

Thinking Developmentally

How To Be A Skilled Couples Therapist



Dr. Ellyn Bader

Co-Founder of The Couples Institute &
The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy
Co-Author of In Quest of the Mythical Mate

What Does This **Mean** and What **Do You Do?**

What Developmental Thinking Does

Developmental thinking enables you to view couples' struggles as part of the journey for psychological growth and wholeness – **not as pathology** or illness



When you use
**Developmental
Thinking** your
interventions are
focused on growth
not pathology



The background of the slide features a photograph of a couple in the foreground, seen from the back, and a man in a suit sitting across from them, gesturing with his hands as if in conversation. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple gradient. A decorative curved line in yellow and purple runs along the bottom right corner.

You **Fall in Love** with the Process of Couples Work

You make an enormous
difference in people's lives

Two parts to this workshop

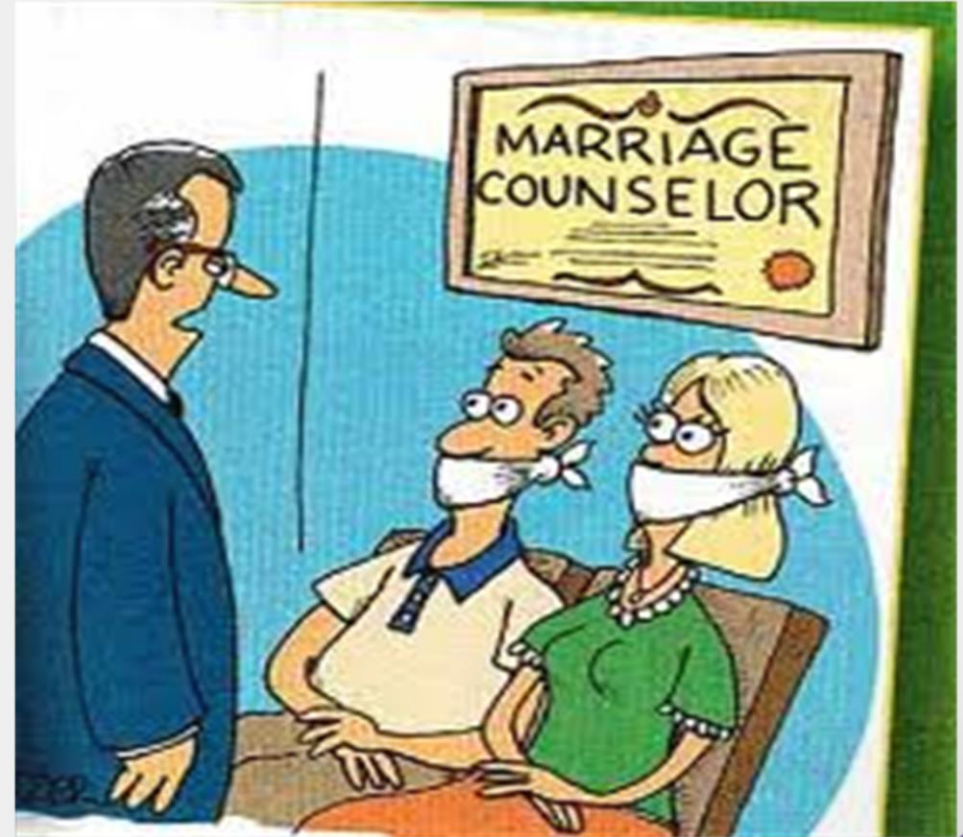
1

What it means to think developmentally and why that matters

2

Clinical cases to show you how to use these ideas when your clients feel stuck

Thinking Developmentally Allows You to Intervene Incisively





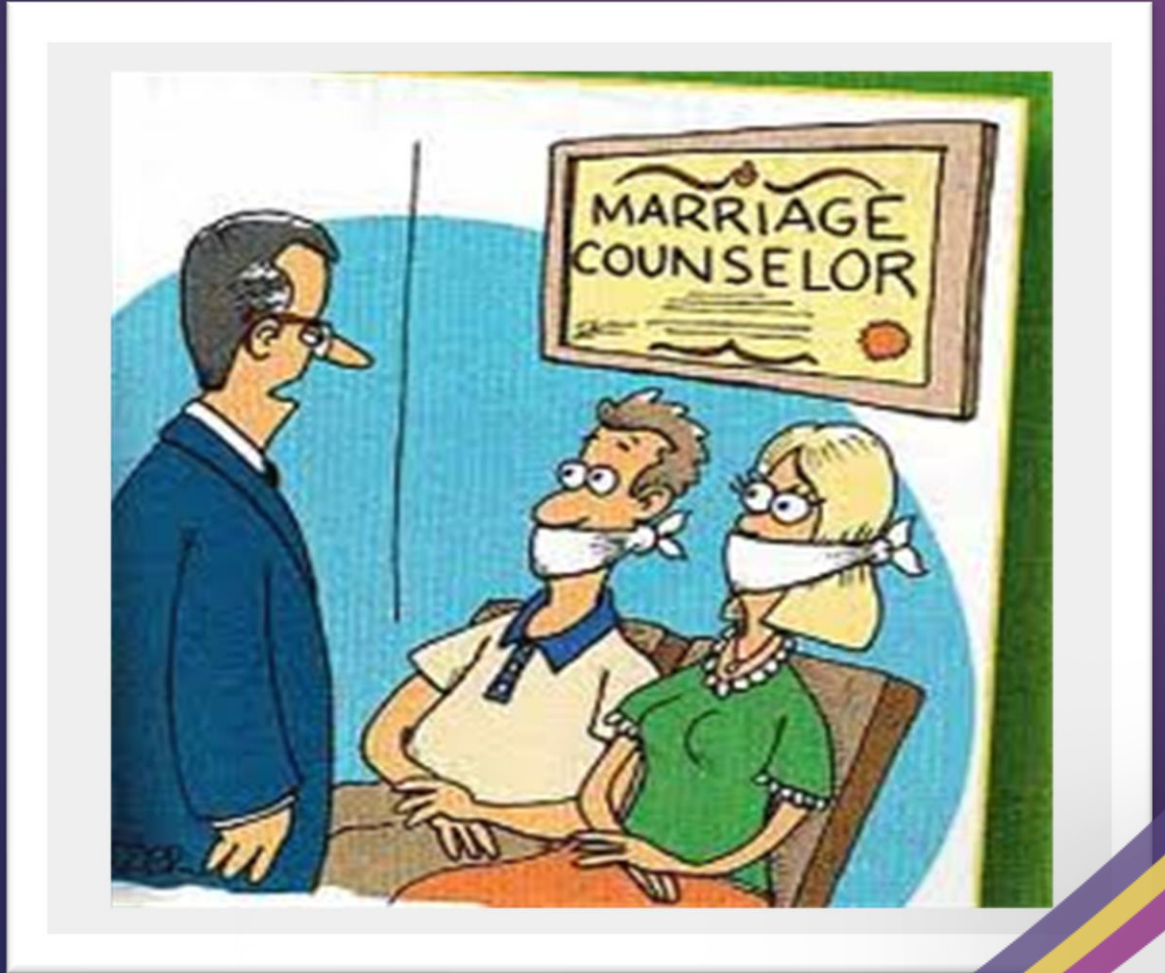
You have a way to **LEAD**

And inspire them to
what they can become.

Thinking Developmentally

- Reduces frustration because you are not ahead of your couples and they are not failing

- Allows you to see their stuck places and use developmental assists



What **Developmental Thinking** Does For You



You lead and manage sessions so they don't get out of control



You are able to show your clients what skills and capacities are needed to enable them to build the marriage/relationship they desire



You don't end up lost and meandering



You support them getting there

Understand Couples Problems

Couples problems are always predictable based on...

