

TTAC

Perinatal and Early Childhood
Mental Health Network

Training and Technical Assistance Center



Beyond Parenting: Supporting the Couple Relationship in the Early Years

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Family
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Who We Are

The New York City Perinatal and Early Childhood Mental Health Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC), is funded by the NYC Health Department.

TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development (NYCCD) and the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research

- **New York Center for Child Development** has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York with expertise in informing policy and supporting the field of Early Childhood Mental Health through training and direct practice
- **NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research** houses the Community and Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers (CTAC & MCTAC) and the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE). These TA centers offer clinic, business, and system transformation supports statewide to all behavioral healthcare providers across NYS.

TTAC is tasked with building capacity and competencies of mental health professionals and early childhood professionals in family serving systems to identify and address the social-emotional needs of young children and their families.



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**NYC Perinatal & Early
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- Contact the TTAC team by clicking on **Ask TTAC** and filling out our **Contact Us form**
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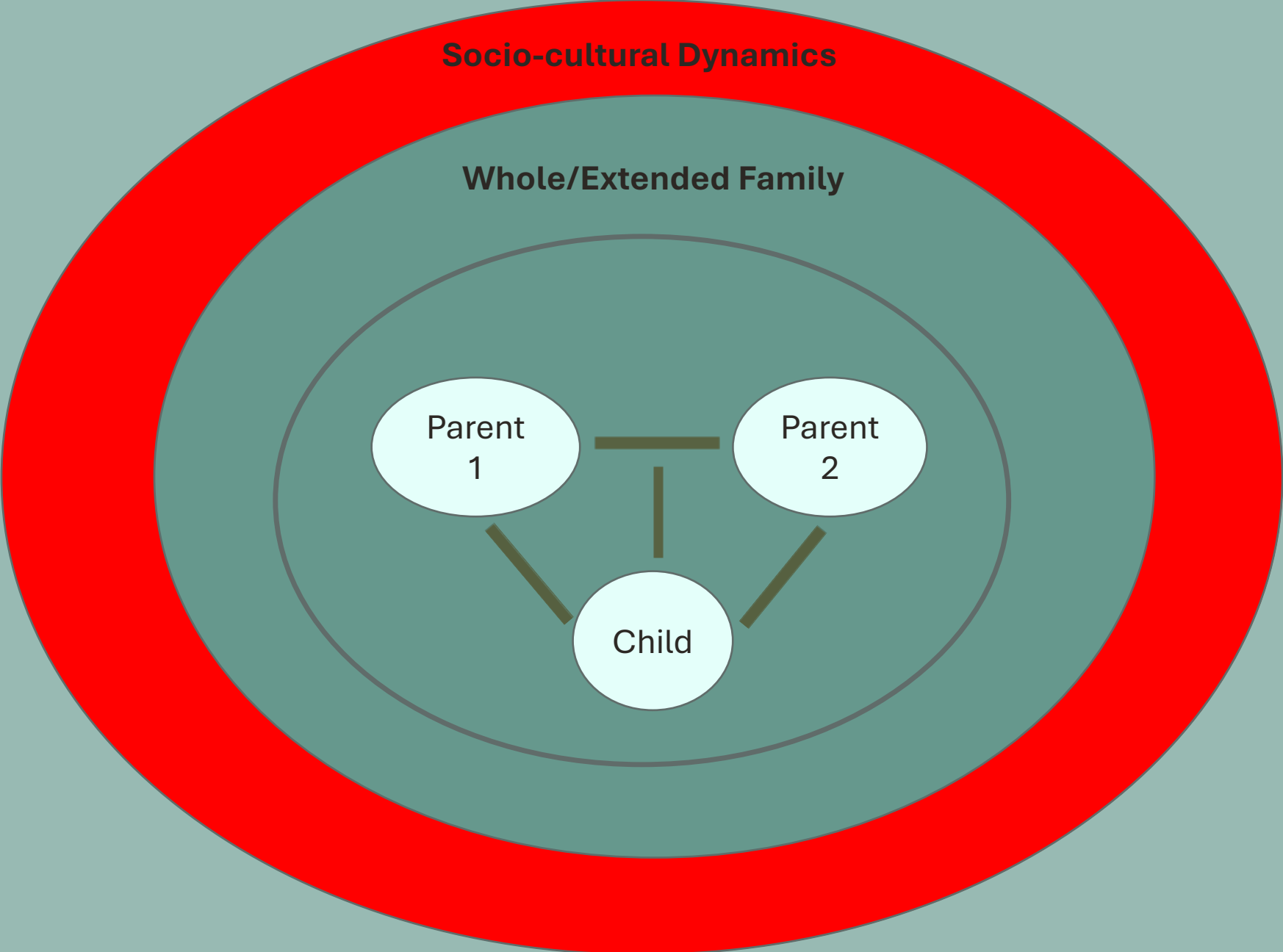
Have questions or need assistance? Please contact us at ttac.info@nyu.edu and we'll be happy to assist you

