


A Psychobiological Approach to Couple Therapy

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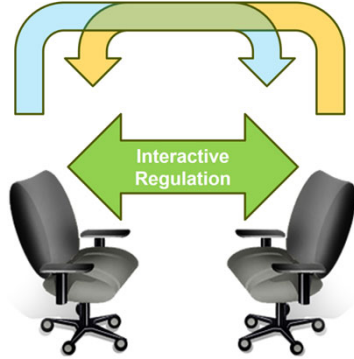


The logo for PACT INSTITUTE features the word "PACT" in a large, bold, serif font, with "INSTITUTE" in a smaller, sans-serif font below it. To the right of "PACT" is a small circular emblem containing a stylized figure.

1

It Started With A Paradigm Shift

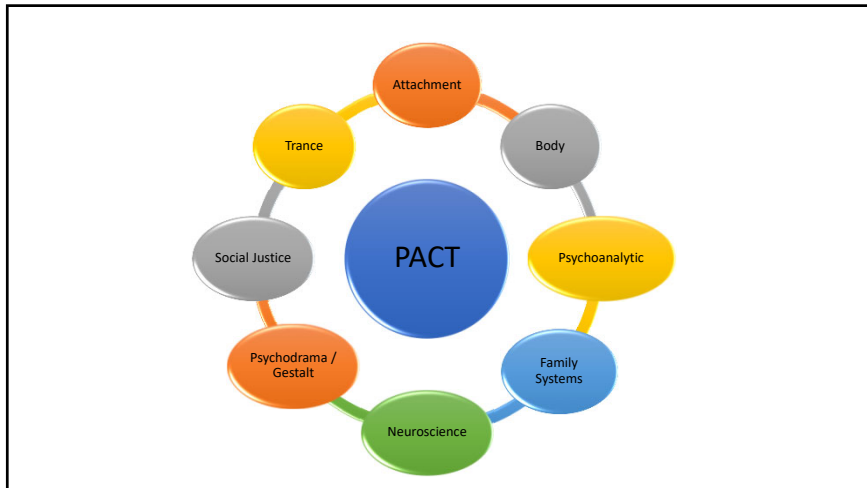
- The simple idea that partners are in each other's care
- Emphasis on interactive regulation over self-regulation



The diagram shows two black office chairs facing each other. A large green double-headed arrow labeled "Interactive Regulation" connects the two chairs. Above the chairs, three curved arrows (blue, yellow, and green) point from the left chair towards the right chair, and three curved arrows (green, blue, and yellow) point from the right chair towards the left chair, illustrating a reciprocal relationship.

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2



3

What Is This, Really?

PACT therapists:

- Are, above all, investigators
- Test and retest their hunches and hypotheses
- Prove everything
- Use interventions to help prove or disprove hypotheses
- Constantly looking for the *best version of the truth*
- Craft interventions tailored to what's in front of them
- Play the long game; couples will always play the short game

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4

A Strategic Approach

- We pay close attention to **micro-movements and micro-expressions**
- We pay special attention to **all shifts and changes** in arousal and affect
- We regulate the couple using **tensing and relaxing** and **shifting topics**
- We use a **forensic-like interview process**
- We prefer to **stage or create experiences** before making interpretations
- We prefer to **collect evidence, plan strategically, and offer proof** before intervening

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5

A Strategic Approach

- We **evoke problematic mental and emotional states** in session and work with them in real time
- We **make bold statements** to get partners to adjust and correct information according to their reality
- We prefer to **move on inspiration** and not pressure
- We speak in **plain language** in a fearless and open manner to model safety and confidence in the therapeutic relationship

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6

A PACT Model of Therapy

Conflict Model	Capacity Model
Social skills	Social-emotional capacity
Content conflicts and power struggles	Psychoneurobiological, developmental, social-emotional skills and deficits
Narrative	Narrative coherence
Top-down processing	Bottom-up processing

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Two Main Reasons Relationships Fail

- **Insufficient Organization, Structure, and Hierarchy**
 - Lack of Shared Purpose, Vision, and Governance
 - Fertile Territory for Threat
 - Increased Internal/External Load Increases Dysregulation & Threat
- **The Manner in Which Partners Interact When Under Stress or In Distress**
 - Fertile Territory for Threat
 - Increased Internal/External Load Increases Dysregulation & Threat

