

Article 2: Constructing a Couple's Sexual Cycle

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Couples who feel more connected sexually often feel more connected emotionally and more fulfilled in their partnership. While sex can be a rich and multi-layered source of pleasure, joy, intimacy, connection, and fun for couples, it is also space of great vulnerability. This vulnerability sets the stage for closeness and bonding, but also opens partners up to experiencing shame, pain, fear, and insecurity.

Sexual disconnection can take several forms -- one partner pursues sexual contact while the other backs away; both partners shut down sexually and a great chasm of distance and silence takes hold; or partners have sex out of obligation or fear and feel alone and distant. In these disconnected spaces, working models of one's value and desirability get easily triggered, such that sex or any sexual expression become a litmus test of one's worth: *am I worth being loved? Am I worth getting comfort, care, and pleasure?* Attachment theory tells us that this is a key moment of threat -- where the internal alarm bells sound, activating attachment strategies to navigate and regulate the distress. As we all know, the action strategy that one person mobilizes to cope with this threat is the very cue that pulls their partner deeper into the dance of distress.

Some couples can experience a secure bond in their relationship, but still find sex to be a "pocket" of significant avoidance, insecurity, or disconnection. This can be very disconcerting for a couple who feels close and connected in so many other ways, but feels so distant in the sexual realm. Sexual disconnection can feel scary for couples -- like an existential threat to the survival of their relationship.

In working with couples experiencing sexual distress, the EFT therapist will do what we already know how to do: help couples see the systemic nature of their sexual dance (i.e. the cycle), and help each partner send clearer signals to their partner about the attachment fears and needs that are evoked through their sexual interactions.

Consider the following as a way to translate into the sexual realm some of the attachment strategies that we are well versed in when tracking a couple's cycle:

ATTACHMENT STRATEGIES:

- 1) Secure: I reach for you and I tell you I am longing for you -- that I want to make love or be sexual with you. OR I tell you that I am hurting and need you/miss you/want you; that I am afraid you don't want me anymore, you aren't attracted to me and I need reassurance.

- 2) Anxious/Protest; Anger/Criticism: I get angry and confront you, and say, *What's wrong with you? You aren't woman/man enough. You have a problem; You are frigid/ All you want is sex*; OR anxious pursuit and seeking sex predominantly for reassurance to prove one's value and desirability or secure one's place in the relationship.
- 3) Avoidant/Shut Down: I turn away, dampen my sexual longing and desire; feel helplessness. I don't allow myself to feel longing anymore; I have closed off my sexuality. It's just too scary to even want sex, or if I do have sex it feels performative and obligatory, disconnected from real emotional experience or engagement.

TRACKING THE CYCLE

There is a simple and direct way to elicit a couple's sexual cycle. Ask for the cue that starts the dance: *Tell me about the last time – or any time – that you can remember when it didn't go so well in your sexual relationship.*

For a couple who has not had sex for a long time, you might ask about the last time they became aware of *wanting* their partner, or their awareness of the lack of sexual intimacy and how they navigated it. For a couple with a more "overt" conflictual cycle around sex, you might inquire about the last time it didn't go well around a sexual encounter of initiating and responding. The therapist then assembles the emotional experience of each partner in that moment, illuminating the attachment-related emotions that primed their "move" in the dance of disconnection. Assembling emotion takes into consideration the CUE (what set this off?); the COGNITIVE APPRAISAL (the meaning that was made in that moment); the SURFACE EMOTION and CORE EMOTION (i.e. secondary and primary attachment-related emotion); BODY SENSATION; and the ACTION TENDENCY. Keep in mind that one partner's action tendency is often the other partner's cue.