Explore all the provider resources at ttacny.org



Winnicott: There is no such thing as a baby. There is a baby and someone.





Socio-cultural Dynamics

Whole/Extended Family

Parent
1

Parent
2

Child

AGENDA

- The impact of the coparenting couple relationship on children – what does the research say?
- Typical couple challenges and clinical strategies help couples address them
- Strengthening the couple bond





IMPACT OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIP ON CHILDREN – WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Couple Impasses
(Anger, sadness,
disagreements, couple
dissatisfaction,
withdrawal, etc.)



CHILD OUTCOMES,

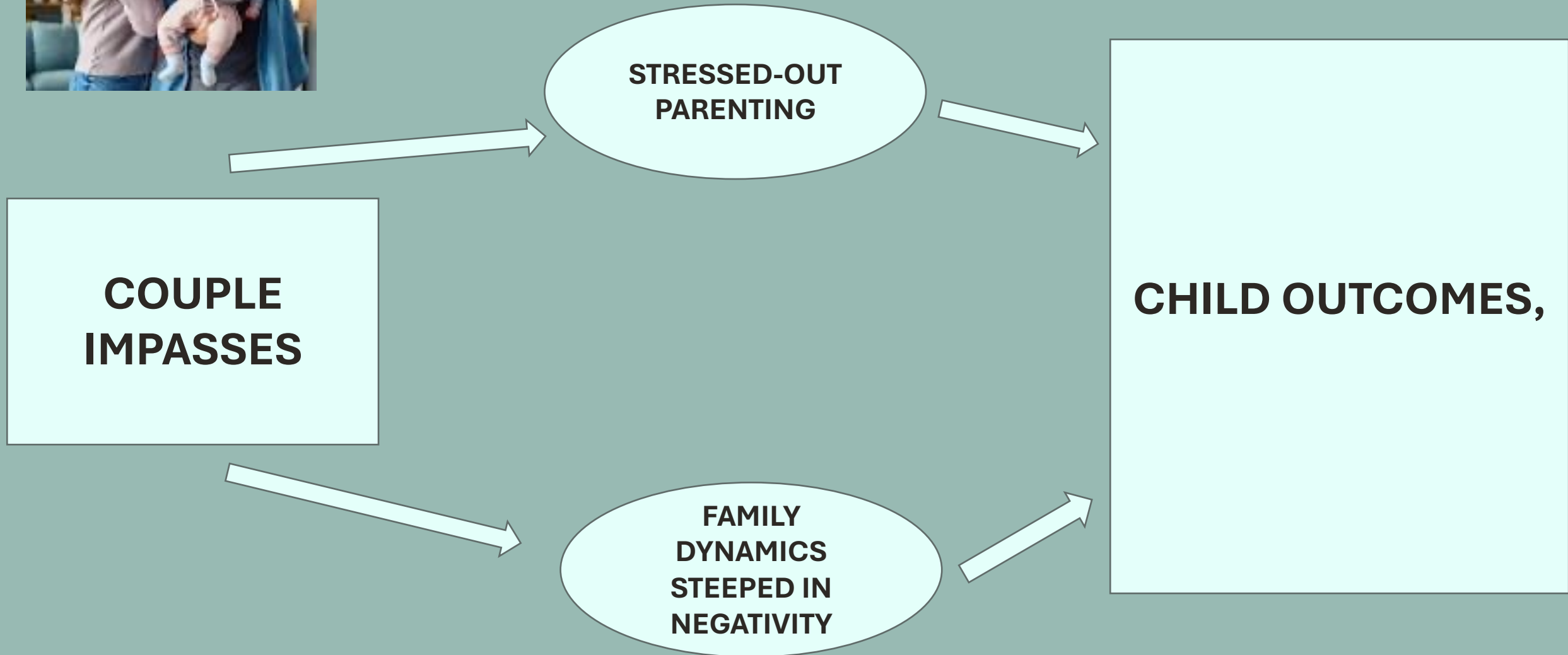
e.g.,

- Substance use
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Eating disorders
- Externalizing behaviors
- School difficulties
- A more negative outlook on life

Belsky et al., 1996; Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994; Cowan, Cowan, Mehta, 2009; Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Dorn & Du Rocher Schudlich, 2020; Du Rocher Schudlich, Erwin, & Rishor, 2019; Du Rocher Schudlich, White, Fleischhauer & Fitzgerald, 2011; Fearnley Shapiro et al., 1997; Feinberg, 2002; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Ingoldsby et al., 1999; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; McHale et al., 2023; McHale, Kazali, Rotman, Talbot, Carleton, & Lieberman, 2004; O'Brien, Bahadur, Gee, Balto, & Erber, 1997; O'Brien, Margolin, & John, 1995); Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005); Rhoades, 2008; Schoppe et al., 2001; Zemp, Bodenmann, & Cummings, 2016