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Couple Organization

- Co-Architects, Co-Creators
 - Relationship Is An Abstraction
 - Doesn't really exist
 - Shared Mythology
 - Co-Constructed Culture
 - Relational Ethics/Morals
- Purpose-Centered Principles
 - Not Based On Feelings
 - Based On Purpose — *What needs to be done*
 - *What is the best thing we can do or right thing we should do, even if it will be the hardest thing to do in the moment?*

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Three Developmental Pillars of PACT

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The Three Pillars

- **Developmental Neuroscience**
 - Key areas of the brain and development throughout life span, memory systems, cranial nerves (especially vagus), the neuroendocrine stress system, neurotransmitters/neuropeptides/hormones, neuroplasticity, and structure/function limitations
- **Arousal Regulation**
 - ANS, difference between arousal and affect, arousal strategies, arousal biases, recovery, executive function, vagal brake
- **Attachment Theory**
 - Infant and adult attachment, personality theory and defenses, object relations theory (American/British), and self psychology

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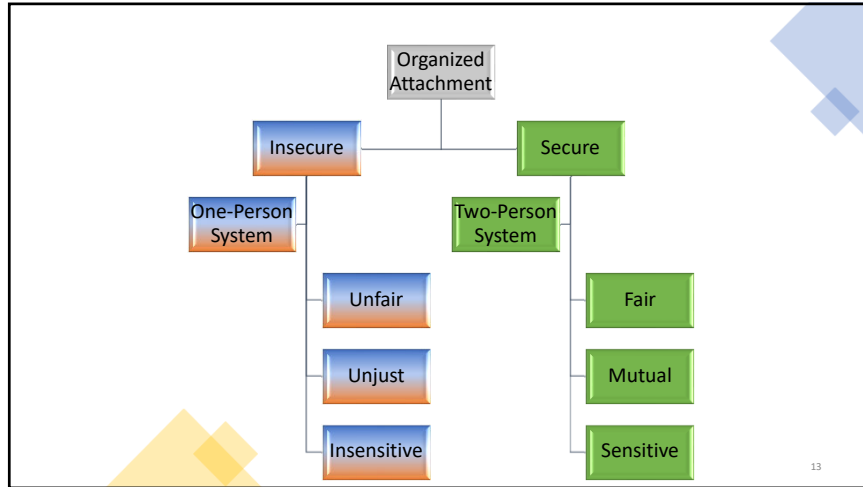
11

Therapeutic Stance

- Secure functioning is the goal
 - Principle-based agreements on mutual surviving and thriving as a two-person system
 - Based in survival and reality
 - Not the same as secure attachment
 - Social contract
 - An orientation — big idea — culture of teamwork and interdependency
 - Available to *most* people as proven over human history
 - Since the very beginning of human civilization, persons of different origins, race, religion, sex, politics — have unionized according to shared purpose and shared vision — have looked to where they are the same and where they agree, to create consensus and get others on board
 - *Only couples fail to orient in this fashion!*

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12



13

What Is Secure Functioning?

- Partners fully agree on their highest priority
- Partners are always collaborative & cooperative
- Partners are good stewards of their safety and security system
 - No unnecessary threats to the relationship
 - Mutual protection in private and in public
 - Quick repair of injuries/misunderstandings
 - Fully transparent
 - First to know
 - Go-to people
 - Attraction not fear
 - Manage thirds together

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14

What Is Secure Functioning?

- Partners are good co-regulators
 - Able to generate mutually amplified positives and mutually attenuated and foreshortened negatives
 - Partners are skilled at quickly shifting one another's state
- Partners know and accept themselves/each other, and seek to become experts on each other
 - Have each other's owner's manual
- Partners can articulate their purpose for coupling
 - Why be coupled?
 - Must be purpose-based (survive & thrive)
- Social contracts based on true mutuality - two-person psychological system
 - Truly mutual: good for me and you

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THERAPEUTIC STANCE

- Only advanced if the therapist *expects* secure functioning
- Secure functioning is evidenced by a **therapeutic alliance**
 - All on the same page regarding frame, roles, and task
 - Couple is collaborative and cooperative
- **Acting out** should not be rewarded – a sign of poor therapeutic alliance
- Cross-interpreted (esp avoidant partners) or confronted (esp angry resistant partners), or down the middle (confrontation of both partners)
- **Pressure is maintained** to move toward secure functioning
- Secure functioning **competes** with addictions, compulsions, lying, and cheating

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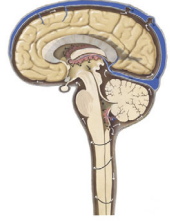
16

