

Strategic Conceptualization: Use of Containers

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Therapeutic Containers

- A **container** is a **frame** that places the therapist and couple in a **time-limited, task-oriented exercise** that provides valuable and reliable information about partners to both partners and therapist.



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Therapeutic Containers

- These exercises are **often playful** yet are all to some degree stressful.
- Containers can also **provide a structural framework**, set of instructions, a task or goal, or a role the therapist plays.

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Therapeutic Containers

- These containers (be they tasks, games, or exercises) **help the therapist assess, elucidate, expose, or establish** – through real-time partner interaction – issues concerning **social-emotional function, attachment organization (or disorganization), arousal regulation, developmental delay, deceptive behavior or language**, and so on.

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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

■ **Bending Metal**

■ **Declarations**

■ Toward and Away

■ Partner Attachment Inventory (PAI)

■ Beckoning

■ Re-enactments

- "Going back to the scene of the crime"

■ Staging

- Difficult Partner Exercise
- 5-10 Minute Argument

■ Posing

- Face-to-Face
- Lovers Pose
- Redemption Pose

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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

■ The **therapist** is in this container as well.

■ Containers includes **a task, a goal, and roles**.

■ When staging a scene, the **therapist is to be an investigator** and not a therapist.

■ This **keeps the therapist on track** and **allows the couple to suspend disbelief** and to stay in the psychodrama without disruption.

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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

■ **Keeps everybody on task** and more likely to achieve the **goal which is clarity, insight, and awareness of the multitude of errors** that are occurring at every moment.

■ These errors are in **communication, perception, memory, and appraisal**.

■ In the staging container, each partner is expected – after the detailed examination of a replayed event – to **produce several course-corrections that would alter event trajectory and outcome**.

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Strategic Conceptualization

■ **The first session must include a lot of coverage**, scanning as much of the couple's daily life as possible.


■ **A full history** of the couple is very important (three generation genogram).

- Dates, ages, relationships, first names of relatives and exes, work, work satisfaction, medical history, medications, mental health history, etc.

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Strategic Conceptualization

- Lengthy observation of the couple in action is very important.
 - How they interact when under stress.
 - How they co-manage distress.
 - Hints about attachment organization.
 - Hints about self-state regulation.

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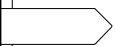


Strategic Conceptualization

- By understanding each partner's developmental history, their behavior while interacting with you and their partner, their areas of vulnerability, defensive patterns – you will soon be able to predict partner reactions to one another and to your interventions.

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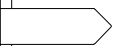


Strategic Conceptualization

- Interventions are tested as a means of finding more information about each partner.
 - For example, partners who require supportive confrontation versus mirroring interpretations of narcissistic vulnerability.
 - Or partners who display a predictable pattern of defensive behavior.
- Learn to collect "tells" from each partner as a means of predicting what they might do or how they may be reacting to your intervention.

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Strategic Conceptualization

- Once you begin to understand how each partner will likely respond to interventions or exercises, you can begin to think more strategically by planning just a bit ahead.
- For example, if you believe someone is holding back important information, you might create a container that pressures them to speak up (by way of their partner pressuring them).

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Strategic Conceptualization

- If you want to get something out in the open, you might **create a container that pressures one or both partners to come out with it.**
- If you want one partner to stand up to the other, you might do an intervention that would **predictably cause them to react** by standing up to their partner.

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Bending Metal and Declarations

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Declarations of Commitment



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Declarations of Commitment

- Declarations are vital part of adulthood — they **support identity and purpose**
- **Declarations are ego-consolidating:** avoidance of declarations is ego-diffusing
- Declarations force partners into a **differentiated psychology**
- Marital vows are a type of declaration of commitment
- Many couples don't remember vows, let alone follow them
- Declarations of commitment can be found throughout history and in all corners of the world

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Declarations of Commitment

- Clarify where partners stand
- Expose insecure issues around self-activation**
- Work through insecure issues around self-activation
- Make partners be explicit** about forming a secure-functioning relationship
- Support insecure partners** who have difficulty expressing and/or receiving declarations of commitment
- A declaration **to leave a relationship** is as important as a declaration of **commitment to stay**

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Bending Metal

- A strategic way of dealing with resistance
- Follows the tradition of Peggy Papp (1980) and other strategic family systems thinkers (Imber-Black, 2007)
- Similar to paradoxical therapy strategies, such as prescribing the symptom

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Bending Metal Purpose

- Breaks through chronic ambivalence or strong resistance to moving toward or away from the relationship
- Clarifies where each partner stands when faced with the decision to fully commit or fully separate
- Intended to put an end to threats against the existence of the relationship

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Bending Metal

- Use only when partners express chronic ambivalence about being in the relationship
- Forces partners to take a stand in one direction or the other
- Helps determine partners' commitment to the relationship (and capacity for decision making).
- Moving with full conviction is more important than which direction is chosen

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Bending Metal

- Challenge the couple's position by taking a contrary stance
- If one or both partners consistently resist reunion-type interventions by threatening the relationship, bend toward separation interventions, and vice versa
- If resistance isn't expressed in response to pushing toward separation, then splitting apart can be seen as congruent

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Declarations + Bending Metal



- Provide a **declaration to bend metal** or to expose and amplify an insecure partner's defense against self activation
- Make declaration short with an **emotional punch**
- Make a declaration while **looking into partner's eyes**
 - Observe somatic reactions**, blockages, resistance, and other issues in the sender and receiver

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Why don't you tell him you don't want to move to Texas?

BENDING METAL

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I don't want to tell him that.

BENDING METAL

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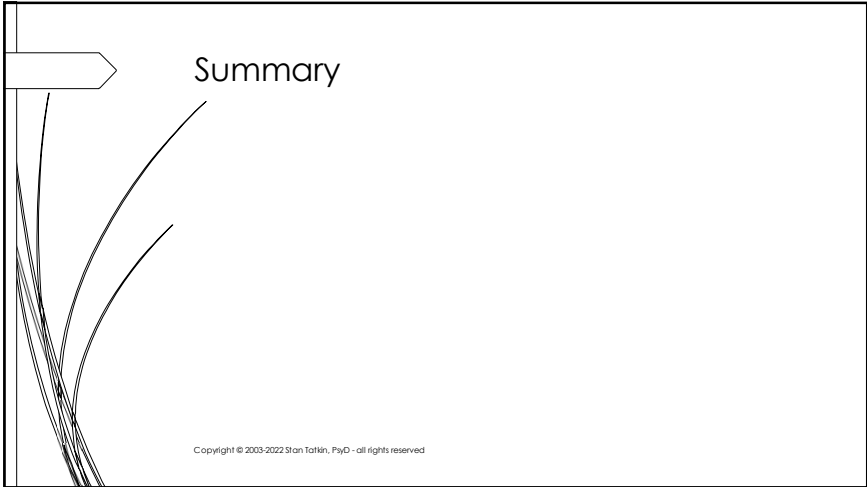
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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

- Track errors in communication, perception, memory, and appraisal.**
- When in the **staging container**, make sure each partner **comes up with several course-corrections that would alter event trajectory and outcome.**
- And, make sure to **have fun!**

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Thank you!

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