IMPACT OF PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP ON CHILDREN – WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?



THE ADAPTIVE CHILD

STRATEGIES, e.g.,

- Shutting down emotion
- Withdrawing
- Arguing or acting out
- Becoming the “good” child
- Becoming the “parentified” child
- Taking care of parent

WHAT TOPICS DO COUPLES STRUGGLE WITH OR FIGHT ABOUT?

- Money
- Division of labor (chores)
- Sex/intimacy
- Parenting
- In-laws

WHAT DO COUPLES FIGHT FOR? (Howard Markman)

- Power & control, e.g.,
 - Whose priorities take priority?
 - Who makes decisions?
- Care & closeness, e.g.,
 - Am I safe with you?
 - Can I trust you?
 - Do you have my back?
- Respect & recognition, e.g.,
 - Do you see and appreciate who I am and what I do?
 - Do you value me?



ANJELAH JOHNSON- REYES

TYPICAL COUPLE CHALLENGES

- Difficulties in the process of communication
- Being “triggered” and shift into defensiveness
- Outdated models of emotion
- The importance of rupture and repair

COMMUNICATION THAT BUILDS MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND COMPASSION



Hedy Schleifer's "Crossing the Bridge:

- Conflict is an opportunity for growth
- Crossing the Bridge into the world of the other.
- Turn toward and look at each other (if possible)
- Essentialize – what is the essence of what I would like my partner to know about my experience? (I statements)
- 10-25 words if possible
- The listening partner repeats back what he/she heard and asks "Do I have you?"
- The speaking partner says, "Yes," or "Yes, almost – " or "No, let me try again."
- Switch roles.
- Reflections:
 - What did I learn?
 - What did I re-learn?
 - What surprised me?
 - What are next steps I could take?

