

COURSE 200:
**CLINICAL TRAINING IN
IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY**

Training Manual Text
Module 3, Segments 9-12

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Imago

A new way to love

Imago International Training Institute

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Imago Theory

OUR STORY SO FAR

We come into the world whole and fully alive

In childhood the experience of pain causes us to lose the feeling of connection

In response to pain we develop adaptations and defenses

Through repressive messages of socialization and deficits in nurturing we lose access to parts of ourselves

Throughout childhood we are developing our Imago

In adulthood we go on a search and find mission for the partner who will help us to heal and grow, to restore our wholeness.

So How Do We Get There?

Conscious Relating is the path out of the Power Struggle but it requires traveling through the Valley of the Shadow of Death! The journey of Conscious Relating requires knowledge and awareness, commitment and skills. It requires the knowledge of the purpose of committed relationships and how to cooperate with that; a willingness to be aware of one's own contribution to creating the Power Struggle, one's own and one's partner's agenda and adaptations, and a willingness to risk growing beyond old survival strategies.

The Essential Condition - Commitment

Commitment to the Relationship

Commitment to Change/Growth

Commitment to Personal Responsibility

The Essential Skill – Imago Dialogue

Imago Dialogue – Listening, Understanding, Empathizing

FIVE PROCESSES AND THE EXERCISES THAT SUPPORT THEM

Re-Imaging	Parent/Child Dialogue Holding Exercise Parent-profile and Imago Work-up
Re-Structuring Frustrations	Behavior Change Request Dialogue Personal Behavior Change Request Process Commitment Dialogue Goodbye process for old ways of being in relationship (see Keeping the Love You Find workshop)
Removing Negativity - Creating Sacred Space	Dialogue – Sender Responsibility Appreciations Keepers of the Relationship Days Making Behavior Change Requests
Re-Romanticizing	Positive Flooding Appreciation Dialogue Caring Behaviors Fun Surprises
Re-Visioning	Relationship Vision Exercise

THE MISSING SELF

Specific tools for working deeply with the Missing Self are presented in the Keeping the Love You Find workshop and in Imago Advanced Training Programs, in particular the Characterological Growth Training. We recommend that all trainees attend one or both of these to continue to work on their own relational character adaptations and learn more dialogues to support their work with their clients. Also read “Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide”¹

The Self and Its Defenses

There are two threads that we follow from childhood to adulthood that help us to understand what is going on in our adult conscious relationships (see Training Manual Text, Module 1B, Segment 3 p. 5). One thread relates to the Psychological Journey and the nurturance needs that we manifest at each developmental stage. The other thread relates to The Journey of Socialization and to the repression of various aspects of the self.

A basic Imago hypothesis is that we come into the world whole, although with perhaps certain genetic predispositions. If we received ideal parenting and lived in an ideal world we would not need to develop defensive adaptations which restrict our responsive choices and our energy would continue to flow freely to all our functions. Our original wholeness would remain intact. That does not happen. Our parents are not able to meet all our needs. We develop adaptations. These can become some of our greatest strengths in the world and often our career is related to our adaptive strengths. However, in intimate relationships they get in the way of intimacy and connection.

In addition, our parents and other agents of society give us messages about how we can or cannot be to be accepted. We are shamed, ridiculed, rejected and exposed for certain of our ways of expressing our energy. Shaming occurs at home, at school, on the street, at religious institutions and in our educational institutions. We see our parents and others behave in ways that cause us pain or disgust us. As a result, we give up some of our wholeness to survive and be acceptable to ourselves and others. The Self, which within Imago is always seen as developing and existing within a relational context, becomes distorted, some parts over developed and some parts blocked or underdeveloped. The Missing Self is formed in the shadow from all the parts which we cannot own or allow to exist in the light of our own awareness or show to others.

When parts are actively pushed down into the shadows by shaming and disgust, they tend to take on a separate existence that has a compulsive quality. We react in one of two ways – we compulsively repress that trait, we compulsively express it, or both. There is a scene at the beginning of the autobiographical movie about Tina Turner ‘What’s Love Got to Do With It’ where she is repeatedly shamed and eventually rejected by her choir mistress for her irrepressible bursts of individual song during choir practice. She went on to make a successful career out of her individual voice with choral back up. However, in her marriage with Ike, her individual voice was again inhibited. Whereas Tina Turner made a career of singing irrepressibly, others of us shut down our capacity to sing at all.

The Self has many layers – some parts we know about ourselves but keep hidden from others. Some are so alien or unacceptable that we do not even allow ourselves to know

¹ Hendrix, Harville. *Keeping the Love You Find*.

about them. (In the movie 'In and Out' Kevin Kline's character was in total denial himself of his homosexuality and was about to get married, until a former student announced it to the world on Oscar night and he went through a reluctant journey of self-discovery.) Some parts others know about even if we do not, and some we keep hidden from others as well as from ourselves.

The Missing Self

	We know	We don't know
Others know	PRESENTATIONAL SELF SOCIAL SELF	DENIED SELF DISOWNED SELF including CONTRA-SEXUAL
Others don't know	HIDDEN SELF including CONTRA-SEXUAL	LOST SELF including CONTRA-SEXUAL

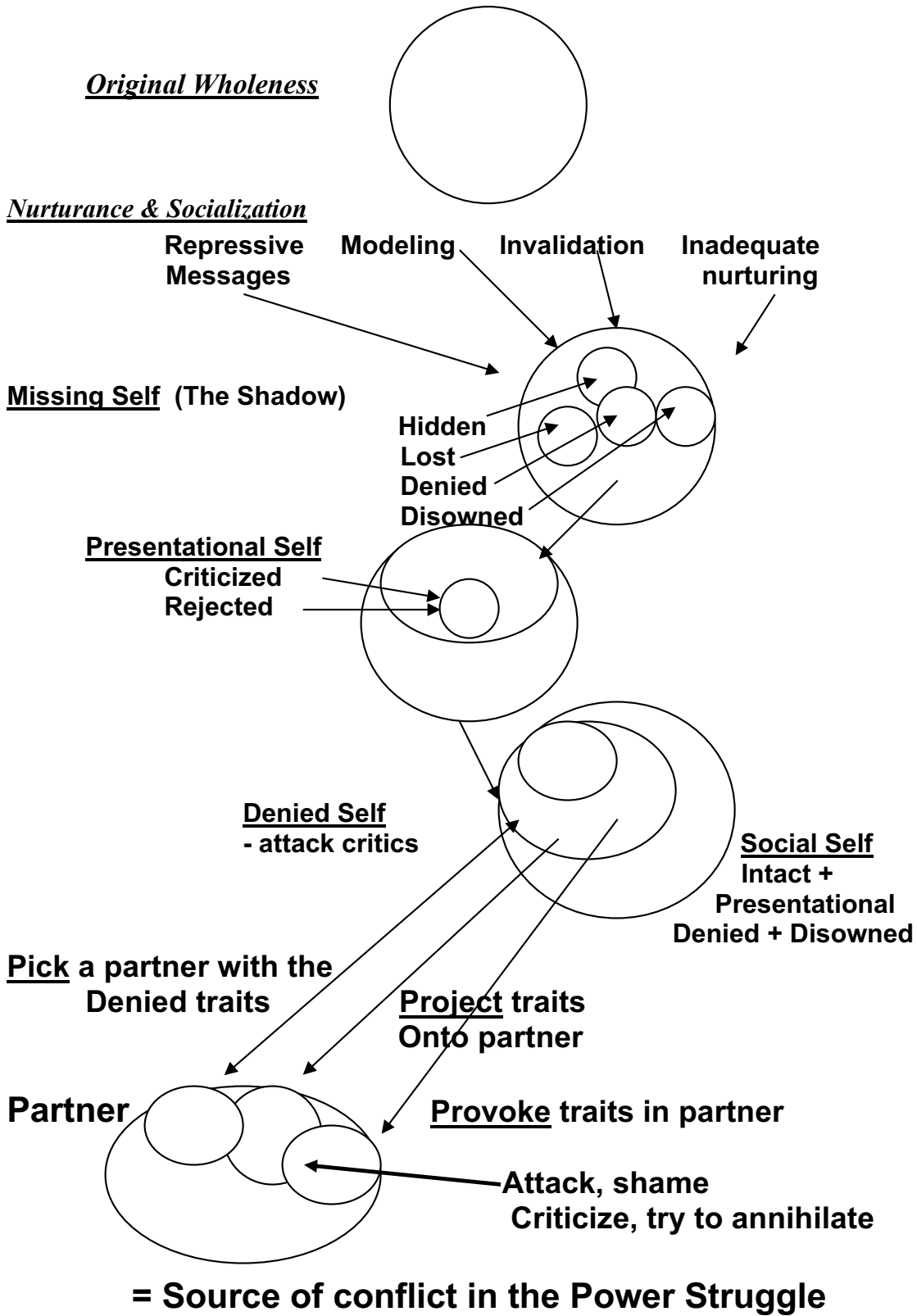
We start out whole and then the experiences of nurturing and socialization impact on our wholeness. We get messages 'Don't be that way' and we lose or block some of our energy to be that way – to think, to feel, to move, to sense. Our parents model to us certain ways of being – how women should behave, how men should behave, how people should not behave. We take it all in and become this or repress that. We are invalidated by those around us when we express certain parts of ourselves 'You must be crazy to think you'll ever get picked for a part in the play' and we learn to give up that potential in ourselves. Some parts of us are just neglected or inadequately nurtured in our particular environment – there just was not any exposure to music, or sports or books or poetry or spirituality at home so we never got a chance to develop those. No one was actively against those things, they just were not part of the environment.

