

**COURSE 200:
BASIC CLINICAL TRAINING
IN IMAGO RELATIONSHIP
THERAPY**

Training Manual
Module 1-A: Days 1 & 2
FACT A
August 2008 edition



A new way to love

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“For one human being to love another human being: That is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation. Loving does not at first mean merging, surrendering, and uniting with another person – it is a high inducement for the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world in himself for the sake of another person; it is a great demanding claim on him, something that chooses him and calls him to vast distances.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

From Letters to a Young Poet - 1904

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Course 200: Imago Relationship Therapy

Basic Clinical Training

Module 1-A

MODULE 1-A COURSE OUTLINE	
<p>Day 1</p> <p>Introductions</p> <p>Basic ideas and assumptions of Imago theory</p> <p>Overview of Imago Relationship Therapy</p> <p>What is an Imago therapist/educator</p> <p>Aspects of an Imago practice</p> <p>Imago Dialogue - Mirroring</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Demonstration</p> <p><i>Lunch: Imago work-up - Childhood</i></p> <p>Perspectives and phenomenology</p> <p>Imago Consultation Process</p> <p>The Imago dialogue - Mirroring</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Practice</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Feedback</p> <p>Closing - journaling</p> <p><i>Homework: Imago Work-up - Partner profile</i></p>	<p>Day 2</p> <p>Opening - contact & connection</p> <p>Meta-theory</p> <p>From the cosmic journey to the Relational Paradigm</p> <p>The Imago dialogue - Overview</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Validation and empathy</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Demonstration: the complete Imago dialogue</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Practice: Imago dialogue and feedback</p> <p><i>Lunch: Through Conflict to Connection</i></p> <p>Conscious Relationship</p> <p>Pleasure and the Fear of Pleasure</p> <p>The Appreciation Dialogue</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Practice with feedback</p> <p>An Imago session (Harville DVD)</p> <p>Closing - High Energy Fun</p> <p>Journaling</p>
MODULE 1-B COURSE OUTLINE	
<p>Day 3</p> <p>Opening - contact & connection</p> <p>The psychological and social journeys</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Why and how to use with couples</p> <p>The initial interview</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Demonstration</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Practice: with feedback</p> <p>Closing - journaling</p>	<p>Day 4</p> <p>Opening - contact & connection</p> <p>The Imago Dialogue -</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Deepening (from content to affect)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">- sentence stems, doubling, focusing, directives</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">“Shallowing” (from affect to cognition)</p> <p>Demonstration & Practice: Imago dialogue - deepening affect and “shallowing” with feedback</p> <p>Introducing the positive and finding the balance</p> <p>Basics of an Imago practice</p> <p>Assignment for Session 2</p> <p>Administrative issues</p> <p>Closing</p>

Introduction to Imago Relationship Therapy

By Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., & Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D.

Imago Relationship Therapy is a theory and therapy of committed partnership with a focus on marriage. Its major thesis is that the purpose of the unconscious, in marital choices based on romantic attraction, is to finish childhood. Partner selection, therefore, is the result of an unconscious match between a mental image of one's parents/caretakers, created in childhood (called **Imago**) and certain character traits of the attractive partner.

The **Imago match** is the determining factor in **selection** because it is driven by the **unconscious purpose of recovering wholeness by restoring the connection**, both personal and transpersonal, which was ruptured in childhood by need frustration. While the match between the positive and negative character traits and similar traits in the partner constitute the basis of attraction, the intensity of the attraction is a result of the match in negative traits – those connected to frustration.

Romantic love therefore, at one level, is the result of anticipated need satisfaction. At a deeper level it is a transient experience of original wholeness and connection to the Whole. Since unmet childhood needs are brought into adult intimate partnerships for resolution, and since the selected partner shares the same limitations as one's parents, inevitably, they are re-activated and frustrations re-experienced.

Romantic feelings diminish as partners attempt to coerce the other into becoming the ideal parent and the **power struggle** that inevitably ensues, often leads to chronic conflict, a parallel marriage or a divorce.

Imago Relationship Therapy offers couples another option: cooperate with the intention of their unconscious by creating a “conscious marriage/committed relationship” in which they intentionally meet each other's unmet childhood needs. To achieve this goal, **Imago therapists use** as their primary therapeutic intervention a three stage structured process called the **Couples Dialogue**.

The use of **Intentional Couples Dialogue restores contact and connection**, thus achieving mutual emotional healing, restarting the developmental engine and eventuating in the recovery of personal wholeness. Re-connection to the personal (where the rupture occurred) re-establishes awareness of one's intrinsic connection to the social, natural and cosmic order. When used consistently, **dialogue becomes the way of being in relationship**, and eventually evolves into a spiritual practice, transforming the conscious marriage into a spiritual path.