Let's break this down:

CUE: Note the CUES that set the negative cycle into motion. Cues are sometimes very obvious and overt, or they can seem almost imperceptible (yet have a big impact). Sex and sexuality is embodied, and cues are readily perceived at the body level: a tension in the muscles when one person reaches for the other, a stiffness in bed when one partner is silently hoping the other doesn't initiate sex, a slight resistance to a hug, or tension in the lips out of fear that the kiss or hug will convey a message that they want sex. These body-based cues register quickly as rejection by the receiving partner. Cues can also be not so subtle – like an overt rejection – when a partner reaches for sex, and they are met with anger, rejection, criticism or defensive excuses and withdrawal.

BODY SENSATION: Exploring each partner's body sensations in response to a cue is particularly important in deciphering a couple's sexual cycle, since sexuality is learned and experienced *in the body*. Partners may not have feeling words to describe their experience, but they may be able to point to or describe an *embodied* awareness of some response to a partner's touch, a certain look, even the visceral experience of their partner's warmth or breath. Making extra space for exploring body sensations in uncovering the sexual cycle is immensely helpful for further understanding each partner's appraisals and emotional experience.

APPRAISALS: These moments are rich with meaning for partners, and appraisals have a powerful influence on the way partners feel about themselves, their partner, and their relationship. A good question to elicit appraisals is:

*What does it say to you when your partner pulls away as you lean in for a kiss?
What do you tell yourself this means about you? About your relationship?*

These attachment cues strike at each partner's sense of worth and desirability, and partners readily go through all the negative possibilities about their relationship. The therapist's job is to make these appraisals explicit.

What meaning do I make of our distance?

- What do I tell myself about YOU? *Maybe...*
 - You don't want me anymore
 - You aren't interested in me and will leave me
 - Something is wrong with you sexually
- What do I tell myself about ME?
 - I'm not attractive/desirable
 - I'm not loveable
 - Something is wrong with me sexually; I am failing you as a partner
- What do I tell myself about US?
 - We aren't going to make it
 - There's something wrong with us; we are broken sexually

ACTION TENDENCY: When partners are not feeling sexually connected to each other, we make explicit what action each partner takes in these moments and name their "steps" in the dance of disconnection. In this process, each partner's attachment strategies are brought into focus.

When I don't feel close and connected sexually with you, what I do is (examples):

- Complain about our sex life
- Get angry and irritable with you
- Try to engage sexually with you even when you are not receptive
- Try to impress and perform sexually for you

- Give up and withdraw
- Distract myself with other things
- Insist it's not a problem and/or get defensive
- Go outside the relationship (flirtations, emotional or sexual affairs, porn) to meet my needs

CORE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE: Next we explore the core attachment-related emotions that lie under the surface emotions and reactions, such as the sadness of feeling alone, the pain of rejection, the fear of being abandoned, and believing oneself to be unlovable and unwanted.

Just as is true when tracking a couple's relational cycle, tracking their sexual cycle in this way and making it explicit then allows the couple to see when it's happening, stop it, and work on approaching each other with more vulnerability and responsiveness. When that happens, they can have a different experience of being seen, heard, and cared for by their partner, thus breaking the damaging negative spiral, and strengthening their attachment bond.

Case Study: Anthony and Lupe are a heterosexual couple who have been married for 15 years. They have two children, and feel they have many strengths as a couple. However, they have been sexually disconnected for the last 8 years, rarely engaging in any sexual contact. Though both say they want a more robust sexual connection, neither initiates sex, and they feel at a loss as to how to re-start their sexual relationship.

As we begin to track their cycle, we explore how they experience and make sense of the sexual distance between them. I ask Anthony to walk me through a moment when he becomes aware of feeling or thinking about being sexual with Lupe.

"Just the other night," he says, "when we were getting ready for bed, I noticed that I was really wanting to be with her. She is so beautiful to me and I just miss her." He looks down as if embarrassed to acknowledge his feelings. I validate this can be hard to talk about, and ask him to tell me more about this moment of wanting her yet feeling at a loss for how to reach her. "She's going into the bathroom, undressing... I can see her in the mirror getting her nightgown on – and I have to force myself not to look."

