we can do to improve. This session is organized around one goal of relationships: partners help one another heal from the injuries each obtained earlier in their lives. By focusing upon just one goal of committed relationships, participants will be able to explore how and why early trauma plays such an important role, and what can be done to manage/overcome its negative effects. Participants can expect to obtain useful clinical information to help refine their couples counseling efforts as well as ideas that might be useful in their own relational lives. The session will offer a discussion-rich format that will enable participants to create interventions unique to their client needs.