As a result of all these experiences we adapt – some parts of us grow fully and others do not. Like the trees on a side of the cliff where the winds are always blowing in from the sea, we develop well in some ways and in other ways our growth is stunted. Parts of us are Hidden, Lost, Denied and Disowned. We create a Presentational Self to cover up the holes, to cover over the parts we cannot have. We present this patched up Self to the world but sometimes even this gets criticized. We create the self we present to the world – full of holes and patches, more holes and more patches.

However, we have to do something with the parts of ourselves that we had to get rid of – they do not just disappear from the universe, we are a closed system. So, we:

- pick someone who has that trait to be in relationship with and get them to carry it, e.g. a person who was not allowed to be angry might get into relationship with someone who has ready access to their anger and can express it easily.
- project the traits that we do not like onto those around us – we see them as having that trait whether or not they do, relate to them as if they did and sooner or later they start to identify with the trait and to behave as if they had it.
- provoke those around us to express the denied and disowned parts of ourselves.

The Missing Self



Aspects of the Missing Self

The Lost Self refers to the parts of the self which are lost as a response to the repressive messages of socialization. When some of our capacity to function fully in the areas of Being, Thinking, Feeling, Acting and Sensing are shamed and deemed as unacceptable in our families and in our culture, we repress our own capacity to fully express ourselves in those areas of functioning.

The Denied Self consists of traits we do not even know we have. They are so abhorrent or dystonic that we do not let ourselves know we have them. They include traits we see as negative such as self-righteousness, bigotry, abusiveness, submissiveness, violence, and voyeurism. There is usually a lot of energy attached to these traits so that when we see them in others, we find them very disturbing. They are often traits of our parents that we despised in them and did not want to have because they were associated with pain. Sometimes they are traits we believe that others would despise and reject us for having. Many gay, lesbian, and transgender people have had to deny those aspects of the self to themselves and to others out of fear.

The Disowned Self is made up of the traits that we see as positive in others that we admire, but that we do not acknowledge in ourselves. Others may know we have them, but we do not. Often, we experience fear or anxiety around saying that we have that quality and are quick to negate it.

The Social Self is our public façade, the way we think others see us. If you write down a list of traits that you think others see you as having, that is your social self. It includes parts of our original self which stayed intact as well as the false traits we put on or overdeveloped to cover up the lost and denied traits.

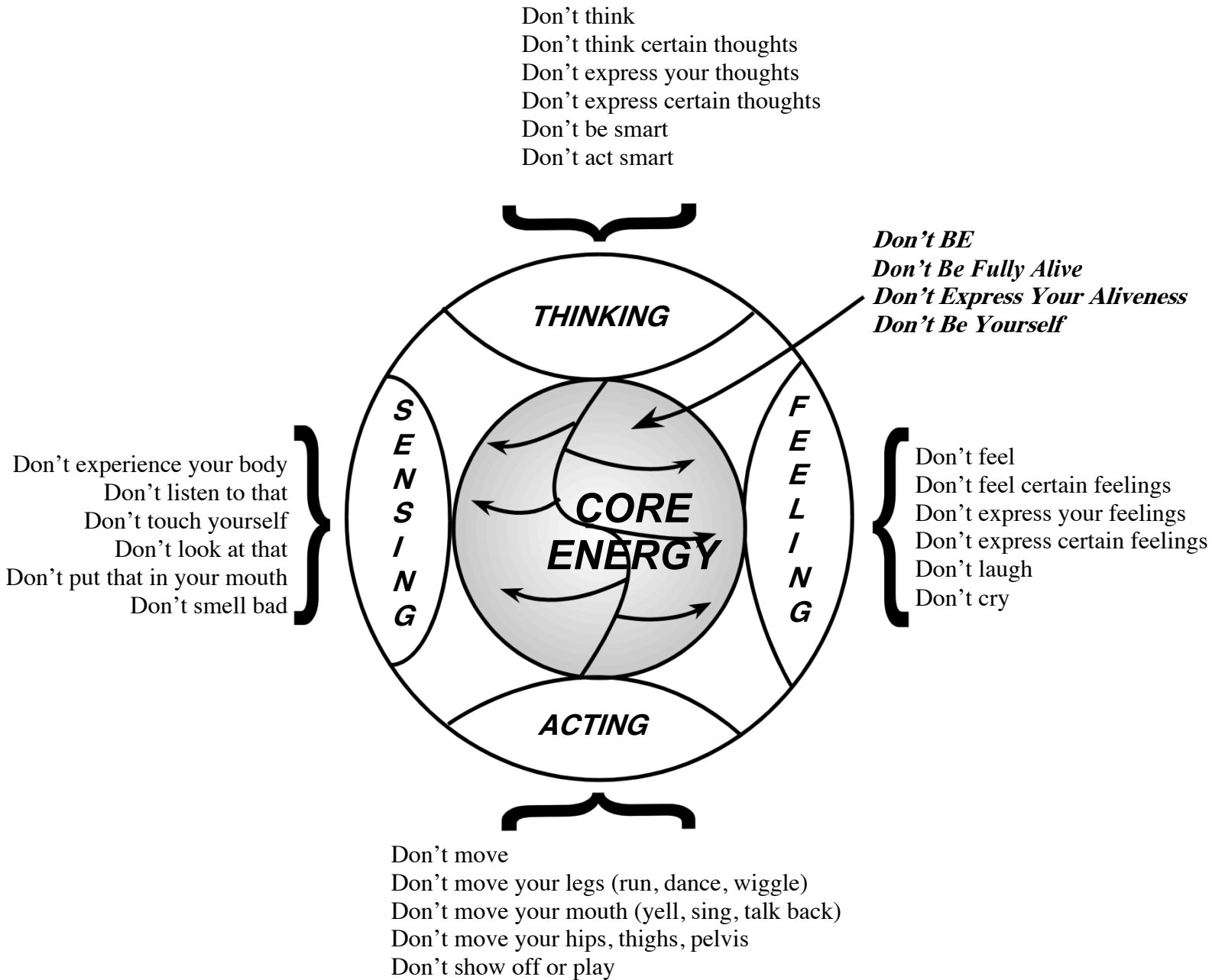
The Presentational Self reflects the way we want others to see us. We put a lot of effort into being seen that way. These are the traits we developed to cover over the gaps left by the lost, hidden and denied traits. During romantic love, no effort is too much to present the self we think will make the other fall in love with us. We keep some of our less nice bits well out of sight. Once the commitment deepens, we tend to put much less effort into the presentational self, after all we really want to be loved for who we are underneath with all our warts and imperfections. This shift often leads to accusations that 'you've changed'.