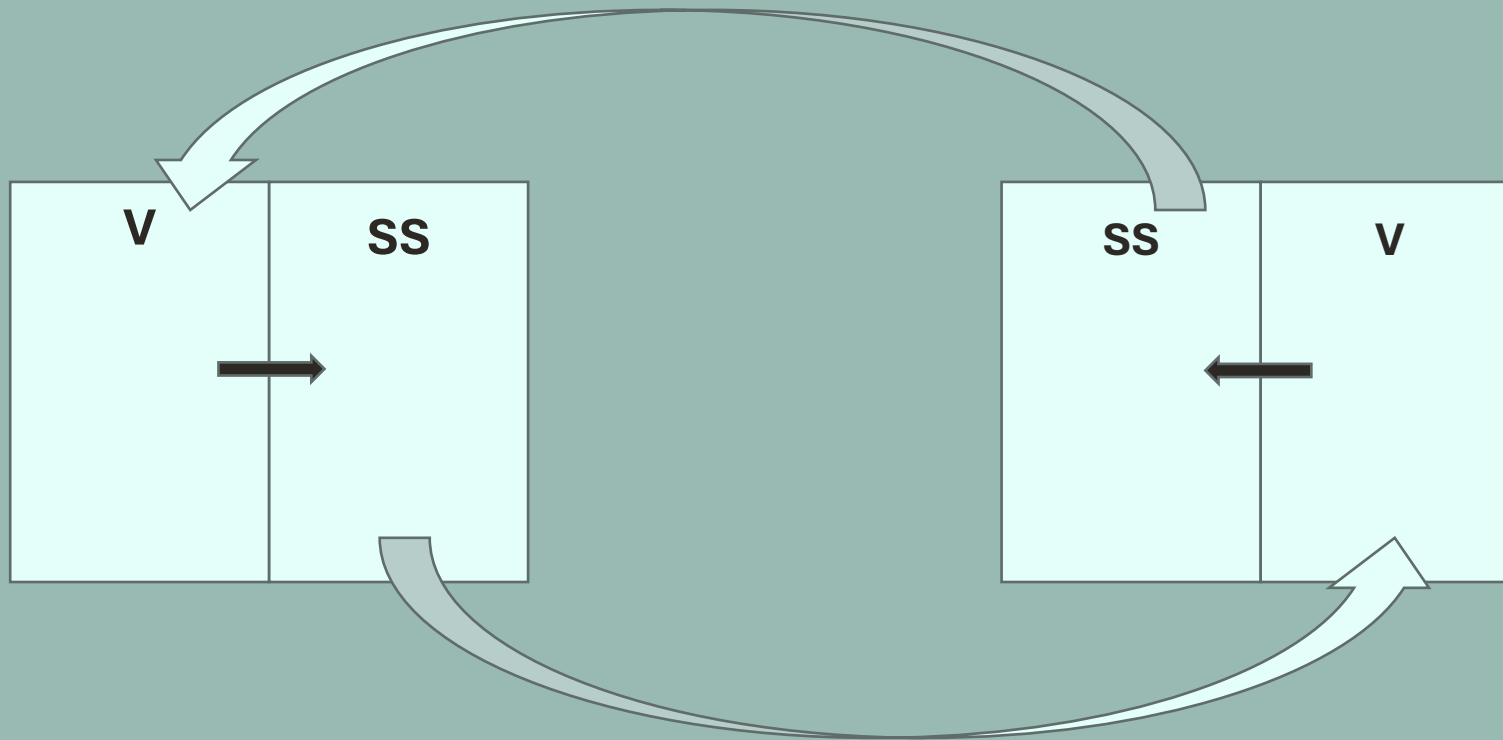
VULNERABILITIES

- Neurobiological
- Historical from childhood in family of origin
- Historical from previous relationships or this relationship in a previous time
- Socio-cultural – from negative experiences in the world due to racism, homophobia, classism, gender biases, etc.

Examples:

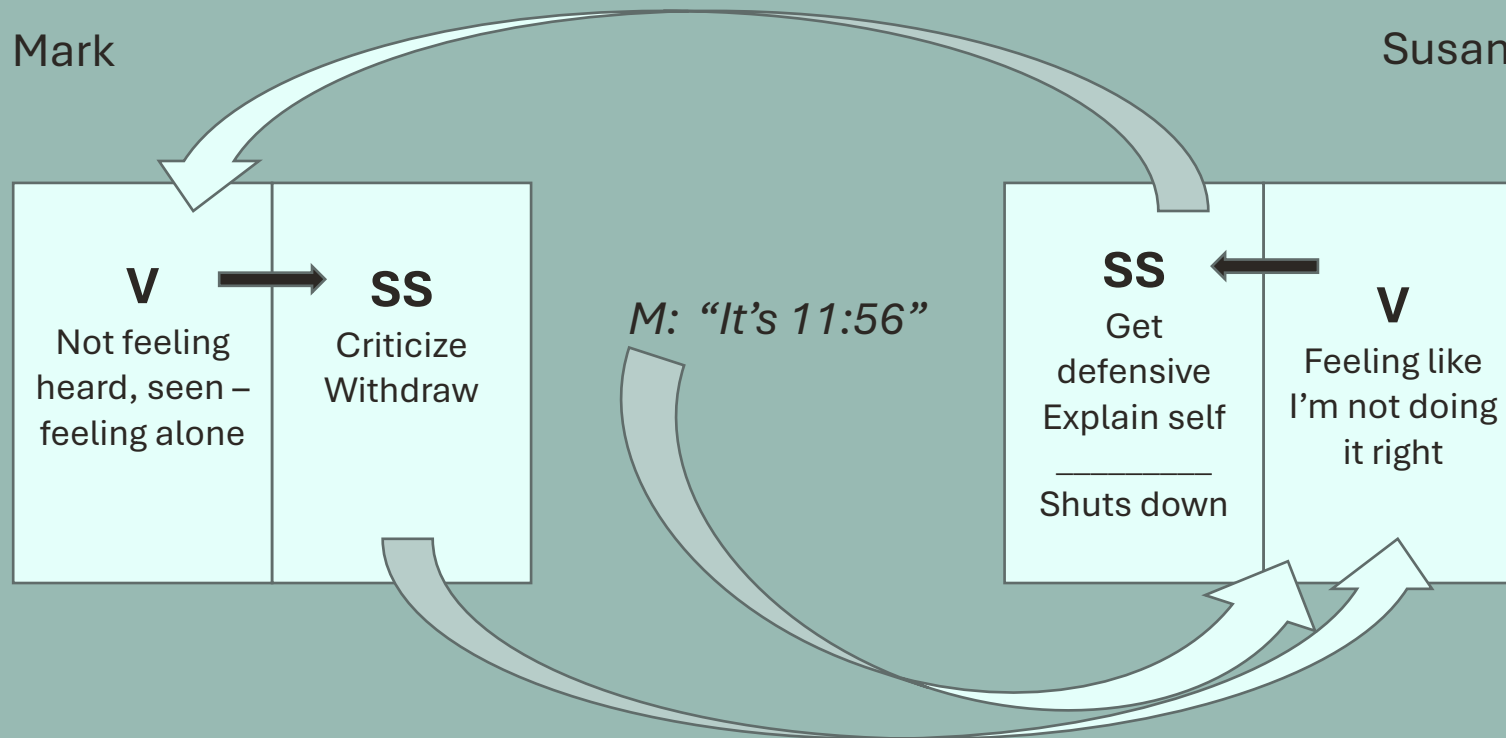
- Fear of doing it wrong, making a mistake
- Being told you were selfish
- Being abandoned
- Being not wanted
- Feeling stupid
- Feeling ugly, not good looking enough

THE VULNERABILITY CYCLE - Michelle Scheinkman and Mona Fishbane



V = vulnerabilities
SS = survival strategies

THE VULNERABILITY CYCLE - Mark and Susan



V = vulnerabilities
SS = survival strategies

**“BETWEEN STIMULUS AND RESPONSE THERE IS A SPACE.
IN THAT SPACE IS OUR POWER TO CHOOSE OUR
RESPONSE. IN OUR RESPONSE LIES OUR GROWTH AND
OUR FREEDOM.”**

VIKTOR FRANKL

BOTH CROSSING THE BRIDGE AND UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY CYCLE PREVENT GOTTMAN'S FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

