

SUPPLEMENTING COUPLES THERAPY WITH METHODS FOR Reconditioning Emotional Habits

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IN THE 20 YEARS THAT I'VE BEEN FOLLOWING NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN neuroscience, one of the most practical lessons I've learned is that we tend to place too much confidence in the sufficiency of weekly couples therapy sessions to facilitate lasting relationship change. Many good things happen in conjoint sessions. Defenses crumble and heartfelt connections are made. Partners develop profound insights into the nature of their problems and learn what they can do to avoid falling into the same old patterns. Couples therapy sessions aren't limited because they are unproductive—they're limited because they simply aren't the appropriate forum for facilitating what many partners need most—the **reconditioning of automatic neural processes** that "run the show" when partners get upset with each other.

Brain studies suggest that across their lifetimes, people develop internal mechanisms for coping with things that are upsetting to them. The brain organizes these coping mechanisms into coherent, self-protective neural response programs that are highly automated (Panksepp, 1998). Once a neural response program forms, each time it is triggered, a predictable pattern of thoughts, urges and actions unfold. Neural response programs can dramatically bias people's perceptions and interpretations without them realizing it, and generating powerful inclinations to attack, defend, or retreat.

While everyone is born with neural hardware enabling the organization of response programs, people get wired up uniquely based upon the pattern of emotionally significant experiences they've had across their lives (Atkinson, 2010b). There's evidence suggesting that early childhood experiences, when neural circuits are most malleable, are particularly influential in the conditioning process. Once self-protective habits are formed, they can be highly reflexive and resistant to change. People go through their entire lives enacting the same patterns of self-protection literally thousands of times.

A primary reason why relationships falter may be that partners inadvertently trigger neural response programs in each other and become caught in closed-loops, unable to connect with parts of their brains capable of the kind of thinking that can

calibrate the intensity of these often "trigger happy" internal states (Atkinson, 1999). Successful therapy sessions are probably effective because therapists help partners activate brain processes that enable more flexible thinking at moments when they are upset and usually incapable of flexible thinking. More precisely, therapists help clients use their pre-frontal lobes—areas of the brain that synthesize multiple types and layers of information. In these moments, clients can change because therapists help them use more of their brains. The problem is that when therapists aren't there to help them, clients are once again restricted to the cognitive/behavioral patterns driven by their deeply conditioned neural response programs. A single therapist-assisted change experience per week isn't enough to recondition reflexive brain programs that have sometimes been operating in exactly the same fashion for most of a person's life.

Neurons that Fire Together Wire Together

Nearly all neuroscience researchers agree on one thing: the mechanism through which the brain acquires new habits is repetition. One of the most enduring concepts in the field of neuroscience is Hebb's Law, summarized in the phrase, "neurons that fire together, wire together." In a nutshell, Hebb's Law stipulates: Brain processes that occur together over and over again tend to become grafted together so that they are more likely to occur in conjunction in the future. Drawing upon Hebb's law, a motivated person can learn to think more flexibly when feeling upset, just as surely as Pavlov's dogs learned to salivate when hearing a neutral tone back in 1901. How? If a person pairs the voluntary activation of brain processes involved in flexible thinking with processes that normally occur when a person is feeling upset, and this happens with sufficient regularity, soon the brain processes involved in flexible thinking will automatically become activated whenever clients become upset. Couples therapy sessions help partners think and act more flexibly when they're upset—but clients need to have these experiences much more frequently than once a week. For a period of time, clients need to experience the activation of more flexible forms of thinking every time they become upset with each other. For an increase in neural integration to stabilize, clients must engage in a type of

repetitive practice that is: 1) state specific (practicing when calm will not do the trick—clients must practice when they're actually feeling upset); and 2) frequent, with short intervals between practice sessions.

One of the top priorities at the Couples Research Institute during the past decade has been to devise methods that enable partners to engage in state-specific practice with enough frequency and regularity to enable a reconditioning of reflexive brain processes (Atkinson, 2004; 2007). We have developed a variety of methods for helping clients recondition reflexive habits, many of which draw upon advantages afforded by the new digital technologies associated with smart phones (Atkinson, 2010c; Atkinson et al., 2005; Weiss et al., 2010). The following section describes one method that enables clients to engage in reconditioning trials that are high frequency and close in proximity—the "Canned Attitude" method.

