



DYADIC TRAUMATIC REENACTMENT

What do we mean by a negative cycle?

- Many couples who come to couple therapy say that they have the same argument over and over again and that they just cannot escape the pattern that they get stuck in no matter how hard they try.
- In couple relationships, especially when there is a history of childhood trauma, attempts to get our attachment needs and longings met by our partners sometimes result in disappointment, hurt feelings, and discouragement. When partners are feeling angry, discouraged, and hurt, they can often turn to “secondary emotions” as a way of protecting themselves from further hurt. For example, instead of showing our partner how hurt and sad we feel, we may lash out in anger. In response, our partner may simply withdraw from our angry or critical approach, and these types of interactions lead the couple into a repetitive cycle of hide-and-seek, where one partner is longing for connection and the other is running. In couples where there is a history of trauma, shame and fear about connection can be a big factor in this negative interaction cycle.
- Often, how one partner responds to a distressing interaction results in an almost opposite response from their partner, such as: I seek you out and you move away from me. Frequently, the response is exactly the opposite to what we feel we need in that moment and, often, we end up feeling more hurt and alone than we did before the interaction.

What do we mean by a Dyadic Traumatic Reenactment (DTR)?

- Childhood trauma frequently occurs in the context of relationships with people who should have cared for and protected a child. The traumas often have a significant impact on the survivor’s capacity to trust and feel safe in adult relationships.
- When we experience these kinds of traumas, our memories, feelings, expectations, and fears follow us into our important relationships. When looking at the patterns and cycles of couples where one or both partners have experienced childhood trauma, we see that the past has gotten stuck in there and clings to the cycle that unfolds between them with a lot of force.
- In therapy, survivors can often identify and articulate what happens between them, understand it and sometimes even begin to stop it. However, when it comes to really getting to the bottom of it and changing it, many childhood trauma survivors get stuck at this point in therapy and keep repeating the patterns over and over again with increasing frustration: they keep sliding back into the chaos and pain of their early traumas as they are relived with each other.
- Part of the process of understanding the DTR is to externalize the trauma as a force that you and your partner are fighting together, a force that makes it very difficult to shift out of these negative cycles. It is very difficult to make the shift from insight and understanding to real change, when the thing we are trying to change is not something we are even aware of.



- For many couples, this powerful pull of unprocessed trauma happens because the trauma has not been “symbolized”, or made conscious and put into words. Being able to think and know our traumas, not just the details, but the feelings and sensations of those deeply embedded experiences, allows someone to talk about their traumas as a part of their life story and to really “get” how these traumas have impacted their relationships. These unsymbolized traumas typically remain stubbornly stuck in their cycle. When traumatic emotions and memories or feelings continue to be unconscious and dissociated, they continue to be alive in the underworld of the couple’s interactions. To help you with these trauma cycles, we have to work at a deeper level. We have to find ways to bring those stuck traumas into our minds and bodies so they can be talked about and explored. This can be a real challenge, because it involves paying attention to the ways in which we “find” the trauma being relived in our couple relationship; these can be hard and painful. However, your therapist will help you learn to pay attention to these parts of the cycle so you can start to really pull those stuck traumatic relivings out of your cycle and begin to build a new relationship where your interactions with your partner are not based on reliving traumas from the past.

Where do you see this in your relationship?

- Can you identify a repeating argument or negative cycle in your relationship?
- How does this feel when it is happening?
- Can you identify aspects of your trauma that get triggered when this happens?
- What strategies have you tried to work on this?