The Hidden Self is the composite of those traits that we know we have but do not let anyone else know about. To protect the very essence of our being we keep them hidden from view. Often, we have a lot of shame attached to them.

The Contra-sexual Self may include lost, hidden or denied traits that are unacceptable because they are seen culturally as gender inappropriate, e.g., being sexually aggressive for women, being sensitive and poetic for men. In many cultures these are much less rigidly defined now than in the past but are still there.

The Messages of Repressive Socialization

THE LOST SELF



These are the areas of functioning to which the energy got blocked as a result of all the overt and covert messages of socialization, the parts of our capacity to be, sense, feel, do and think that we gave up to be acceptable.

The Missing Self becomes another source of conflict in the Power Struggle. We give up parts of ourselves in childhood. In order to be whole, we need to get them back, so we get into relationship with someone who has them. Initially we feel whole again, but after the glow of romantic love wears off, when we see them in our partners, we feel anxious because we learnt that we could not have them and be accepted or safe. We feel the same way as we felt about them in ourselves, and we do to our partners what was done to us – shame them, attack them, reject them, model how not to have those traits, invalidate them, fail to nurture them. As long as we are relating to the traits in our partner in these ways, we cannot allow ourselves to have them back. We know a trait is unlovable and unacceptable in them by not loving or accepting it, so we cannot allow ourselves to have it because then we will be unlovable and unacceptable. As long as we continue to attack and criticize aspects of our partner that we dislike, we will stay incomplete and in conflict! Abuse of your partner is a form of self-abuse because what you are attacking is parts of yourself that you have rejected and got them to carry for you. Another way of saying this is:

We are born with it, we lose it, we miss it, we find it, we want it, we marry it, we see it, we fear it, we attack it, we stay incomplete.

The journey back to wholeness is to accept and reintegrate into your Self, in a conscious way, the traits you gave up in childhood. How do you know what they are? Your missing self consists of whatever you hate and admire the most in others, especially your partner - but do not see as a part of yourself. Look also at your clients – they too carry parts of your missing self. Reclaiming your missing self is essential for your wholeness. It is the core of the individual growth work that we cover in the 'Keeping the Love You Find' workshop and Characterological Growth training. Hendrix and Hunt, in their book 'Receiving Love'² identify it as a key factor in our difficulty receiving the love we want when it is finally available.

How do you re-own that which you despise and cannot allow yourself to have, that which you gave up in order to be loved, that which you attack and criticize when you see in your partner? In Imago Therapy we help couples, through Imago Dialogue, come to understand and value the most despised traits in their partners. They get to understand these traits as adaptations which allowed the partner to survive, to be loved and accepted. They see the trait as having value not only to the partner but also to the self and gradually begin to re-integrate the missing pieces. This does not mean that we encourage couples to tolerate behaviors which are unacceptable and abusive, but to see beneath the behaviors with compassion and request changes in behavior using the Behavior Change Request dialogue from a place of consciousness and ownership.

² Hendrix, Harville & Hunt, Helen LaKelly. *Receiving Love*. Atria Books: NY. 2004.

CLOSING EXITS: DECREASING PAIN THROUGH DEEPENING COMMITMENT

Relationship Exits – the acting out of negative feelings about the partner.

Although we long for connection in relationship we are terrified to allow ourselves to have it. We were wounded in childhood by people who loved us – namely our parents. Our unconscious has not forgotten this.

In the disillusionment of the Power Struggle, we again feel wounded by the person who is supposed to love us the most, so again we find ways to create distance from the pain. We discharge our feelings through actions or go outside of the relationship to get needs met. This creates exits or energy leaks.

Couples avoid intimacy for one primary reason: hurt. The hurt may be expressed through the following:

1. **Anger:** Couples feel angry at the loss of romantic love, experience their partner as withholding and not meeting their needs.
2. **Fear:** In romantic love the partner is seen as a source of need gratification. In the power struggle the partner is seen as a source of pain rather than pleasure. Fear arises that needs will not ever be met.
3. **Helplessness:** Partners exit when they feel helplessness in connection. This arises when they:
 - have closeness and they fear losing it
 - feel something they were not allowed to feel in childhood
 - have archaic feelings of being trapped
 - are tempted to be vulnerable
 - see each other's pain and cannot fix it
 - want to say no or yes and neither was acceptable in childhood
 - have been close and closeness in childhood was followed by pain

Couples collude to keep a set distance in the dance of intimacy. Both are terrified to get too close.

In the Power Struggle couples experience their partner as a source of pain and the exit often as a source of pleasure. Couples are often resistant to closing exits because they no longer see their partner as a source of pleasure. They do not believe that their needs will be met by their mate. They have a 'frozen' picture of one another and of what is possible in the relationship.

Types of Exits

Intentional	Designed to avoid intimacy. e.g. reading the newspaper at the table at every meal.
Functional	This is not intentional, rather it is something that must be done (e.g. working) but the partner experiences it as an exit in that it pulls energy that belongs to the relationship out of the relationship. The motivation determines whether an exit is functional or intentional.
De-Energizing	Drains energy away from relationship. For example, television, the internet, sports and friends can be used to avoid time together.
Catastrophic	This exit if left open will lead to the demise of the relationship over time. Examples are affairs, addictions, contempt, stonewalling.
Terminal	These exits put an end to the relationship. They are divorce, murder and suicide.

Closing exits is a process whereby both partners learn to express their feelings safely within the relationship and to listen to the other's world with openness, curiosity, and empathy. Small steps maintained over time are more effective than big changes that cannot be sustained. Closing exits helps couples to keep energy in the relationship for the purpose of mutual healing. Couples need to have compassion for the exits of their partner, who is not being malicious in exiting. Rather, they are unconsciously trying to get needs met and create safety. They are trying to make up for the emptiness and pain in the relationship by filling their lives with substitute pleasure.

Closing exits begins a new process of commitment:

- to the relationship
- to the partner
- and to change

This often begins to shift the dynamics of the relationship.

Closing exits is a process not an event. It may take time in order to close all the exits. Closing the exits means committing to the goal of creating a positive, working relationship with the partner. We need to keep energy in the relationship to devote to attaining this goal together.

In Imago we recommend that couples enter into a 12-week process in which they make a commitment to gradually close exits as well as agree to not 'exit' from the relationship during that time. The purpose of this is to draw back energy into the relationship for the purpose of mutual healing. Some couples may not be able to make this commitment right away and will need some time to do so.

- Closing exits is a gradual process.
- Each partner experiences the other's exits as a source of pain.
- Couples are often reluctant to close exits because they come face to face with repressed disappointments, anger and fear.
- It is difficult to give up an exit that is a source of pleasure/gratification that is not being met by the partner.
- The process of closing exits begins with working gradually on closing the terminal exits and then focusing on the catastrophic ones and so on.
- Closing exits often alleviates fear in one partner and exacerbates it in the other.

- A couple's response can be a revealing glimpse at the complex dynamic of the insecurely attached and the avoidant.
- Sometimes startling reversals happen and we can behold the intricate dance of the couple.

The role of the Imago Therapist is to:

- create a safe container, through dialogue, to contemplate closing exits.
- teach couples about exits
- help both partners identify their exits
- introduce the idea of gradually closing exits to keep energy in the relationship for healing
- help the couple connect with and safely express the disappointment, anger and fear that is fueling the exit. This will surface as the exit is closed.
- help them stay in dialogue about exits so that partners feel empathy for each other's experience
- help increase pleasure and need gratification in the relationship
- identify more complex dynamics regarding attachment
- help each partner to recommit to the other, to the relationship and to the process of change.

In a conscious relationship, couples learn to use vulnerable language and connection instead of acting out unspoken feelings.

The Commitment Dialogue is a very powerful and useful tool to help couples explore the ways in which they act out their feeling and learn to express them in ways that lead to connection.

Catastrophic Exits – Addictions and Affairs

Addictions – dealing with issues of addiction in couple relationships is beyond the scope of this Basic Clinical Training in Imago Relationship Therapy and is covered in an Advanced Training. Dealing with addictions is an area of specialization that requires special training. We recommend referring to and working with therapists who have such expertise. The “Getting the Love You Want” workshop has been adapted for couples in recovery.