Fun Facts

- Nothing more difficult than another person
- All people are annoying, disappointing, contradictory
- No such thing as a low maintenance person up close
- We pair bond by recognition and familiarity
- What we don't like in our partner is not what we think
- Real time is extremely fast
- We mostly don't know why we do what we do
- What we don't know we make up
- Narratives cannot be trusted
- Things are hardly ever what they seem
- 99% of our day is automatic

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17

<h2>Ambassadors</h2> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 0 auto;"/> <h3>High Cortical</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Relational ✓ Expensive ✓ Slow ✓ Conscious ✓ Plastic 		<h2>Primitives</h2> <h3>Subcortical</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Survival ✓ Cheap ✓ Fast ✓ Automatic ✓ Less Plastic
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18

Working with Primitives

- Bottom-Up Techniques
 - Cross-questions, cross-comments, cross-interpretations, down the middle confrontations/interpretations
 - Surprise questions, surprise movements, movement exercises/psychodramas, stationary poses/psychodramas, re-enactments of problematic scenes, events, and interactions
 - Containers (increasing pressure/stress)
 - Partners given a task
 - Therapist has a purpose
 - Therapist may play a particular role (coach, interviewer, investigator, professor, etc)

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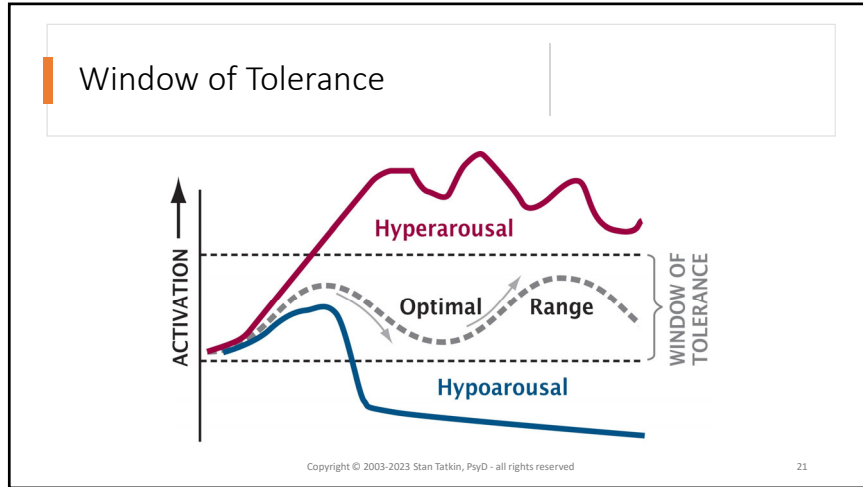
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Working with Primitives

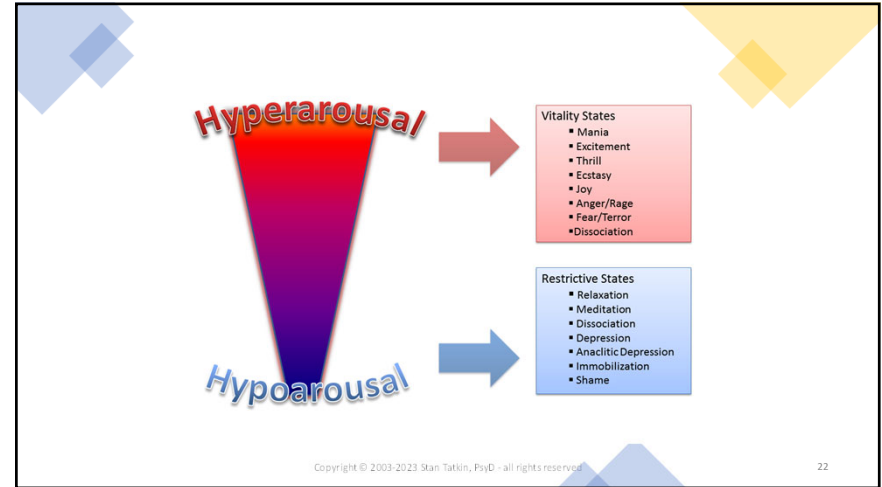
- Containers (cont.)
 - Organizes sessions for therapist
 - Provides a way to measure, assess abilities, capacities, developmental levels, and improvement
 - Task-driven containers provides a stressful process for the couple, a necessary condition for both increasing partner interest, awareness, and buy-in for secure functioning
 - Provides a way for the therapist to determine where the couple is in terms of secure functioning
 - Containers provide enough stress to expose "leakage" from partners, allowing for a more accurate assessment of partners' real experience, real intentions, real thoughts/feelings