Before I describe this method, I want to emphasize that for clients to use it (or any of the other methods for increasing neural flexibility) effectively, clients must be highly motivated. They must be convinced that their current habits are in serious need of revision and really want to change them. Over the years, we've also discovered that to sustain sufficient motivation, clients must believe that they are as responsible for the faltering condition of their relationships as their

partners are. Few clients enter couples therapy feeling this way (they usually believe that their partners are mostly to blame, and want their partners to change their habits). In our couples treatment model (Atkinson, 2005), the first phase of therapy is devoted to challenging each partner to drop blame and accept mutual responsibility. As we do so, clients' self-protective neural response programs usually kick in and they become anxious, annoyed, defensive or resist accepting mutual responsibility in some way. A crucial skill in this phase of treatment involves the ability to interact with clients in ways that calm their natural defenses and cultivate receptivity (Atkinson, 2005). As partners develop motivation, we provide resources that help them develop clear understandings of the set of habits that are associated with increased partner-responsiveness (Atkinson, 2010a). Clients learn about how to stand up for themselves while making it easy for their partners to become responsive at the same time. Typically, as clients learn about the skills needed to cultivate partner responsiveness, they begin trying to implement them. They quickly learn that knowing what to change is one thing; actually doing it is another. As they become frustrated with their inability to implement the skills they are learning about, they become ready for reconditioning practices, such as the Canned Attitude Method.

The "Canned Attitude" Method

In individual sessions, while listening to criticisms their partners have recorded, clients begin to feel annoyed, anxious or defensive. The therapist then helps them to: 1) study the internal reactions that arise as they listen to their partners' upsetting words and attitudes; 2) consider how they would ideally like to react at such moments (mentally, physically and behaviorally); and 3) repetitively practice a new sequence of thoughts and reactions while feeling annoyed by their partners' recorded complaints.

Implementing the Method

My colleagues and I had no idea how valuable these recordings would be until we actually used them for the first time. We found that we could literally activate clients' self-protective internal states "on demand," simply by asking them to listen to their partners' irritating pre-recorded comments. As the recordings came in, I felt like I was accumulating a pantry full of cans of attitude that I could open at will, instantly provoking a client's typical defensive/dismissive thoughts and feelings. Since recordings are made at moments when those making them are actually feeling upset, the frustrations, accusations and critical attitudes conveyed in these recordings are real, palpable, and reliably trigger the typical conditioned internal reactions of the listening partners. When I first began using these recordings, for the first time in my career I felt like I had the elusive "thief in the night" standing still right in front of me, rather than reading the clues in the aftermath of a heist. Unlike in conjoint sessions, where things often get going so fast that it's hard to stick your toe in the door before it slams shut, here, in the safe confines of the therapist's office, with the client's partner miles away, it's possible to "freeze the frame," zoom in and take a close-up look at the client's automated internal process. More importantly, it's possible to experiment and discover how the client can alter the trajectory. Through a controlled activation process, clients can become activated and also engage in flexible cognitive and behavioral processes at the same time.

Once clients' self-protective internal states get activated by the recordings, we do three things. First, we help clients become more aware of the thoughts, feelings and physical sensations that come along with the activations. For many clients, this is the first time in their lives that they've paid close attention to what happens internally when they feel criticized. In real life, the sense of urgency is often too great to afford the luxury of becoming mindful of one's internal reactions. The recorded complaints remove them just far enough from real life to enable them to become more aware of their internal reactions while still feeling annoyed or defensive.

This increased internal awareness is in itself intervention.

Next, we ask clients, "If you could somehow react differently when moments like this happen in real life, how do you wish you could react? What would you like to do differently physically? What kind of things do

you wish you could remember to say to yourself at moments like this? What would you like to say to your partner that you can't remember to say at these moments? Here, clients draw upon what they've already learned about effective habits in the previous phase of therapy. One of the most basic things that many clients need to do

Instructions Given to Clients

The purpose of this procedure is to provide a way for each of you to practice reacting more effectively at moments when you don't like what your partner is saying, or the way your partner is saying it. For this exercise, you need either a smart phone equipped with a voice recorder, or a free-standing digital sound recorder. In the days ahead, whenever you feel dissatisfied with or disapproving of your partner's behavior, start the voice recorder and speak as if you were leaving a voice mail message for your partner. Address the issue the way you typically would. Some people express dissatisfaction head-on (e.g., "It really bugs me that you forgot to tell me you talked to my mother"), while others express dissatisfaction more by asking questions (e.g., "Were you going to tell me that you talked to my mother?") Communicate your feelings the way you typically do. Keep each recording relatively short (from 15-45 seconds). Any time you feel even mildly dissatisfied with your partner, make a recording. After you've made each recording, simply text or email it to me. The more recordings we have to work with, the better.