Affairs

Many couples present for couple therapy because of affairs, often just after an affair has been discovered.

Some statistics and other information:

- 9 out of 10 people who have affairs also have extended family members who had an affair.
- About 60% of men and 40% of women (increasing) will have an affair during their marriage
- If a man has an affair the marriage is more likely to continue than if a woman has an affair:
 - a man is more likely to consider himself happily married and that the affair is just sexual
 - a woman is more likely to be emotionally involved and to have disconnected emotionally from the marriage

Therapist neutrality is particularly important in making it safe for a couple to deal with an affair in a productive and healing way. The therapist is often the only one in the couple's world holding a neutral space within which both partners can look at and own their contribution to the affair without taking responsibility for the other's choice of acting out behavior. This can be a delicate balancing act, requiring the therapist to be centered at the fulcrum of the relationship, holding both partners in equal respect and compassion. It is essential to have looked at and worked through our own life experience with affairs so as not to unconsciously act out a bias. If this is not possible refer the couple elsewhere. We all have within us the capacity to be 'unfaithful' to our partners in one way or another, by talking with friends, by refusing sex, by developing greater emotional intimacy with a therapist than with our partner, by violating the marital bed...

Affairs are generally (but not always) considered catastrophic exits in Imago, (depending on how the couple experiences them). Affairs perform the function of exiting the pain in the relationship by acting out (discharging or avoiding) feelings about the partner or the relationship that the couple is not able to deal with in a safe and healing way. They are relational rather than individual. Both partners contribute to the pain in the relationship and both act it out, although in different ways.

Some affairs have already ended before the couple enters therapy, but some are exits which will take time and a lot of dialogue to close. As with any other survival strategy it can take a lot of time and effort to create enough safety to let them go. The 'betrayed' partner may need to hold onto their own survival strategy, whatever that may be, just as long, and they may both be much less aware of it. It is often much more difficult for the 'betrayed' partner to own their contribution to the acting out of exits and to acknowledge the ways in which the diminished intimacy has been 'working' for them also. If the partner having the affair is in the Romantic Love stage with the new partner, the PEA (phenylethylamine) induced 'altered state' may render them cognitively and psychologically unavailable to do the work of therapy, which has a hard time competing with the ease, spontaneity, and aliveness of Romantic Love. The forbidden nature of an affair and the risk involved can increase the production of PEAs.

Dialogue is the process for dealing with affairs. Helping the couple to learn dialogue and holding them in dialogue allows them to create the safe space within which they can start to express all that needs to be expressed, listen with empathy to the other's experience, understand what was happening within the relationship that contributed to the affair and own their own roles in that, understand the affair in terms of childhood needs and adaptations, and above all connect with each other in ways that they may not have connected in in years. The therapist holds the hope that the relationship crisis, whether an affair or something else, will be the catalyst that will motivate them to examine their relationship and do the work of growth and healing so that after a while they will say, 'Even though it was hellishly painful, in some ways I'm grateful that it happened because we have a much better relationship now than we did before!'

Affairs are frequently a function of the interaction in the relationship, and they reflect developmental issues. They reflect the pattern of wounding and defense that developed in childhood and is re-created by both partners in the adult relationship. As such, they reflect particular manifestations of the dynamics of clinger/detacher, pursuer/isolator, diffuser/controller, competitor/manipulator, or of the relationship with the lost or denied self traits.

Affairs from a Developmental Perspective

Attachment Stage Affairs

The Avoiding partner experiences contact and others' needs as painful so they may have an affair as a way of avoiding contact that is too close. Sometimes the affair is not even with another person, but with anything – job, computer, church activities, porn sites – that will keep them out of close contact with their partner. If it is with another person they want it to feel good and conflict free, with no demands and no pain. They are just as remote and unavailable in this relationship as in their marriage and sooner or later the other will start to feel that and to want more, re-creating painful contact from which the avoider will then need to withdraw.

The Clinging partner longs for contact and experiences the lack or loss of contact as painful. They will have an affair as a reaction to the detachment and unavailability of their avoider partner which triggers their terror of abandonment. The affair may be equivalent to the infant ragefully biting the breast: 'You weren't there!' The clinger tends to feel a lot of self-hatred about his or her own rage and neediness and defends against that by devaluing or demeaning the partner: 'You're the bad one, not me. My affair was justified because you weren't there.'

Sex is not the motivation per se in the attachment stage affair; It may not even be a sexual relationship but more of an emotional affair.

See movie: *Fatal Attraction* with Michael Douglas and Glen Close

Exploration Stage Affairs

The Distancing partner feels smothered and the affair is a way of acting out the fear that if they open up to their partner they will move right in and absorb them. They experience their partner's needs as bigger than their own so there is no room for their own needs, just as in childhood. They experience their partner as not really interested in them as a person, just in their needs for them to be there. Their distancing contributes to their partner grabbing on to the few crumbs of themselves they do share.

The Pursuing partner engages in an affair in reaction to the neglect and distancing of their partner. They are vulnerable to the attention of anyone who is interested in them: 'I'm finally getting the attention you don't give me'. Unable to language their hurt feelings of neglect and sadness, they defend against the terror of their own unimportance by getting angry at the other for not being there, thereby contributing to the other not being there.

Again affairs at this developmental stage are not really about sex although they may be sexual.

See the movies: *Intersection* with Richard Gere & Sharon Stone, *Out of Africa* with Meryl Streep and Robert Redford

Identity Stage Affairs

The partner who adapts by becoming compliant and diffuse has an affair to feel visible and to feel valued. Initially in the affair, in the light of the other's interest, they risk expressing themselves and feel bathed in the light of visibility. One part of the self which feels seen and valued is the sexual self and so they make love. The affair is often with someone who is admired such as a professor or mentor and is an attempt to take on that

person's identity, so they have a secure base. The affair initially helps to solidify a sense of having a self that is separate from the spouse. This often happens when a woman who has been at home as a wife and mother, goes back to school or into the job market and starts to stretch into having more of a self-identity. Given that the affair is often with someone older or more respected it can be easy to recreate the dynamic they experienced in their marriage, where there is no room for them to have a self and the lover needs them to admire and mirror them. And the journey continues.

The rigid controlling partner has an affair because they feel that they are losing control over the diffuse partner and need someone else, often younger or less successful, that they can control and who will look up to them as the right way to be. They will look for someone who will admire and mirror them. They experience their spouse's emerging identity as a threat to them, when their partner can no longer stay within the rigidly defined role that they have adopted.

Affairs at this stage are more sexual as the sexual self is beginning to emerge and needs to be seen and mirrored.

See the play/movie: *My Fair Lady*, *Ordinary People*, *The Joy Luck Club*.

Competence Stage Affairs

The compulsive competitor partner typically will be attracted to a person who belongs to someone else. This is the core element in this recreation of the Oedipal challenge where winning over another is everything. 'Can I get you to love me more than the other?' The lover's spouse is integral to the triangle, as it is the competition against him or her which adds the incentive, the challenge, and the excitement to the contest. They are out to prove themselves by being better, better in bed, more sensitive, more caring, more intelligent, more... better.

The manipulative compromising partner wants to be valued and worthy without having to play the game, without having to try and risk not being valued for their efforts. The satisfaction of the affair is from winning the love of another without ever competing. Initially they will experience the quiet satisfaction of feeling loved and valued and their spouse does not even know it. They feel they have won against the competitive partner.

Dialogue holds the couple in connection through the often incredibly painful process of dealing with what is often considered the ultimate betrayal of the relationship. Often the 'betrayed' partner wants to know details about the affair. It is important to work very carefully with this, balancing the need to know with their capacity to contain the feelings that the information is going to stir up and the capacity of the partner to contain the reactivity. If they ask for the information and the partner stretches into giving it, and then gets attacked and shamed or punished without being able to hold that with compassion for the hurt, it reinforces the impulse towards secrecy, hiding and not telling, which is part of the pain of the affair for the 'betrayed', and sometimes part of the pain of the 'betrayed' which has contributed to the affair: 'When I am in contact with you or express myself to you, your reactivity causes me pain'.