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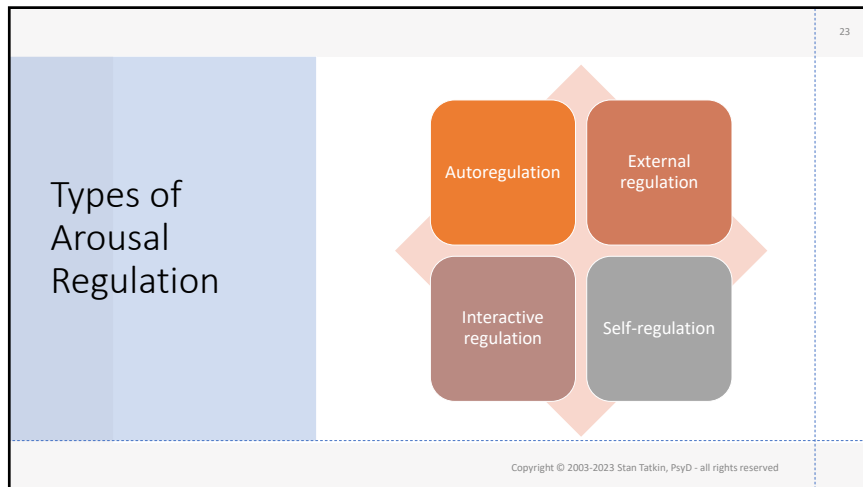
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21



22



23

Autoregulation

- Pro-self
- Simple form of self-stimulation and self-soothing
- No other person necessary
- Others can be used as self-objects, *appearing* interactive
- Interpersonal stress is reduced or eliminated
- Can be dissociative
- Anxious avoidant partners overuse
- Examples: electronic devices, alone time, exercise, substance use

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24



External Regulation

- Can be pro-self and pro-relational
- Being regulated by another (vice versa)
- Looks interactive but lacks mutuality and simultaneity
- Early caregivers are external regulators
- Therapists often function as external regulators
- External person needed
- Anxious ambivalent partners overuse
- Examples: venting, over-focus on partner (codependency)

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25



Interactive Regulation

- Pro-social, pro-relational
- Face-to-face, eye-to-eye, skin-to-skin
- Foundation of micro-attunement and present during infancy
- In adulthood, requires self-regulation under stress conditions
- Highly intersubjective and mutually managed
- Verbal and nonverbal
- Used to manage positive and negative emotional states
- Examples: repair, friendly gazing, smiling, attuned touch

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26



Self Regulation

- Pro-social and pro-self
- Inhibitory and limiting (e.g., impulse control, frustration tolerance, emotion regulation, hold and wait)
- Developmentally follows interactive regulation
- Adults expected to self-regulate
- Requires functioning prefrontal cortex and vagal braking system
- Frontal lobes exert inhibitory influence on subcortical structures (e.g., amygdala)
- Assumes good functioning of PNS
- Examples: self-calming during stressful interaction, out-breath, prosody, friendly eye contact

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27

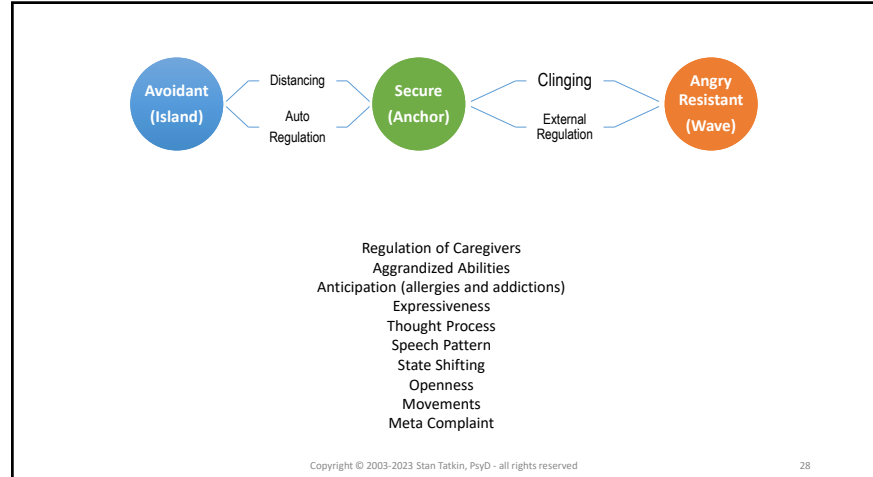


Diagram illustrating the relationship between attachment states and regulatory processes:

- Avoidant (Island)** is associated with **Distancing** and **Auto Regulation**.
- Secure (Anchor)** is associated with **Clinging** and **External Regulation**.
- Angry Resistant (Wave)** is associated with **Clinging** and **External Regulation**.