1

How long partners have been together

2

Developmental stage of relationship

3

Arrested development

4

The chronic triggering of trauma that has gone un-repaired

Thinking Developmentally When You First Meet A Couple

Where is the couple stuck?

Where is their development arrested?

What are the main sources of their pain,
disappointment and disillusionment?

How have they hurt one another?

How far off course are they from what you
would expect based on their ages and the time
they have been together?

5 Principles of Developmental Thinking

1

Strong Leadership is essential

2

Create individual autonomous goals

3

Set the stage for self-differentiation

4

Open client to expressing vulnerable thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires

5

Get each partner back in their own skin

1st Principle

Your Strong Leadership is **Essential**

You know where to go

You step in and take charge and insist
they stop rehashing the fight of the
week without a clear direction



Your Leadership Matters

Before we jump into discussing your fight, think of our time together today not as conflict resolution, but instead as a time to learn. You are here to learn from me and from each other.

Solving this one fight won't build a strong future.

You'll learn about your emotional triggers and how to manage them better. Instead, of rehashing, you can learn what triggers each of you. You're also learn how to avoid triggering each other and what to do when you yourself are triggered..

This won't always be easy, but it is essential to realizing the dreams that brought you together.

A couple starts a session by dumping the fight of the week on you. They are feeling the raw pain of it.

Here is one example of how you can take a strong leadership role.

You are here to learn new ways of being together. If you are willing to let me interrupt and direct you, then you will be different.

If you don't let me guide you, nothing new will happen. After several months, you'll say, "Well, we tried and it didn't work." If you allow me to coach you into new ways of being together, you'll be learning how to support each other. You will discover what gets in the way of you cooperating and collaborating. If you stay open to feedback and to supporting changes in each other, a lot will start to change.

2nd Principle

**Individual change
becomes autonomous
rather than “I’ll change
if you change.”**



Autonomous Goals



Relationship work is challenging. It takes openness. It takes looking at uncomfortable and ineffective parts of ourselves.



No one wants to enthusiastically look at what you do. It is so much easier to see what our partners do.



The more emotionally armored or self-protective you are at any given moment, the more you will want the other to change without risking yourself.




Couples therapy works best when each of you create targeted growth goals and then hold yourself individually accountable for reaching those goals. The most effective goals target change in areas of repeating pain or stuckness.

Their growth will require individual risk and vulnerability

Let's step back for a few minutes and look at the big picture. Relationship work is challenging. It takes risk. It takes openness. It takes looking at uncomfortable and ineffective parts of ourselves.

No one enthusiastically looks at their own contribution to the problem at hand. It is so much easier to see what our partners do.

Basically, couples therapy or coaching works best when each partner creates targeted growth goals and then holds themselves individually accountable for reaching those goals. The most effective goals target change in areas of repeating pain or stuckness.



Now I recognize this is not easy. It requires each of you to put forth sustained effort with focus. It means moving past layers of self-protection and taking multiple emotional risks

The more emotionally armored or self-protective you are at any given moment, the more you will want the other to change without risking yourself.

That is normal. You can always ask me for help and support when you try new behavior.

3rd Principle

Encourage and Support Self-Differentiation

**Differentiation takes
internal self reflection**

Supporting Differentiation Enables Your Client to **Build a Newly Integrated Sense of Self**

What is Differentiation



Differentiation is the active, ongoing process in which a person defines himself or herself, their own thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires.