Mistrust is a huge issue where there has been an affair. It is important to balance the affairee's needs to know where the partner is and what they are doing, with the affairer's needs to feel safe from being annihilated, smothered, over-controlled, and manipulated. Keeping the couple in dialogue and using the Behavior Change Request process helps them to work through the specifics of this within the larger context of childhood

wounding. This helps the affairer to overcome their own defensiveness and have empathy for the affairee, and vice versa.

When couples do hang in there through the tough times, and many seem highly motivated to do that, they come out of the therapy with a better and stronger relationship than they had before. Many report that they are spending time with each other and talking with each other in ways they have not experienced since the beginning of their relationship. Affairs are sometimes extreme measures, when lesser measures have failed to promote the healing and growth that they know on some unconscious level is the potential of their relationship. The therapist may have to carry the consciousness of affairs as growth opportunities for both partners and for the relationship when the partners cannot.

Sexual Addiction, like other addictions, is beyond the scope of this Basic Clinical training and requires expertise in working with addictions generally and sexual addiction specifically. We recommend that the Imago therapist who does not have this expertise refer clients to colleagues who do. The Imago therapist might work with such a colleague to supplement the addiction and co-addiction issues. Patrick Cairns'³ books are very helpful in understanding in non-judgmental ways the dynamics of sexual addiction and their treatment.

³ Cairns, Patrick. *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction* (1983), *Contrary to Love: Helping the Sexual Addict* (1989).

THE USE OF TOUCH IN IMAGO RELATIONSHIP THERAPY

It is important when working with couples for the therapist to be aware of the body language of the couple as well as the verbal and emotional communication between them. Physical touch is a vital part of being intimate in a relationship. However, sometimes couples will use physical touch to stop strong feelings or to avoid becoming differentiated. The therapist is particularly aware when the RECEIVER initiates touch. This may be an expression of their own need to do something beyond contain and mirror, to 'take care of' the partner, suppress feelings, fix things, or manage some other discomfort they are feeling. Behaviors such as touching or passing tissues to the tearful SENDER may reinforce "Don't cry", or "Don't express your feelings" message, whether or not this is intended. Like reactive facial expressions this is a 'send' not a 'receive' or flat mirroring. The therapist therefore encourages partners to stay in their roles making eye to eye, knee to knee, contact without touching, unless that is the particular form of the exercise. Hugging after a difficult or touching piece of work is fine and is often encouraged as an important way to express the connection.

The therapist asks permission to touch one or other partner if necessary to move them into a position, such as the holding position, keeping the good-feeling touch between the partners rather than coming from the therapist.

RE-IMAGING

The loss of empathy is perhaps the greatest loss that we experience as human beings. Re-imagining helps us to recover from this tragic loss. Empathy is the capacity to tune in to another's emotional experience without confusing it with one's own, to visit another's feeling world but not to move in and dwell there as if it were one's own.

There are three aspects to re-imagining:

Re-Imaging the Partner

- as wounded and as trying to survive by using coping strategies learned in childhood
- as the person who can help in the process of healing and growth

Re-Imaging the Self

- as wounded and trying to survive using coping strategies that 'worked' in childhood but that increase pain in the current relationship with the partner
- as the person responsible for helping the partner to heal and grow

Re-Imaging the Relationship

- as the primary therapeutic modality for mutual healing and growth
- and the conflicts as gifts that signal the places where this is trying to happen

The purpose of re-imagining is to help couples:

- replace defensiveness with empathy
- reclaim their own capacity for empathy
- deepen empathy and compassion for their partner and themselves

The Holding Exercise and the Parent-Child Dialogue are two of the ways to help partners re-image each other and themselves and to increase empathic understanding.

Therapist's Use of Re-imagining

When the therapist is feeling reactive to particular clients it can be very helpful for the therapist, in managing their own reactivity, to do some internal re-imagining of the clients as wounded, and of the relationship as the vehicle for their healing and growth. Seeing both clients as equally wounded at the same developmental stage and as having developed complementary defensive adaptations to survive relational pain, can help the therapist get back to a neutral supportive stance towards both partners, when they feel "off center" more drawn to one partner than the other, or more judgmental of one partner. Remembering that they are together for a reason, to call each other into wholeness and to heal from childhood hurts, can help the therapist focus on what they can do to support this. If the therapist experiences themselves as taking sides, it is important to take this to supervision.

HANDLING HIGH REACTIVITY: ANGER AND RAGE - EXPRESSED AND HELD

In Imago we see anger as our life force defending against the threat of violation, helplessness, or loss. It is a protest against loss of connection. It is, in its protest, an attempt to restore connection. When connection is ruptured, we are placed in a position of powerlessness and we can respond by trying to restore the connection through anger or rage. When anger and rage don't work, we can then fall into depression: "I don't have any power to manage this".

Anger is:

- A protest against the loss of joy and connection
- Our life force defending itself against the threat of helplessness

Rage is:

- Anger fueled by archaic memory of helplessness to restore connection

Neither anger nor depression re-establishes connection, so we can then move into sadness, which is an acknowledgement that the connection is in fact broken. It might be the death of a child, the death of a marriage, or the death of making love tonight; it might be a comment that signals one partner wanting to have power over the other symbolizing the loss of equality. Whatever has been lost, if one can allow oneself to feel the sadness, it can be a transition towards a re-integration with the new reality of that loss.

This is a healthy process unless we get stuck in one of the polarities, anger or depression. Both anger and depression tend to alienate one further from the partner and leave both feeling even more disconnected. But if we go through the anger and progress naturally into the sadness, then we can move through this experience of ruptured connection in a healthy way.

Underneath all of these feelings is anxiety. Anxiety is the intolerable emotion underneath all the other emotions. All the other emotions have the purpose of endeavoring to regulate anxiety because that is the intolerable emotion. Anxiety is the experience of the anticipation of the experience of potential death, so we try to regulate it. We do this by trying to restore power, get angry and express it in all the unproductive ways we have learned – yelling, criticizing, withdrawing, blaming. None of these work; they rupture the connection further.

The other option is to be pro-active. We can learn how to take our anger and get pro-active toward the restoration of connection. That may mean we will say or do something that is reconnecting - bring our partner flowers, apologize, express appreciation, etc. In order to do a pro-active action, we have to move out of the limbic system where the anger resides and into the neo-cortex, where we can make choices. In this way, we have used our anger to reconnect. When we do this, the anger goes away because the anger is simply a signal that the connection that we want has been ruptured.

Anger and rage are feelings, life energies that are signals attempting to energize us toward survival and full aliveness through the restoration of connection. The anger in itself is neither good nor bad, it is neutral. It is the behaviors that emanate out of the anger that can be destructive. There is a difference between feelings and behaviors.

Forms of energy such as gun power, gas or nuclear energy, when contained, can be useful, for example, cooking food, powering a car or producing energy from a nuclear power plant. However, gun powder, gas and nuclear energy can be destructive when uncontained or uncontrolled. It is what we do with these energy sources that determines whether or not they will be useful or destructive. Similarly, with anger; anger is an energy which can be destructive if uncontained but can be a force for good if contained and channeled well. Look at Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, or Florence Nightingale who when asked why she did what she did, answered with one word: "Rage".

Underneath anger is pain (anxiety, hurt, fear, loneliness – these are primary emotions). Anger is a secondary emotion. Frustration is low level anger and rage is anger connected to a childhood memory. What is ultimately important in our therapeutic work with anger and reactivity is to move beneath the surface emotion to the anxiety with stems such as "What scares me is..." and then find out what would help to remove the fear. The Imago Dialogue and variations such as the Behavior Change Request Dialogue are helpful because the need is to restore connection. Underneath the anger and rage, or the withdrawal, is often a childhood memory which is fueling the fear. What did the client need as a child to restore connection? What do they desire in the current relationship that would help to restore connection? When we invite clients into making three requests, we are channeling energy into higher cerebral functioning. When they are mirrored, they are seen; not eradicated, invisible, unheard as they sometimes felt as children. This softens the strong hold of the amygdala and they can relax.

