

# Couples Affected by Combat Stress: Impact on Attachment Bonds

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# What is Mental Health?

- Complex system of self-organization which requires:
- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Cohesiveness
- Energy
- Stability

Adapted from Mental Health and Attachment Process  
Lecture by Daniel Siegel, M.D. July 8, 2004

# What's Attachment Got to Do With It?

## Attachment:

- Is an innate, adaptive motivational system operating throughout life
- Promotes physical and emotional security during times of threat
- Is universal and is influenced by culture
- Provides a map of adult love relationships
- Helps us understand relationship distress

# Benefits of Healthy Attachment Bonds

- Foster autonomy and self-confidence
- Offer a “safe haven” of support
- Provide a base for adaptive development
- Help regulate emotion
- Promote resilience in the face of stress and combat
- Positive close relationships are linked with immune system health

# The Brain: An Owners Manual

- Three regions of the brain
  - The brain stem—*the reptilian brain*
    - Interface between brain and outside world
    - Regulates bodily functions
  - The limbic system—*the mammalian brain*
    - Processes emotions
    - Appraisal and response to potential threat
  - The cortex—*the evolved human brain*
    - “Center of free will”
    - Coordinates cognitive and emotional process
    - Facilitates control of impulses—thinking before acting

# Healthy Attachments and Communication

Healthy attachments are facilitated through these types of interactions:

- Emotional Communication
- Collaborative Communication
- Reflective Dialogue
- Rupture and Repair
- Coherent Life Stories

Siegel (1999).

# Emotion: The Heart of Attachment

- Emotions involve a personal reaction to an event and have physiological, experiential and behavioral manifestations
- Emotions represent a dynamic process which play a critical role in creating and regulating mental life
- Attachment researchers study the way that emotion is experienced and communicated in close relationships

Siegel (1999).

# Emotions & Actions

## Emotion

- Fear
- Anger
- Sadness
- Surprise
- Joy
- Disgust

## Possible Actions

- Flee, Give up
- Assert, Defend, Attack
- Seek support, Withdraw
- Attend, Explore
- Contact, Engage
- Expel, Avoid, Hide

# Emotional Communication

- Emotional communication is central to intimacy and the experience of being understood
- Positive emotional states can be shared and amplified
- Negative emotional states can be shared and soothed

Siegel (1999).

# Collaborative Communication

- Reciprocal, mutual, and empathic
- Involves verbal and non-verbal signals
- Facilitates understanding of oneself and others

Siegel (1999).

# Reflective Dialogue

- Focusing on thoughts, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and intentions
- Partners “co-construct” their stories and shared experience
- These shared stories help to integrate past, present and future

Siegel (1999).

# Rupture and Repair

- Emotionally connecting relationships between spouses, friends, parent-child, teacher-student, counselor-client all involve times of connection, solitude and misunderstanding
- Ruptures are common and occur in all healthy relationships
- In healthy, secure relationships the inevitable ruptures are actively repaired

Siegel (1999).

# Coherent Life Stories

- Coherent stories reflect how we come to make sense of life experience
- Integrating experiences into coherent stories requires self-reflection and tolerance for uncomfortable emotion and painful memories
- Secure relationships facilitate sharing these stories and integrating the past, present and future in a meaningful way

Siegel (1999).

# Combat Stress

- Jonathan Shay M.D. discusses combat stress in terms of the persistence into civilian life of the valid and necessary adaptations to life in battle which are physiological, psychological and social
- The effects combat stress fall into three main categories:
  - Intrusive/Re-experiencing traumatic events
  - Avoidance
  - Increased physical and/or emotional arousal

# Impact of Stress on Relationships

- Increased marital discord and divorce
- Withdrawal, irritability, agitation in family relationships
- Most suicide attempts of service members follow a break up with a partner
- Research shows that PTSD is one of the psychological conditions most likely to lead to relationship problems
- Deangelis, (2008)

# Attachment and Stress

- Attachment serves an evolutionary purpose of survival in a dangerous world
- Emotional attachment provides protection from helplessness and meaninglessness
- Stress and trauma affect coping styles and ways of relating to others
- Isolation or lack of secure attachments make coping with trauma more difficult

Johnson (2002).