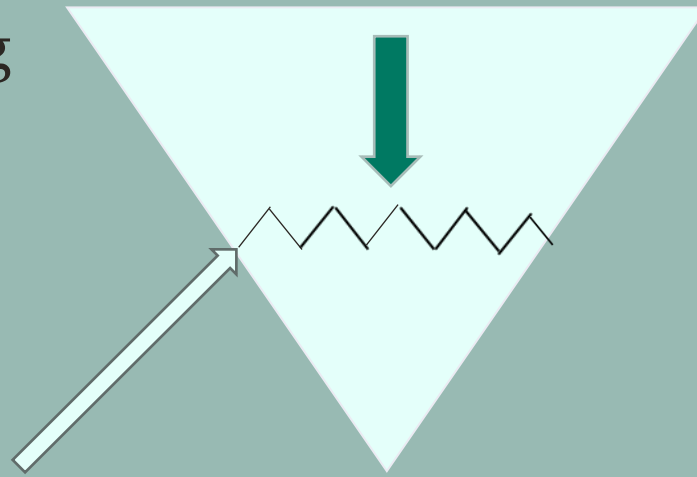
- **Criticism** - attacking the partner's character rather than a specific behavior
- **Contempt** - communicating disgust or moral superiority
- **Defensiveness** - self-protection that deflects responsibility
- **Stonewalling** - withdrawing from interaction and shutting down)

Triangle of Change (from Diana Fosha)

Defenses, e.g.,
Jokes, sarcasm, over-doing
anything, screen time,
criticism

Inhibitory emotions
- Anxiety

*Defenses and anxiety block
access to core feelings.*



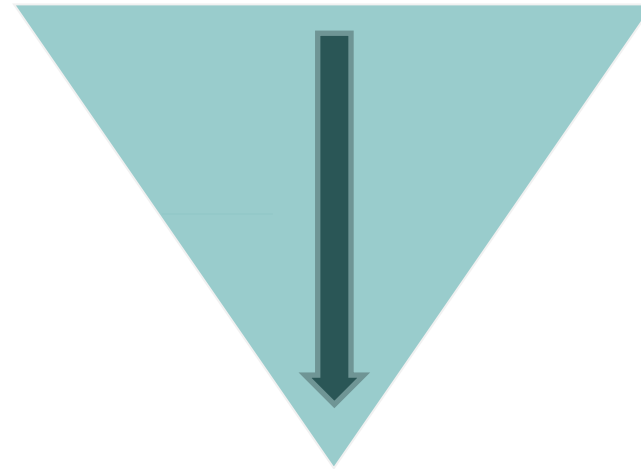
Core
Feelings

Triangle of Change (from Diana Fosha)

Defenses

Inhibitory
emotions: Anxiety

Slowing down and
connecting with sensations
in the body facilitates
access to core feelings



Core
Feelings



RUPTURE AND REPAIR –

Harriet Lerner

- Keep the focus on your actions
- Take full responsibility
- Express genuine remorse
- Make amends when possible
- Let go of control over the outcome



CREATE A SOLID COUPLE/COPARENTING FOUNDATION

Share your thoughts about the qualities and capacities you want to help your child develop.

Discuss with partner:

- What are the qualities and capacities our child needs to be “successful” in the world we are living in, e.g., grit, compassion, family-mindedness, independence
- What parenting practices do we want to use to help our children develop in these ways?



CREATE A SOLID COUPLE/COPARENTING FOUNDATION - GOTTMAN

**Floor 1: Build Love Maps – Get to know one another,
e.g.**

- What is their inner world like?
- What are their likes and dislikes?
- What kind of childhood/parents did they have?
- What are their interests/hobbies?
- Who are their friends?
- What do they actually do in their work? How do they feel about work?



CREATE A SOLID COUPLE/COPARENTING FOUNDATION - GOTTMAN

Floor 2: Share Fondness and Admiration

- Vocalize the characteristics and actions that you appreciate in your partner. Be specific.

Floor 3: Turn Towards

- Bids for connection are any small, verbal or nonverbal attempts to gain a partner's attention, affection, or support.
- The partner can turn towards with a response that facilitates connectedness.
- Consistently turning away (or worst yet, turning *against*) a bid spells disaster for any relationship. Recognizing and turning towards each other's bids helps to create a safe space for you both to express yourselves and your needs.



COUPLE/COPARENTING FOUNDATION - GOTTMAN

Floor 4: The Positive Perspective

- See the best in each other and don't rush to offense or criticism.
- The partners give each other the benefit of the doubt

Floor 5: Manage Conflict

- See conflict as an opportunity to grow.
- Take other's ideas, desires and feelings into account.
- Dialogue
- See triggers and take steps to stay in wise adult rather than adaptive child

Floor 6: Make Life Dreams Come

- Support each other in achieving life goals