When we are working with anger and withdrawal we are working with anxiety. In the individual paradigm, we have to regulate our anxiety to feel safe in a dangerous presence. To our brain it is neither rational nor neuro-chemically possible to be at ease in the presence of danger. In the relational model, we regulate our partner's anxiety. That is what a parent does with a child. The way we regulate our partner's anxiety is by being a safe person for him or her. We regulate ourselves so that our partner does not see us as a danger or threat. If we can thus regulate our partner's anxiety, that simultaneously regulates our own anxiety. This is really a challenging implication of the relational paradigm.

How do we do this? The way to regulate our partner's anxiety is to manage our own need to discharge or avoid our feelings and to mirror, ask "Did I get that?" and "Is there more about that?" If, instead of acting in ways in which our partner will become anxious – for example, by not listening, ignoring, depersonalizing, shouting, criticizing - we move into Dialogue, this will quiet their anxiety. They are anxious because we have ruptured connection or threatened to. In moving toward our partner in a safe way, our own brain begins to experience the decrease in the chemical activation that we were trying to prevent from occurring in their brain, or to regulate if it has already occurred. This is a very powerful thing and it is a doable thing. It is very empowering because what I am doing is regulating the anxiety of the people around me.

You just have to have the capacity to say, "Did I get that?" and "Is there more about that?"

When working with clients where there is anger and rage, expression and containment of the energy are both essential. With some clients the challenge is to help them to express their anger so that they can get to the sadness which is underneath it. With some

people the anger is so contained they do not know they have it. Sometimes it shows up as contempt. With other clients the challenge is to guide them to contain explosive anger that erupts spontaneously and instantaneously so that the partner can stay present to listen for the sadness which is underneath.

So we see the concept of Containment as key in the expression of anger within the couple relationship. This is why we have the 'rule' in Imago that all anger in a conscious relationship is expressed by appointment only. This is an ideal to help couples move towards, not a rule which can be imposed. It takes a lot of practice with expression and containment, both of which are the ground rules of the Imago Dialogue be able to develop the skill of Rage Containment so that all spontaneous fighting is replaced with a structured process that channels the destructive potential of the energy into positive feelings. When we reach our Buddha state....

Containment

Part of the reason it is so difficult to become a safe person for our partner is that, according to brain researchers such as Brent Atkinson⁴, there are neuronal 'superhighways' that transmit 'red alert' information about potential pain and danger straight from the sensory receptors to the limbic system bypassing the neocortex. So you have reacted before you have even had time to have a thought about whatever the trigger is or how you are going to respond. The two possible, energetic responses are to expand or to constrict. Sometimes we discharge our energy (maximize) and sometimes we constrict or freeze (minimize), depending on the nature of the threat and our own defensive predisposition – hot anger and cold anger. It is usually more obvious when someone is discharging their energy in the face of threat and the exploders are often labeled the 'bad guys' but the freeze response is just as much outside of our conscious control as the explode response. It is not a conscious choice, and the contempt and unavailability that happen during the long thawing out period of the frozen partner can be just as harmful to the relationship as the fiery heat. By the time you feel the anger your body has already made the chemical changes necessary for action. What you feel when you feel angry is largely the result of the changes which have already happened in your body chemistry. The more you live with the stress of trauma, the more these superhighways will be carved out. They will not just be 2 lane byways they will be 10 lane superhighways with multiple access routes and feeder lanes.

The implication of this is that we cannot learn containment by thinking about what we should do once we feel the anger, because the neo-cortex is just not available with that information. We have to rewire our brains by setting up new connections that create new pathways that become hyper-facilitated. If you have ever been white water rafting you probably had the experience that before you get in the raft they drum into you over and over again that when you fall out of the boat and into the turbulent water, you 'grab for the paddle', so that when you are in that water and you don't know which end is up or whether you are going to live or die, the only thought you have is 'grab for the paddle'. It becomes the over-learned response to replace the brain's natural discharge or freeze, fight or flight responses to loss of connection with the boat. Grabbing for the paddle keeps you safe and reconnects you with the boat and your fellow travelers.

⁴ Atkinson, Brent. The Emotional Imperative - Psychotherapists Cannot Afford To Ignore The Primacy Of The Limbic Brain. *Family Therapy Networker*, July/August 1999.

Similarly, in Imago 'Grab for the dialogue' (mirror) becomes the over-learned response to turbulent emotions. When in rough waters and you think you are going to drown and everything is upside down and all looks hopeless - mirror, validate and empathize. Then when you get into the really tricky waters of rage you have some well-worn pathways that will carry the energy in the direction of the new connections which have been established. Grabbing for the Dialogue empowers the rageful partner to re-establish the safety and connection, the loss of which was the cause of the rage. The archaic feelings and behaviors are replaced with relevant feelings and effective behavior that change distancing emotions into intimacy and competence. Through the use of the Dialogue the rage, which when uncontained and undirected leads to further disconnection and destruction of the relationship, can be the fuel for deeper empathic understanding and bonding. Childhood frustration, rage and sadness can be safely re-experienced in a context that allows for a healing experience with the Imago Match partner who is the natural transference object for the parents. Gradually over time the rage and accompanying despair diminish and disappear.

The capacity to contain must be in balance with the amount of expression. Large amounts of emotional expression require a large capacity to contain.

Processes for the Expression and Containment of Anger

The Imago Dialogue – for all emotionally charged issues: a way of being in relationship

The Behavior Change Request Dialogue – for dealing with frustrations

The Mini-Container Exercise – for staying current with minor frustrations

Container Days – to practice skills of conscious expression and containment.

RE-ROMANTICIZING: SEX AND PHYSICAL INTIMACY

Sexuality: the other 'hot' emotion

Two aspects of working with couples around sexual issues within the Imago model are:

1. to enhance what is already good about their sexual relationship
2. to address and work through sexual difficulties

Pat Love⁵ states passion is when two sexual beings combine safety with knowing each other and intimacy (into-me-see).

1. Sexual Enhancement

Supporting couples in having a more alive and joyful sexual relationship is part of the Re-romanticizing aspect of Imago where we invite couples to put energy into amplifying the positives in their relationship. Many of the Imago tools can be adapted to apply specifically to the sexual area of their relationship, e.g. the Relationship Vision can be adapted to focus on the Sexual Relationship Vision, the flooding can be used to focus on sexual aspects of the other (physical, character, behaviors and global), etc. Pat Love's book and video series 'Hot Monogamy' and Tammy Nelson's book "Getting the Sex You Want"⁶ are excellent resources. It is important to help couples channel their energy into appreciating and amplifying what is working in their relationship, to help them to see their areas of competence and connection, despite whatever pain they might be in.

2. Sexual Challenges

One of the most frequent complaints is a discrepancy in level of desire, one partner wants more sex ('all the time' in their partner's mind) and the other wants less ('never' to their partner). Pat Love's book and video series 'Hot Monogamy' is particularly helpful in dealing with this and many sexual issues, as well as her book 'The Truth About Love'⁷. She provides some good basic information about sexuality and also some tools and quizzes to get couples talking about the topic in some new ways. This helps them learn about themselves and each other, thereby deepening the intimacy and connection as a step towards empathically stretching into meeting each other's sexual needs.

Pat describes how people have different base-line levels of desire based on a number of interacting factors including testosterone levels. 'High-t' people have high levels of desire and interest whereas 'low-t' people hardly ever think about sex and could go for weeks, if not months, without feeling the desire. During Romantic Love the PEAs (phenylethylamine) and other chemicals released by the brain give a boost to the libido so that low-t people look high-t. When Romantic Love fades their libido goes back to baseline. The problems come primarily from how they then interpret the lack of sexual desire e.g. you don't love me anymore, I don't love you anymore, I'm with the wrong partner, etc. Just having good information about sexuality and desire helps couples to experience some of their challenges without all the projections, interpretations, expectations and value judgments. They can then deal with them more creatively and directly.

⁵ Love, Patricia. *Hot Monogamy*. Plume: NY. 1995.

⁶ Nelson, Tammy. *Getting the Sex You Want*. Quiver: Beverley, MA. 2008

⁷ Love, Patricia. *The Truth about Love*. Simon & Schuster: NY. 2001.

Beyond the physiological aspects there are also the psychological aspects. As couples talk about their sexual struggles within the safety of the dialogue process similar themes emerge as in other areas of their relationships, i.e. that sexual issues reflect the dynamics of wounding and defensive adaptations at the different developmental levels and/or they reflect the dynamics of the lost self.