Regulation of Caregivers
 Aggrandized Abilities
 Anticipation (allergies and addictions)
 Expressiveness
 Thought Process
 Speech Pattern
 State Shifting
 Openness
 Movements
 Meta Complaint

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28

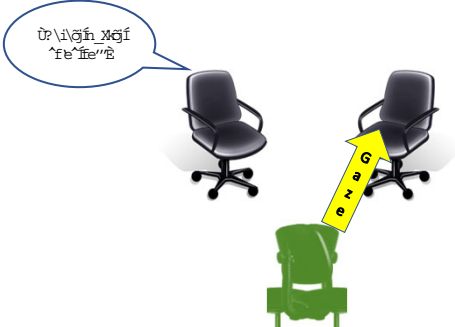
PACT Basic Interviewing Process

- Cross-tracking
- Cross-questioning
- Cross-commenting
- Going down the middle
- Leveling the playing field

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29

Cross-Track



The diagram shows two black office chairs facing each other. A yellow arrow labeled 'G' points from the right chair to the left chair. A speech bubble from the left chair contains the text 'On the left side of the field'.

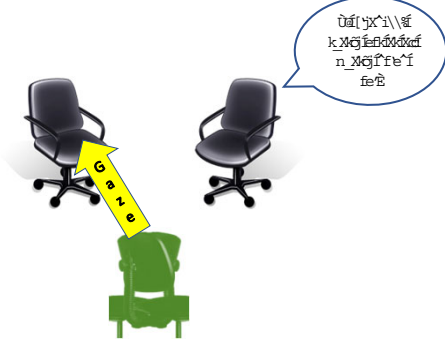
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29

30

Cross-Track




The diagram shows two black office chairs facing each other. A yellow arrow labeled 'G' points from the left chair to the right chair. A speech bubble from the right chair contains the text 'On the right side of the field'.

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31

31

Cross-Question

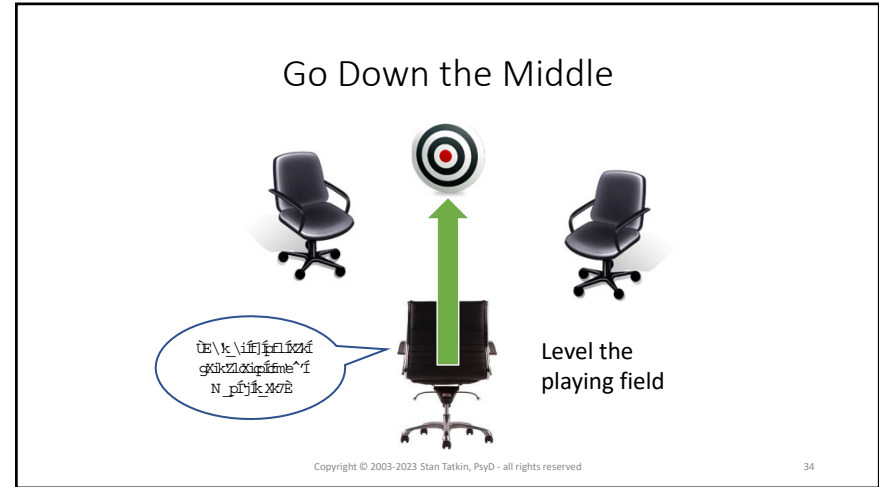
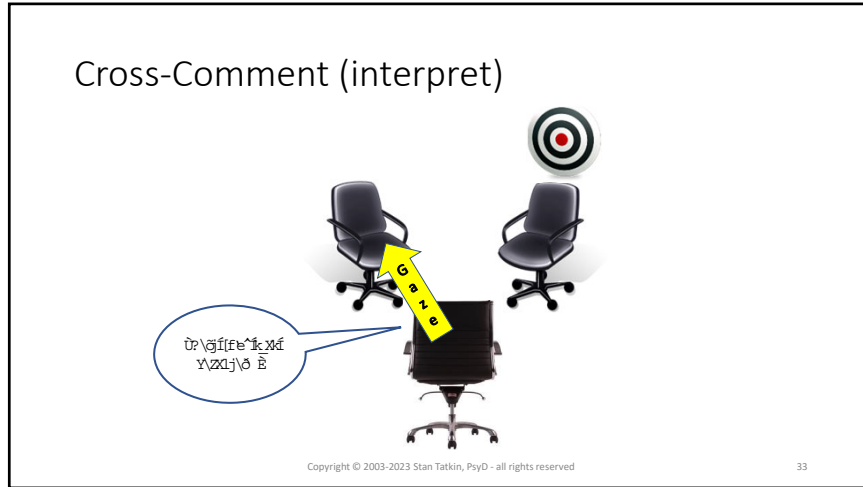