# Comparing Trauma and Attachment Experience

Adapted from Johnson (2002), p. 37

## Trauma Experience

- Physical fear and helplessness
- World seems dangerous and unpredictable
- Creates emotional instability
- Threatens the sense of cohesion
- Limits sense of mastery and control
- Makes it difficult to adapt and be flexible in new situations

## Attachment Experience

- Provides comfort
- Provides a safe haven
- Helps regulate emotion
- Helps to promote a sense of cohesion and meaning
- Promotes self-confidence and trust
- Facilitates learning and adaptation to new situations

# Couples Affected by Stress

- Security needs normally intensify during times of stress
- Stress, trauma and loss impact partners ability to communicate effectively and provide security to each other
- Couple relationships that are distressed make coping with stress, trauma or loss more difficult

# Depression

- Depression is distinct from normal sadness
- It involves changes in mood, thinking, physiology and behavior such as persistent sad mood, irritability, loss of interest, guilt, self-blame, lowered self-worth, suicidal thoughts, poor concentration, withdrawal, agitation, fatigue, diminished sexual interest, disturbances in appetite and sleep.
- It negatively impacts interpersonal coping

# Impact of Loss and Depression on Couples

- Couples often experience loss during deployment or upon return
- Loss can trigger depression in one or both partners
- Depression impacts relationship process in significant ways
- Couple therapy can be effective in reducing the negative impact of depression and promoting healing by strengthening attachment bonds

# Tools for Couples

- Review and use previously effective coping and problem solving processes
- Identify the ways in which every family member is impacted by trauma
- Discussing and deciding together how the trauma is addressed with others.

# Tools for Couples

## Individual Differences

There are differences in the way that individuals cope with trauma. Recovery time and patterns vary. Men and women may cope differently

- Men may prefer to deal with stress in action oriented ways rather than with direct verbal expression
- Women may prefer talking about events and emotions and turn to “tending and befriending” to cope with stress

# Tools for Couples

## Triggers

- Triggers are events that can evoke strong and distressing reactions because they remind us of a traumatic experience.
- Identifying Triggers:
  - Internal triggers include thoughts, memories, emotions and bodily sensations
  - External triggers include situations, people, places, touch, smells, sounds

# Tools for Couples

## Stress Management

- Stress management strategies
  - “Being understood “ is one of the best stress management techniques
  - Mindfulness or meditation practices
  - Relaxation techniques
  - Expressive writing or art
  - Social activities and support

# Therapy for Couples Dealing with Combat Stress

- Educates couples about common effects of stress, trauma and loss
- Promotes emotional understanding and safety
- Assists couples in giving and receiving comfort in the face of loss, stress, helplessness.
- Promotes support for partner experiencing symptoms, such as those common in post-traumatic stress or depression

Johnson (2002).

# Couple Therapy

Continued

- Assists couples in communicating about the impact of stress and loss in their lives
- Addresses “vicarious” stress and losses experienced by partners
- Encourages couples in constructing a shared story about the meaning of loss or trauma in their lives
- Helps develop strategies for protecting relationship from problems arising from stress in the future

Johnson (2002).

# Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy

- Research shows this relatively brief therapy has better outcome than traditional couple therapy
- It has been used with couples dealing with trauma, including combat stress
- It focuses on assisting couples to create a more secure attachment bond
- It teaches partners to identify causes of distress that lead to negative interactions

Johnson (2002).

# Strengthening Attachment

- Couples learn about the impact of external stressors on their emotions and behavior
- Couples identify and express emotional distress that lead to negative patterns
- Couples come to understand the ruptures that may lead to insecurity and distress
- Couples learn ways of repairing inevitable ruptures
- Couples learn new patterns of interaction that provide comfort and security

# Summary

- Attachment needs expressed in couple relationships are normal and adaptive.
- The impact of combat stress in couples include commonly encountered problems of adjustment to stress, loss, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder
- These problems impact the attachment process, creating increased needs for comfort and security

# Summary

continued

- Stressors often increase relationship distress and decrease partners ability to be accessible, responsive and provide comfort to each other
- Strengthening attachment bonds in couples assist in coping adaptively with effects of stress and loss
- Attachment theory, research and clinical experience have helped to identify effective interventions in couple therapy which strengthen attachment and promote individual and family wellbeing.

# References

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