A Developmental Perspective

Wounding at each developmental stage may be manifested through problems in the sexual relationship.

Attachment: Imagine a couple wounded at the Attachment stage. One partner lives with the terror of abandonment, the fear that the other will not be there and everything will fall apart. They live within the emotional belief that their very survival depends on the presence of the other, so even when the other is present they are anxious that they will disappear emotionally or physically and are hyper-vigilant for signs of distancing and anticipate the loss of the other even when the other is present and available. As a result, the contact, even when it is there, is never enough to calm the anxiety of anticipated loss of contact. They are filled with rage at themselves for feeling so needy and at the other because they are dependent on them.

The other partner lives with the terror of annihilation from painful contact. It feels very unsafe to be in contact – the experience will be painful, they will be hit, shamed, shouted at, rejected. They live within the emotional belief that contact, rather than the loss of contact, will kill them. They are hyper-vigilant for signs of anxiety and rage, anticipating painful contact even before it happens and protecting themselves by distancing, shutting down their emotions and disconnecting from their own needs for contact.

Now put them in the bedroom. Some of these couples function very well in this area if the more clinging partner's need for lots of touch and cuddling gets satisfied. Sexual activity is much more about the cuddling and closeness than about the sex. They may be very affectionate rather than very sexual. This can allow the more detaching partner to reconnect with their own needs for contact in ways that are safe. But when it starts to go awry in this area of the relationship the loss of contact can be devastating for the one who fears abandonment and the rage, self-doubt, complaining and tears again causes painful contact for the partner who fears contact. The clinger alternates between pushing the other away and trying to pull the other closer as they oscillate between rage and panic. Sometimes this is an area of the relationship where the usual adaptations of clinging and detaching are reversed. It may be the one area where the detaching partner cannot successfully deny their own needs – the sexual needs have a strength and power that will not be ignored and force them into the clinging adaptive style, enraged at the other's unavailability and at their own dependency on the other to meet these needs. For the partner, the contact then feels painful – they experience their partner as too demanding, just wanting sex all the time and feels it is all about the partner and they are just an object. They feel annihilated and react by detaching from the partner and from their own sexual needs. Internet S & M may be connected with Attachment stage wounding – it allows the detaching partner to have an illusion of contact without making

contact and yet mirrors the experience of contact causing pain. (See movie “Alexandra’s Project”, and “Fifty Shades of Grey”⁸ books)

Exploration: At the Exploration stage sex is still not really about sex. The distancing partner is terrified of being smothered by the partner and isolates to explore on their own, to have space and freedom. They may insist on their right to have friends of the opposite sex and behave flirtatiously with them without restrictions. During sex they may be thinking about someone else. This stirs terror in the heart of the pursuing partner who feels ignored, forgotten, neglected. For the pursuer it is about existing in the mind of the other, being remembered rather than forgotten. In the bedroom the distancer may want to explore a wider range of sexual experiences which may terrify the pursuer who wants to stay close to the safe and the known and feels as though the partner is going off into the void and they no longer exist for them. They try to pull the partner back to the small sphere of awareness of them, complaining the partner could be having sex with anybody, which leaves the distancer feeling smothered and limited in their freedom.

Identity: At the Identity stage the lack of connection of the more diffuse partner with their own sexual identity, their shame about expressing their own sexual-self triggers the rigid controlling partner into taking charge, saying what can and cannot be expressed and how. This triggers the diffuser partner into greater fear of being shamed if they show themselves and it is unacceptable, wrong or deflected. They become a ghost in the bedroom, a non-person who just accedes to the other which is highly unsatisfying for the rigid controller who feels the other is not really there, not participating, there is no other. They want the other to want sex, to initiate sex out of their own desire for sex, but again if the diffuser does initiate it is just to try to be what the other wants them to be to protect themselves from being shamed.

Issues in the bedroom, as in other areas of the relationship, can be understood as defensive adaptations or exits – as ways of acting out the pain and the fear associated with intimacy. While we long for connection and intimacy, we are also terrified of it and collude to create ‘safe’ distance between us. We were wounded in childhood by the people who loved us most and were closest to us, so we fear intimacy, fear being loved. In the bedroom we are our most ‘naked’, our most vulnerable, our most needy and therefore, in some ways, our most defended.

The developmental journey through these issues can be long, slow and full of obstacles. Just when you think you have made some headway and are approaching the promised land a new obstacle appears in the path, a new level of resistance to the vulnerability required to be truly intimate. Dialogue (and its variations) is the vehicle we use to travel this journey, to go back into the childhood origins of current pain, fears and defensive adaptations, to explore the current obstacles and to go forward into the vision of the possible. Behavior Change Requests, carefully crafted and based on empathic understanding, invite the partners to stretch beyond adaptations into new possibilities for reclaiming their full sexual aliveness.

Sometimes desire discrepancy between partners and other sexual challenges can also reflect the dynamics of the Lost Self. Many of us, especially girls in some cultures, got very strong messages that it was not OK to have, to enjoy or to express their sexuality.

⁸James, E.L. *Fifty Shades of Grey Trilogy*. Random House: NY. 2012.

Girls who were connected to and expressive of their sexual energy were described with all kinds of derogatory terms: common, cheap, slut, tart. They did not quite get branded with a scarlet letter of the adulteress, but the assumption was that no-one would want to marry them. Being married and having children was, until recently, seen as the only viable life choice for girls in many cultures. In such an environment, girls are not given the message that it's OK to be sexual and then guided in expressing their sexual energy appropriately. As a result, many have been very conflicted about their sexuality. Powerless to repress it completely in the face of raging hormones and constant adolescent crushes, many tried to hide it as best they could from themselves and others, especially parents. It often got projected onto the boys, many of whom were socialized to be proud of their rampant sexual energy. The girls could then be merely the 'unwilling' victims of boys 'uncontrollable' urges! That way they could be sexual without having to own it. For young people whose sexual energy runs counter to the cultural norms – boys with low libido and girls with high libido – it can be even more painful as all the comments and jokes are contrary to their own experience.

In Romantic Love we were fully connected with our sexual selves and delighted in our sexiness, but once we were married and settled down into the Power Struggle, the dynamic of rejecting in the other what was not acceptable in the self creates increasing tension and conflict. The partners polarize, the desire discrepancy increases and both partners feel unloved, unlovable and unloving, as well as angry and inadequate.

The way out of the Power Struggle around Lost Self traits is to find what is of value in that which we reject, to learn to accept and appreciate that which we reject the most in the partner and to find ways to reclaim it for ourselves, to design behaviors that will reconnect us with our own sexuality and give us ways to express it. This takes consciousness, intentionality and a desire to become whole again.

As Imago therapists we need to be able to listen with neutrality as couples dialogue about their sexual issues, and then to help them to reframe the pain within the context of a theoretical model of the healing and growth that is trying to happen. We can then work with them as with other issues. It is of course important for us to be aware of our own biases, based on our own nurturance wounds and lost-self messages as they show up in our own bedrooms. It is important for us to feel comfortable talking about sex and able to take a neutral, non-judgmental stance. It is in the nakedness of the bedroom that we can feel our most exposed and most vulnerable, so it is an area where couples are very sensitive to shame.

Adaptations of Imago Practices related to the Sexual relationship

- a. Sexual Relationship Vision
- b. Erotic Behaviors lists and Dialogue (I feel aroused when you... vs. I feel loved and cared about when you...)
- c. Sexual Appreciation Dialogue

Imago Practice and Processes

THE HOLDING EXERCISE

(Toolbox Module 3 p. 11-12)

The Holding Exercise normally flows from an affective piece of work in which feelings of deep sadness or grief, often accompanied by tears, are being expressed. It can be seamlessly woven into the session, or it can be introduced as a specific, separate exercise. At times it may flow from the Sentence Stem “What this feeling of ... (e.g. sadness, hurt, grief, loneliness) reminds me of from my childhood is...

The SENDER, who is experiencing the sadness becomes the Holdee and the RECEIVER becomes the Holder. While there will probably be some disruption of the feelings the first time the FACILITATOR moves the couple into this position, with familiarity this disruption will be lessened

The purposes of the holding exercise are.

