

In the Spirit of Integration: IPNB in Action

Couple plasticity

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Much of this information is drawn from seminars with Dr. Daniel J. Siegel.

Individuals in relationships have the potential to heal, change, and influence one another both personally and together as a couple. Even when couples appear to be in crisis due to post-traumatic emotional reactivity and perceived betrayals (such as affairs), there is a window of opportunity to integrate new information as they become witness and support for each other's process of resolving past trauma. Through a developing narrative process, they can individually and collectively create integration across hemispheres, allowing the emergence of new responses to triggers, and, ultimately, fostering the capacity to respond with increasingly flexible behaviors. Using the *neural plasticity of the brain* as a model, we can see that just as the internal system of the brain has this capability of resolving trauma and developing compensatory strengths and resiliency, a couple can also become a thriving, dynamic interpersonal system that can heal, change and grow through the therapeutic influence and mutual support of the partners.

Brain reorganization in each partner can take place by mechanisms such as "axonal sprouting" in which undamaged axons grow new nerve endings to reconnect neurons whose links were injured or severed. Undamaged axons can also help to inspire the sprouting of nerve endings and connect with other undamaged nerve cells, forming new neural pathways to accomplish a needed function. Novel

experience (such as feeling understood) can even create opportunities for neural stem cells to split, generating developing neurons that can propagate new information throughout the brain. Often, if one hemisphere of the brain is damaged, the intact hemisphere may take over some of its functions. Within couples, a similar process may occur when empathic recognition of a perceived limitation or difference in one partner leads the other to utilize a strength for the benefit of the couple. For example, if Jenny realizes that Mark has difficulty waking up in the morning, she might adjust her expectations (and her schedule) to eliminate fighting about this difference. Mark, on the other hand, may volunteer for the late shift with the

children when Jenny is tired. This kind of flexible and mutually supportive dance leads to resiliency under stress as well.

We could call this capacity for change in the interpersonal system *Coupleplasticity*, defining it as the couple's ability to reorganize the flow of energy and information within brains and between brains by the synergistic processes of forming new neural connections individually, in tandem with new interpersonal connections as a couple. The image of a circle springs to mind as individual gains are reflected in the mind of the other through the resonating mirror neuron system that links them together, and individual neural change is fostered by increases in the capacity for connection through empathic



presence and listening. Remembering that integration occurs as differentiated systems link with one another, we can imagine that as each partner becomes more fully differentiated, he or she will also be available for more interpersonal integration.

Coupleplasticity is confirmed by research showing that after five years, a partner with a secure attachment can help his or her mate with a disorganized attachment rewire neuronal firing and achieve an earned secure attachment (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). On the other side of the coin, couples can also participate in a dance of dysregulation, perpetually triggering each others' implicit wounds while hunkered down behind an unempathic defensive screen. In those moments when the environment is consistently perceived as unsafe, they are denied access to either internal or interpersonal resources of kindness and understanding, so the relationship is drawn away from the harmony and openness of coherence into rigidity and/or chaos. The challenge for us is to help the couple move from a war stance into an attitude of curiosity about how they arrived at this painful standoff. In this safer zone, they can each begin to look at the roots of their reactivity within the embrace of their partner's empathy. While this can be a long journey with some couples, just holding the possibility in our minds encourages their mirror neurons to internalize the vision of interpersonal goodness we are holding for them.

How can we as clinicians create an environment conducive to brain reorganization in service of two individual minds and what has been called "the mind of the couple"? An essential starting point is attending to our own internal balance, so we can flexibly flow with the state of the couple coming through the door. We can promote our own neural plasticity with sound nutrition, regular exercise, mindfulness practice, stimulation of our brains through study and supportive interpersonal connections, to name only a few. With practice, we can sense when one or the other of these will lead to greater balance. Taken together, these practices can increase our ability to maintain good

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middle prefrontal integration during the sometimes intense therapy process with couples, and lays the foundation for a number of helpful processes to unfold.

When a few key elements are present in therapy, the groundwork is laid for *coupleplasticity*. Some will appear to be primarily in the service of individual development, while others will focus on weaving the couple together. However, as we will see, there is no clear divide between the two. To begin, since finding such personal benefit in *nutrition and exercise*, it has become second-nature to offer suggestions about these to all clients. When they are able to undertake some changes as a team, the flow of energy between the couple will improve as well. A second focus is modeling *contingent communication*, which begins with attunement and includes empathy, expression, joining, clarification, and respect for sovereignty (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). So much happens in these exchanges between the individuals in the couple and us. The ears take in new patterns of communication along with the empathic tone. The eyes see the facial expressions and body language that convey warm curiosity and understanding. Mirror neurons resonate with the therapist's intention to understand, while internally practicing what is being seen and heard. This alone is often not enough to overcome the neural superhighway of blaming patterns, but at least we can know that a new neural goat path patterning contingent communication is creating the possibility for future change.