The diagram shows two black office chairs facing each other. A yellow arrow labeled 'G' points from the right chair to the left chair. A speech bubble from the left chair contains the text 'On the left side of the field'. A target icon is positioned above the right chair.

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32

32

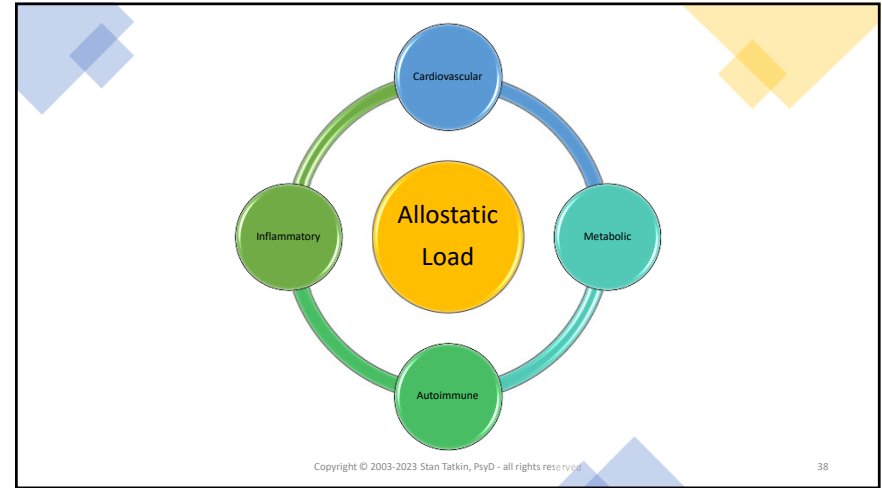


The real purpose of secure functioning is to reduce *allostatic load*

Chronic Interpersonal Stress

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37



38

Conclusion

- PACT is a polytheoretical approach which has at its goal, *secure functioning*
- PACT is a difficult approach to master with a lot of moving parts, but when integrated, it becomes exquisitely simple, fun, and energy conserving for the therapist
 - It is not paint by numbers, it is jazz
- PACT is the "show me" psychotherapy
 - We want to see/hear it happen in action and real time
- Secure functioning is available to most everyone couples
 - Though it is simple, makes common sense, and attractive, secure functioning can be very difficult and is a practice
- Secure functioning will only occur if the couple therapist *expects* it
- Clinicians who practice PACT principles often report improved relationships for themselves

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39

Conclusion

- Purpose of Secure Functioning
 - Reduce interpersonal stress and threat
 - Reduce allostatic load
 - *The only system that can produce both longevity and happiness*

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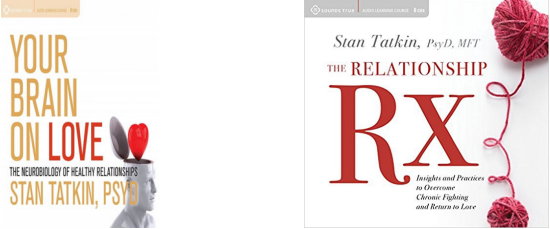
40

Thank you!

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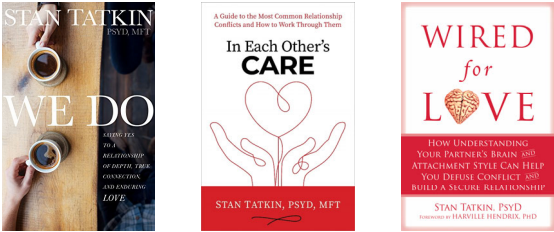
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42



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43