- To deepen the empathy and connection between partners
- To allow for the re-experiencing and release of stored pain or sadness from childhood while being empathically held by the partner
- To provide the couple with a container for the expression of deep sadness and a process they can use at home for this.
- To meet needs for nurturing, non-sexual physical closeness in the presence of strong emotions.

The Position

The therapist helps the partners get into the holding position whereby the Holder will be comfortable for at least 10 to 15 minutes. It is similar to the position of a parent holding an infant child. The Holder is positioned so as to be fully supported – their back against a wall or supportive surface such as a meditation chair, with the left leg bent so support their own arm as they hold the partner. The Holdee is cradled in the arms of the Holder, fully supported, with the head on the Holder’s chest against the heart, able to make eye contact whenever they choose.

The Holder provides a safe, environment for the Holdee to experience archaic pain. The Holder invites/facilitates the Holdee accessing and expressing past sadness, hurt, loneliness, grief, and then listens with empathy, occasionally mirroring just the feelings or making soft encouraging sounds that help the Holdee feel the safety to more deeply connect with their feelings. This gives the Holdee the message “It is OK to have your feelings and to have all of your feelings in the presence of another” and can be a reparative experience for contrary messages such as “I’ll give you something to cry about!”, or “If you are going to cry like that go to your room until you get over it”, or “Don’t be such a cry baby. You are so overemotional”.

The Holdee accesses and expresses whatever deep sadness, hurt, loneliness, or grief they may have from childhood, crying whatever tears there are that need to be cried.

Note: Although the position is regressive, this is not a regression exercise in that it is done partner to partner, in the past tense.

Debrief

Both partners share their experience of the Holding Exercise using Imago Dialogue. This exercise can bring up strong feelings of discomfort in both the Holder and the Holdee, in response to earlier messages about their own nurturance needs, dependency, expression of feelings, shame regarding the longing to be held, and much more. It is important for the Facilitator to help create a safe environment within which all these feelings can be expressed.

Pointer

Even though this is not designed as a regressive exercise in that it is done as adult partner to partner, the position is a nurturing position of infancy and people do regress. It is extremely important that the touch and intimacy experienced in this position never be sexualized. This exercise is designed to fill the often unfulfilled need as adults to experience non-sexual touch. If there has been any history of sexual abuse or inappropriateness, this can retrigger the SENDER into the belief that touch is unsafe. Also, if there is a desire discrepancy, as there is in many couples, often the lower desire person has stopped being affectionate because they do not want touch to always lead to sex. The higher desire partner may misinterpret the physical closeness as availability for sex. This exercise has strict boundaries so both partners can relax and just take in the tender experience.

WORKING WITH HIGHLY REACTIVE COUPLES

Pointers:

1. First, the couple you see is the couple you make up. You see them through your own lens. This is not a difficult couple; they are a couple who is difficult to you. They may remind you of negative and positive aspects of your own parents, and you project onto one or the other good or bad. Then they will fulfill your own expectations. You must remain neutral!
2. The most important thing to think about when you have a couple who you consider to be difficult is Safety. A difficult or reactive couple will by definition be experiencing a lack of safety and loss of connection; hence the reactivity. The question always for the therapist is "How can I make it safe?" **Structure equals safety amid NO judgment.**
3. A reactive couple is not only one where there is a lot of overt reactivity. Sometimes reactivity is passive aggression and/or distancing or depressive behaviors. These couples can actually be some of the most difficult to work with because there is no energy in the room.
4. Bring your own conviction to the session - your belief that if this couple does the work, they can move through the difficulty. They are experiencing pain and loss. Hold hope for them, even though they may not be able to.

When working with reactive couples:

1. Use short sends. Use word for word mirroring. Do not expect the Receiver to be able to contain for very long.
2. If this is too difficult, mirror the Sender yourself as coach
3. Coach mirrors/validates/empathizes with each partner
4. When reactivity is contained, ask the Receiver if they are getting what their partner is saying, and then ask them to tell you what they heard. Ask them what their response is to what their partner has said, asking the Sender to now be willing to listen. Again, mirror the Sender, then ask the Receiver if they are getting it, and to tell you what it is that their partner said. When the mirroring has contained the partners enough, guide the least reactive partner to mirror their partner.
5. Center the more reactive partner, or both
6. If one partner is unable to contain, despite attempts to center, ask sender to bring their send to a close in one or two sentences.
7. Have them dialogue taking turns saying only one sentence at a time, with the other mirroring word or word.
8. If still unable to contain, pause the dialogue.
9. Guide each to internally connect with their hopes for the relationship
10. Remember, coaching the full Imago dialogue may take a number of sessions. Just mirroring each other is huge for some. Attune to where a couple is at. The more comfortable you are with facilitating the dialogue, the more you have brought it into your own lives and have worked with it with your couples, the more you are able to trust the process and the higher your success rate at coaching it.

THE SEAMLESS FLOW OF IMAGO THERAPY

Even though in this training you are taught the main skill, the Imago Dialogue and then the other processes separately, every Imago session is facilitated using the Imago Dialogue with the other processes woven in whenever it is appropriate. For example, when someone makes a connection to childhood in the middle of a session, it might be an appropriate moment to weave in the Parent/Child Dialogue with questions that fit the issue the client is presenting. Or if a couple has a breakthrough mid session, it might be a great place to weave in the appreciations dialogue or positive flooding. Or if it is clear as you are in the middle of the imago dialogue and what is being talked about is an exit, you might use the commitment dialogue. Or when they have completed the vision exercise, you might begin or end the session having them share parts of their vision.

The primary thing to remember is that all Imago Sessions are conducted under the umbrella of the Imago Dialogue. This means there is a Sender and a Receiver and there is at least mirroring and a summary and eventually validation and empathy.

As new Imago Therapists the seamless flow can be a challenge. It is often enough of a challenge to move couple's out of reactivity and below the content into the deeper meaning of their conflict.

Teaching mirroring, validation and empathy in such a way that the couple really gets it, is a huge accomplishment. Even though it is good to be thinking toward using these other processes, once you are able to facilitate a dialogue well, the other processes will be easy to integrate.

When to suggest that couples go to the GTLYW Workshop

As soon as a couple is willing, it is very valuable to get them to a workshop. By going to the workshop couples are exposed to the main pieces of the theory as well as the main skill and many of the processes. Secondly, the intensity of the group experience as well as the amount of time the couple is together help to create for them a deeper understanding of each other and often the workshop enables dramatic shifts. Many participants say that it is worth 7 months of therapy.

That said, a weekend does not a relationship fix, and so it is strongly encouraged at the workshop that the **couple return to the referring therapist**, if they have one, to continue the work of integrating the skills and understanding into their relationship and working through their specific relationship issues. **Imago Workshop presenters have a commitment to not take on any clients from the workshops who were referred by other therapists.** While workshop assistants are strongly discouraged from soliciting clients at the workshop, many Imago Workshop Presenters do invite assistants to make their business cards available at the workshop for those couples who are not already working with a therapist to pick up.

Best Wishes to You on Your Continuing Imago Journey!

We hope that this Imago Clinical Training has been a wonderful experience for you.

Your Imago journey has just begun.

We hope you will complete the Supervision Requirement, submit written reports of your progress at 3 and 6 months post Module 3, assist at a Getting the Love You Want or Keeping the Love you Find workshop and submit a tape for certification so that you can become a Certified Imago Relationship Therapist®

We hope to see you at the Conferences and other Imago events and trainings.

We have a rich roster of Advanced trainings.

These are offered in person and on-line.

You are not alone.

We are building communities of Imago therapists and educators around the world and staying connected.

We strongly recommend that you join the Imago Local Organization in your country if there is one. Or join Imago Relationships Worldwide (IRW). Ask your clinical instructor for information about this.

As a member of the community you will be part of a global community of therapists, facilitators and educators passionate about helping people have better relationships.

We believe we continue to grow as Imago therapists in connection with the other wonderful and amazing people who make up our community, each of whom, like you, is unique and full of wisdom.

For more information about staying connected, ask your clinical instructor.