The third element is one of the most powerful, and often determines if this couple will be able to benefit from doing therapy together. When *rivers of empathy* flow through the system, doors to healing fly open. Together, we seek to develop three patterns of empathy: for oneself, for the other, and for the state of the relationship. When couples walk through the door, they bring their personal and relational narrative. As the three of us listen to family history, focus shifts from current interpersonal struggles to the roots of present day patterns, often stimulating empathic connections between the partners. Experiencing each other's

younger selves in pain is often enough to shift blame to care. Feeling empathy from the partner can often help the storyteller let go of shame and move toward self-compassion as well. Then, an understanding of how their ancient limbic patterns have hooked them painfully together may blossom, allowing them to develop the ability to look at their relationship from the stance of two caring observers witnessing a tragedy. When this happens, they have a toehold on a permanent shift of perspective that can carry them through almost any difficulty.

As therapy develops, when they describe parts of their relational history, we can draw on parallels from family of origin experiences to both demonstrate our internalization of their narrative, and help them make neural connections between past and present. As empathy soothes limbic wounds, perceptual bias diminishes. Then, over time, the individual and relational narratives transform as both get better at *sensing the internal state of the other* (Siegel's *ISO*) and *creating a narrative of the other* (Siegel's *NOTO*) (1999). We could think of this as movement from amygdala-driven narratives that are rigid/frozen/cohesive or chaotic/disorganized, to coherent stories in which an integrating middle prefrontal region allows right and left hemispheres to provide both emotional richness and orderly calmness as they reflect on their individual and collective lives. With these new neural structures in place, they can make sense of the trajectory of their stories.

With some couples, *education about the brain* can play a significant role. Left-brain dominant people often respond well to the hand model and the idea of low road and high road responses (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). As awareness increases, so does safety, often opening the door to the other hemisphere. Others find that doing individual journaling can help them gain a much greater sense of the internal patterns underlying current behavior. Siegel & Hartzell's *Parenting from the Inside Out* (or as Dan Siegel likes to rephrase it for couples—*Parenting Yourself from the Inside Out*) offers rich resources for such journaling. As

couples share their discoveries with one another, in sessions or on their own, those rivers of empathy are nurtured.

With couples or individuals dominated by right-hemisphere limbic reactivity, *regulation* becomes an essential component of the therapy. Often, couples have come together hoping to be healed from childhood wounds through the presence of the lover/partner. However, over time, what once looked like a promising solution to feeling complete during the oxytocin rush of love, now gets translated as mutual betrayal and abandonment because both are aching for fulfillment from a wounded other. In this environment, what once was labeled as passion can become limbic firing exhaustion and confusion. In this atmosphere of intense disappointment, perceptual biases feed hurtful communication patterns until the relationship is seething with pain and anger. Sensing the dominant presence of two wounded children, we may initially focus alternately on each individual in a warm and regulating way, becoming an attachment figure for both lost children until they have enough integration to relate constructively to one another.

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All of these guidelines sound quite orderly, and can help to provide a framework for practice. However, in the rush of energy that accompanies an upset couple, there has to be a flexible flow that follows the couple's immediate need. First of all, I am aware that my integration will immediately affect their sense of regulation. When I look at the couple, I am conscious of my resonance with each of them. I see two individual developing minds and brains, and a resonating collective mind. Together, we become a triad of resonating minds. With this picture in mind, let's look at how a session might unfold.

My most challenging patients are the couples who seem to be both right-hemisphere dominant, with highly charged limbic zones, and have experienced severe childhood trauma, learning differences, addictions, and disorganized attachment patterns. In my practice, my couples are often in the entertainment industry with external challenges such as frequent travel, the psychological and

financial stress of inconsistent work, insecurity of dependable relationships, and the availability of substances and sexual seductions. As this attractive, successful couple enters my office, each one physically communicates a state of dysregulation by posture, breathing pattern, and facial expression, and as a unit, by their lack of eye contact with each other as well as eventual seating choices. Each appears ready to spit out the report of the betrayals from the few weeks since we last saw each other.