4th Principle

**Open client to
expressing vulnerable
thoughts, feelings,
wishes and desires**

5th Principle

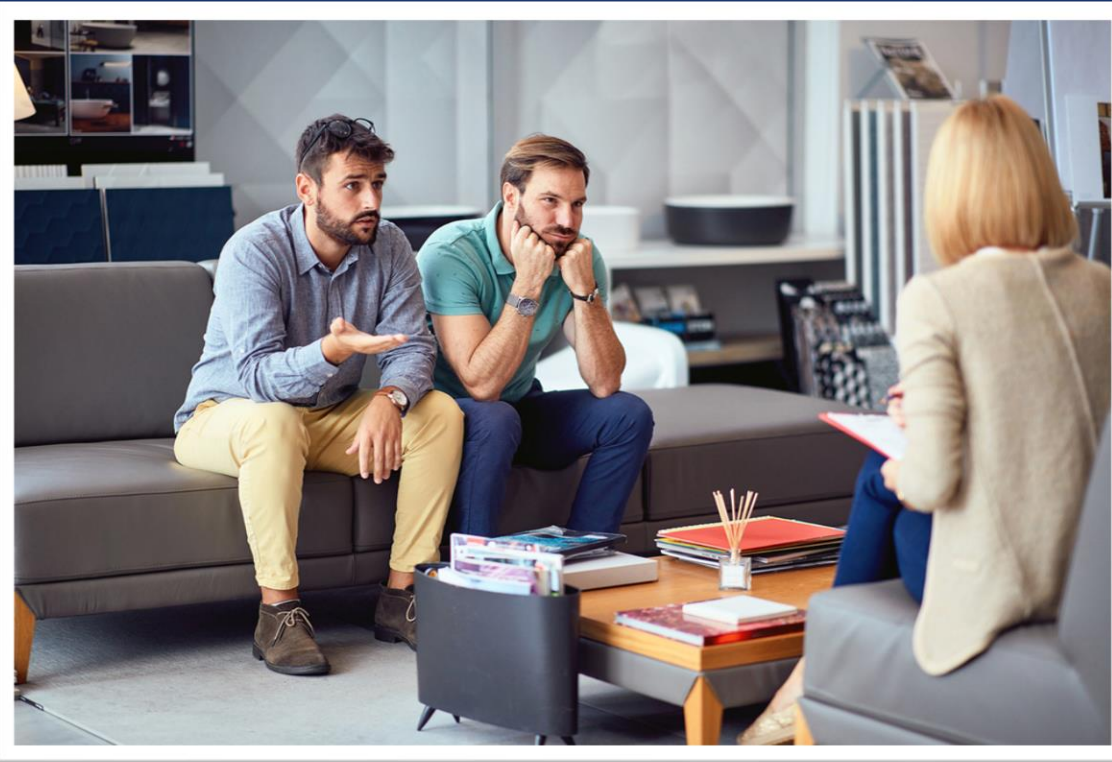
Get Each Partner **Back** **Into Their Own Skin**

You Interrupt Blame and Projection

Disrupt Enmeshment and Focus on Each Partner's
Own Issues

Tom's Case of Joe and Brad

They are a gay married couple together for 12 years



The couple presented as high-conflict, hostile/aggressive... Joe has narcissistic traits and Brad has borderline traits.

Brad was convinced that Joe was a narcissist,

They were extremely explosive at first.
Reactivity is less now.

Presented twice in
training group

Extra challenges since
they work together in
Joe's business

Tom's Good Work Before Next Presentation

- ✓ Tom has increased and strengthened his leadership
- ✓ A strong relationship exists between Tom and both men
- ✓ Tom understands their struggles
 - Challenges of covid and working together
 - Joe driven to work hard and not end up poor
 - Brad highly sensitive to being left out or excluded



Summary of Developmental Work

- ✓ They have individual goals
- ✓ Tom has started differentiation work with them that has decreased their reactivity
- ✓ Moments of vulnerability and openness have occurred
- ✓ It is now time to get each partner back in their own skin and further decrease their personalization of each other's issues



Building Clear Boundaries



Name barely recognized feelings, in order to surface them

Keep coming back to the feelings and empathically supporting them surfacing

"You feel vitriol."