These recordings can be a tremendous resource your partner can use to develop more ability to react better when you question your partner or bring up a complaint in real life. Listening to your recordings, if your partner is like most people, she or he will feel the same kind of defensive or dismissive internal reactions that she or he typically does in real life. However, unlike in real life, without you actually present, your partner won't feel the pressure of responding to you immediately and will be more able to focus on how he or she is reacting to you. Your partner will become more aware of his or her knee-jerk reactions, and then develop a plan for how she or he'd rather react. Finally, she or he will use the recordings to practice new reactions while feeling at least mildly upset or annoyed by your recordings, and will do this over and over again until the new ways of reacting become more of a habit.

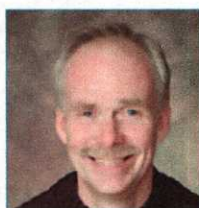
is to question the reflexive tendency to jump to the conclusion that one's partner's complaints are unreasonable or unwarranted, and that one's partner shouldn't be upset. Acquiring the habit of saying to oneself something like, "Just because I might not feel the same way doesn't mean that she's wrong to feel that way" may seem like a small thing, but it's remarkable how much it never occurs to some people when they feel criticized, and it's amazing how much it can alter the trajectory of what happens next in an argument.

Once clients have specific sequences of thoughts and behaviors in mind, we simply help them practice implementing them. We play recorded complaints and clients practice thinking and behaving differently, while feeling annoyed or defensive. We then repeat this process with fresh complaints, over and over again. The beauty of this procedure is that the client can work with 5 to 10 separate activations during a single therapy hour. Any self-respecting experimental psychologist knows that this is a good idea. Conditioning trails that occur in close proximity are more effective than those that are spaced apart. Early on, I was shocked to find that sometimes after only a single session of reconditioning practice, clients who had apparently never responded to criticism with anything but defensiveness found themselves automatically slowing their breathing, thinking things like "My priorities need to count here, too, but that doesn't mean there's something wrong with hers just because she disagrees with me," and saying to partners, "Please don't act like God and everybody knows that I'm out of line. Obviously you're upset and I need to care about that and I probably need to make some changes. Go on... I don't want to stop you. Maybe just slow it down a little?"

Obviously, in order for the thoughts and behaviors that clients are practicing to have any real impact on their feelings of defensiveness or irritation, the thoughts and behaviors practiced must make sense to them. In other words, for the self-reminder, "Just because I might not feel the same way doesn't mean that she's wrong to feel that way," to have any effect, a client must already have

a history of buying into the premise behind this thought in his calmer moments. In state-specific practicing, clients simply condition their brains to remember what they already know, but have trouble remembering when they get upset.

The dramatic success of reconditioning methods, such as the one described above, has helped me realize that the reason why people have trouble changing isn't necessarily because of a lack of ego strength, unresolved grief, or unconscious payoffs of some sort. Maybe the reason is that they haven't been helped to learn new habits in a way that is consistent with the way the brain actually learns. For clients, the experience of couples therapy might be analogous to playing a round of golf while accompanied by an expert golf coach with you. It can be tremendously informative, but the driving range is where golfers forge new habits. The "canned attitude" method is the closest we've come to creating a driving range for intimate partners. ■



Brent Atkinson, PhD, is the principle architect of *Pragmatic/Experiential Therapy for Couples*, an approach that translates

new scientific findings about the brain into practical methods for improving relationships. Atkinson is author of *Developing Habits for Relationship Success*, and *Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy: Advances from Neurobiology and the Science of Intimate Relationships*. He is director of post-graduate training at the Couples Research Institute in Geneva, Illinois, and holds a senior graduate faculty post at Northern Illinois University. Atkinson's pioneering work has been the subject of dozens of professional journal articles, and has been featured in magazines and newspapers such as the *Oprah Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, and others

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