I sense I will need to help facilitate a shift from verbal attacks to get below the anger and into the fear, which manifests as the fight, flee, or freeze response—fighting being the dominant mode in the moment. I believe that anger is the cover for fear—fear of ultimate isolation and separateness, fear of the confirmation from their partner that they are not enough, not seen, and ultimately not alive. When unintegrated early limbic experience leaves both of them vulnerable, a mild dismissal impacts them as forcefully as a life-or-death attack, generating out-of-proportion responses that seek to protect them from wounds of deep shame left by their ambivalent childhoods. The smallest familiar triggers in the present suck them into chaos as implicit memories overwhelm body, feelings, and thoughts.

My own body begins to react as my integration is challenged. As my chest starts to tighten, I breathe through my nose, position my body with feet planted on the floor, and sense the shift in my body as GABA brings calmness to my amygdala, and returns me to a FACES (flexible, adaptable, coherent, energized, and stable) state. I am now fully present and able to help. As their mirror neurons take in my welcoming, attuned state, they appear to relax. They have been together for almost six years, bringing two much-loved children into the world. However, they are experiencing increased awareness of betrayals and disappointments surrounding the myth of “happily ever after.” In the early dating and mating dance, they seemed to have found someone who had strengths where each felt deficits: his eyes helped her to feel seen; her

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ears helped him feel understood. Now, she feels his eyes are too observant, becoming a perceived constant reminder of her deficits and shame. Worst of all, she no longer feels seen by him. Her ears record the inconsistencies in his commitments to her, while her verbal comments are interpreted by him as rejection and proof that he is unlovable and worthless.

Looking at the body language of each partner tells me who is ready to burst. She starts. “We drove separately. He’s sleeping on the couch.” His body tenses and his normally mellow, casual cover is blown by his desire to defend himself against what he perceives to be accusations of not being enough. I am using my mirror neuron system and listening to my body to gain awareness of their state, individually and collectively. I am also aware of how my own integration can provide a container, making it safe for this couple to explore the unintegrated right-hemisphere limbic puzzle pieces that drive the misunderstandings. Having previously explored early family histories, we can now work together to make sense of their lives. I ask questions that bounce in between the past and the present moment, as both fumble toward a coherent narrative. With encouragement, they use tools such as listening to what their partner has actually said and repeating that back. When this is done with curiosity, openness, acceptance, and love

(Dan Siegel’s COAL), a more coherent NOTO gradually emerges, and each feels felt by the other. As implicit wounds heal, perceptual bias decreases, and both partners’ ability to use their mirror neuron system improves. They can now empathize with their partner as the partner shares a parallel original wound by a parent. Awareness of this old pain and fear helps them maintain balance in current day situations as they remember that implicit memory activation feels like it is happening in the present.

Marc begins. “I missed home so much, and when I got home she hangs up on me and won’t let me into the bedroom.” Cary looks away, slipping into shame. “Marc,” I say, “are you aware of any sensations in your body?” “My stomach hurts. I

want to run. It's like when my dad..." Marc begins to describe an early painful childhood memory, and Cary turns to listen, her body relaxed and open. In this state, she is able to internalize Marc's narrative. They are working together, changing the nature of the interpersonal connection. Marc is reformulating his narrative with these newly available puzzle pieces of memory, while Cary mindfully witnesses and listens fully. Her body tells us that she has understood she is not the source of the original pain and shame, releasing her from the role of perpetrator. *Coupleplasticity* is in full bloom.

Once this right-hemisphere activation has been compassionately witnessed, the remainder of the session may be focused on exploration of possible triggers that can reactivate the implicit memory. There are responsibilities for both Marc and Cary. In this case, Cary becomes willing to increase her awareness of how certain behaviors may trigger Marc. He, on the other hand, will continue his work of narrative integration so he develops the ability to maintain mindful awareness when faced with a perceived trigger. Such mindfulness will reduce the fight, flee, or freeze response by helping him stay in the present. To increase awareness, we discuss counting, getting a drink of water,

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Now, as part of the gift of neural plasticity, Marc and Cary's embrace of *coupleplasticity* will allow their children to develop

naming four visible things in the environment, or wearing an article of jewelry as a prompt.

Together, we explore ways that reduce triggers such as prefacing a possibly challenging comment with "I am afraid to share this but..." In the end, we all remember that increased trust will nurture intimacy, so that it will become safer to be vulnerable and share deep painful memories with each other. With practice and attention, these new states of mind can become relational traits that grant considerable resiliency under stress.

Just before parting, we also acknowledge the great value their efforts are having for their children. Never wanting to hurt them, the ongoing tensions have influenced their children's developing brains.

hopeful mental models about people's ability to change, and move toward more harmonious, fulfilling relationships.

As science allows us to gain new insights into the potential capabilities of the brain as adaptable and flexible, individuals in mutually supportive and mindful relationships can experience integration, celebrating their individual uniqueness while relaxing into deeper states of intimacy and trust.

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