Interrupt and stop any reactivity from the partner

" You move to helplessness to manage feeling vitriol"

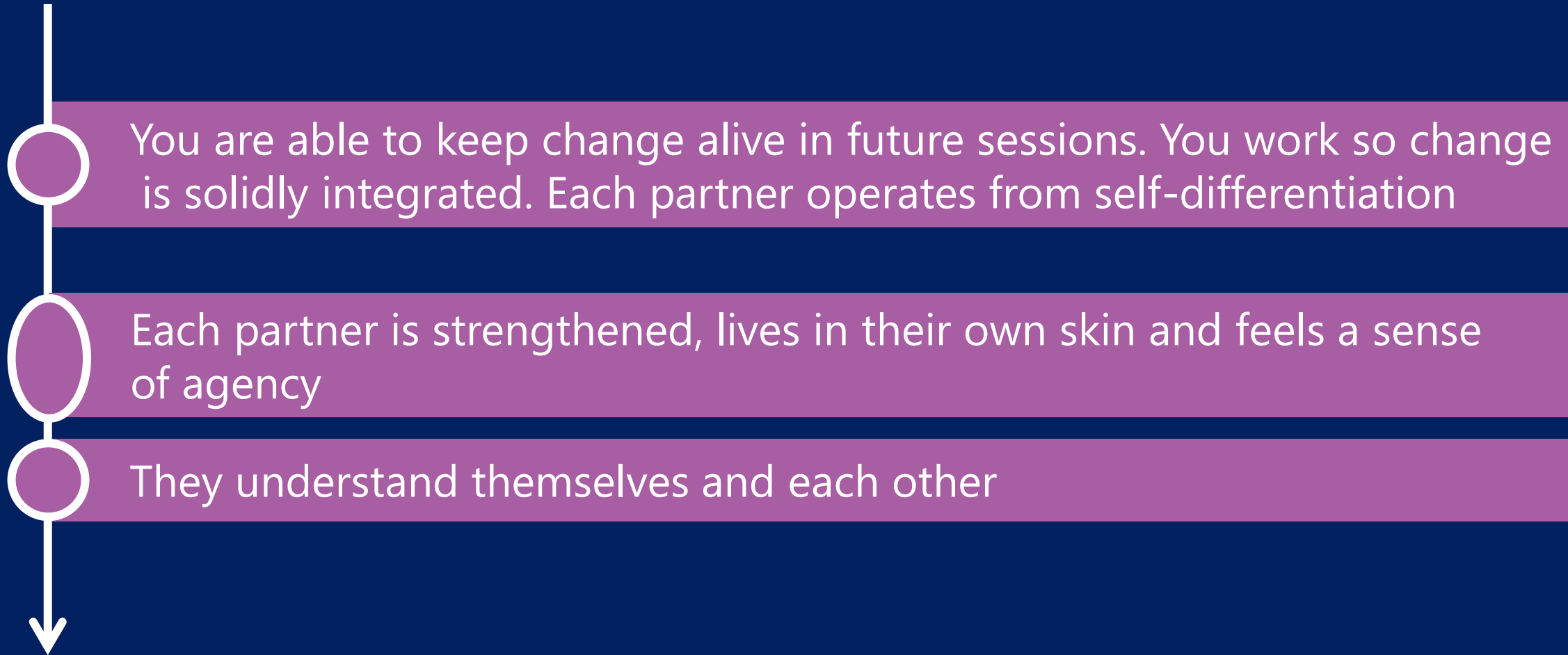
To the partner-His vitriol belongs to him. It is not your fault.
Your job is to continue working on what you do when you are angry.

This feeling is his and is a rubberband from past trauma

It is not Joe's fault.

Each gets back in their own skin and works on their own growth and own developmental edge

When you do this....



Recent Quotes from a Client

“The more I back up and the more space I give you, the more you mature before my eyes”.

“I no longer have to shame you into doing the right thing”.

Benefits to You of Thinking Developmentally



Developmental Model Growth And Healing

You make an
enormous difference
in people's lives