I explore this moment further, "Anthony, can you help me understand - what happens if you look at her?"

"Well, if I look at her, I know I am going to really get aroused and really want her, so I just look down. I can't let myself, because I don't think she would want me. I know she would find some way out, you know. I am not the same guy she married. I look different, older...I don't know if I do it for her anymore... and I don't want to get worked up just to be left hanging in that space."

I ask what he does with these feelings of fearing she won't want him, managing his sexual longing, and he replies, "I look away, go turn the TV on, chill out. I try to get my mind off of sex."

From this exchange, I am able to organize Anthony's side of the cycle: We identify a key moment (**CUE**) when he finds himself wanting sex with his wife. He tells himself in those moments, *don't get turned on because she doesn't want you anymore. You're not attractive anymore* (**APPRAISAL**). His primary feeling in these moments when he is sure his wife doesn't want him anymore: "It's sad – I feel bad – don't really feel good about myself – kind of embarrassed. (**CORE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE**: Sadness of not being wanted, pain of anticipated rejection, pain of not being good enough). What he does then is withdraw: "It's so hard to talk about, so I just try to avoid it and watch TV. That's easier than feeling rejected and not wanted." Anthony does not show her this, he withdraws and hides (**ACTION TENDENCY**). "I just look like I don't care – or I crack a joke..."

With his side of the cycle taking shape, I setup an enactment, and ask Anthony: "Can you talk to Lupe about this part of you that fears she doesn't want you, isn't attracted to you? She only sees the part that appears indifferent."

Lupe is blown away when Anthony says this. She is aware of these moments when he avoids being near her or looking at her (CUE), but had made a very different meaning of those moments. When she sees Anthony looking away from her, she never imagined it was because he didn't want to get turned on; quite the opposite, she thought he was repulsed by her naked body and didn't even want to look at her. (APPRAISAL). She tells herself that she is not attractive to him, because her body has changed. What she does to cope with this pain and loss is to hide, to show less and less of herself (ACTION TENDENCY). She hides in the bathroom to get dressed; she no longer wears her flirty dresses when they go out. In that hiding place she feels the pain of not being desirable to her husband, sadness in the loneliness of not feeling connected sexually (CORE EMOTION). Lupe doesn't talk to her husband about this, because she's too afraid that her worst fears – that she is, in fact, no longer desirable – will be confirmed. So what does she do? "I just jump into bed and get into whatever show he's watching, to try and keep things platonic so we don't even 'go there.'"

Anthony's action tendency – to look away from Lupe to avoid arousal out of fear of rejection – is Lupe's cue that leaves her certain he doesn't want her anymore. That is the meaning she makes of his action tendency, which causes her to pull away further, to hide, because she feels so unwanted. Anthony feels her move further away from him, which confirms his view of the distance between them, leaving them both feeling more hopeless and helpless to regain their sexual connection. Neither is able to talk about the cycle they are stuck in out of fear that their worst fears will be confirmed.

Working with the couple to construct this outline of their cycle, where they can see and feel the moves that both of them make to avoid further pain of rejection and deeper disconnection, helps the couple take first steps to move out of it. Of course, there is a great deal more work to be done, as the cycle won't disappear overnight.

Other issues that may be impacting their cycle, such as their individual relational and sexual histories, past injuries in their relationship, and deeply felt – but often unarticulated – mores, rules, and prohibitions about sexuality remain to be explored. Some couples need help to begin touch again, especially when there have been long periods without contact. In that case, incorporating “behavioral enactments” such as gazing, breath, or sensate focus exercises will be very important. The first step, though, is standing together against their cycle of disconnection, because this allows each partner to begin to identify moves they can make to break the negative cycle, to dance a different dance. The couple regains some hopefulness, as they start to see new possibilities -- of reconnection, of pleasure, of joy, and of re-entering a very special and precious intimacy.