Basic Ideas of Imago Relationship Therapy

1. THE UNCONSCIOUS PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE IS TO FINISH CHILDHOOD

- A. Partners choose each other to get from each other what they did not get from their parents.
- B. Because people pick a partner who is like their parents in some ways, that person is incapable of giving them what they need....
- C. When each partner stretches beyond current defensive character adaptations to give the other what they need, the giving partner begins to grow back into their wholeness and the receiving partner begins to heal from childhood pain of not having the need met.

2. EACH PARTNER IS A MIRROR REFLECTING THE UNDEVELOPED PARTS OF THE OTHER

- D. Each partner will miss the parts of the other that were repressed or neglected in childhood.
- E. Each partner will be hurt by the defensive character adaptations of the other.
- F. Both partners have been trying to tell the other about their pain and about what they have been missing, but neither has been able to empathically hear the other.
- G. Neither partner has been able to hear because often the pain and longing is expressed in the form of a criticism that then triggers defensiveness.

3. CONFLICT IS SEEN AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

- H. When there is conflict each partner is trying to get the other to grow back into their full potential so they can get their needs met.
- I. Relationship struggles are about each partner unconsciously trying to get the other to grow.
- J. The unconscious agenda of both partners is to help them move to the next level by pairing them with someone with whom they will be confronted with their most challenging growth stretch.

Basic Assumptions of Imago Relationship Theory

Remember: Theories are Lies in Search of the Truth

“The opposite of a profound truth is not a lie but another profound truth” Nils Bohr

- We are essentially energy
- The basic feature of energy is pulsation – expansion and constriction
- The natural state of this energy is balanced pulsation
- Balanced pulsation is experienced as relaxation, well-being and joyfulness

- We are connected to all other forms of energy
- Our original state of well-being has been disturbed by a perceived rupture in this connectedness
- We experience this disturbance as a threat to our existence
- Distress diminishes our vitality and aliveness

- Our primary goal becomes to restore our original state of relaxed joyfulness
- This goal is active in the choice of a primary love partner
- The purpose of the unconscious in a relationship is to restore us to wholeness again
- In Romantic Love we experience again the original state of wholeness, connectedness and joyful aliveness
- In the Power Struggle we experience again the disturbance when we perceive ruptures in our connectedness to each other
- Our energetic pulsation loses its balance and we lose the sense of well-being

- To restore balance and wholeness we must consciously co-operate with the purpose of our unconscious
- Co-operation means stretching through acts of Agape Love to guarantee the security of our partner in our presence, commitment to their psychological healing and support of their spiritual evolution
- Our original state of wholeness is restored as we stretch to meet the needs of the intimate partner
- This stretching activates all the parts of ourselves we lost during childhood allowing us to reintegrate them
- These acts of self-transcendence secure our own existence

- Committed relationship is not about finding the right partner, it is about becoming the right partner

Overview of Imago Relationship Therapy

Essential Conditions

1. Commitment to the Relationship
2. Commitment to Change/Growth
3. Commitment to Personal Responsibility

Essential Skill

1. Imago Dialogue – Listening, Understanding, Empathizing

Five Processes and the Exercises that support them

1. Re-Imaging
 - A. Parent/Child Dialogue
 - B. Holding Exercise
 - C. Parent-profile and Imago Work-up
 - D. Lost-Self Exercise
2. Re-Structuring Frustrations
 - A. Behavior Change Request Dialogue
 - B. Commitment Dialogue
 - C. Goodbye Process for Old Ways of Being in Relationship
 - D. Personal Behavior Change Request Process
3. Re-solving Rage
 - A. Parent/child Dialogue
 - B. Keepers of the Relationship Days
 - C. Amends Process
4. Re-Romanticizing
 - A. Positive Flooding
 - B. Appreciation Dialogue
 - C. Caring Behaviors
 - D. Fun
 - E. Surprises
5. Re-Visioning
 - A. Creating a Shared Vision

Imago Relationship Therapy involves STRUCTURE, PROCESS, and CONTAINMENT.

Imago Relationship Therapy is a process by which individuals recover their wholeness through their connection in relationship.

What is an Imago Relationship Therapist?

Many people think of Imago as just one of many psychotherapy theories available for couples' counselling and relationship education. But Imago is not really a separate theory. It is a way of looking at relationships from a different perspective.

Imago is unique because it is a whole system for improving relationships, which is built on a principle that we call 'The Relational Paradigm'. Imago enables us to utilize the wisdom of many great psychological theories in our relationships, in a dialogical format.

Imago is a state of mind in which our interactions embody our consciousness of other people and enable us to build and celebrate connection. The result can be a powerful transformational shift for a couple whose relationship is in crisis. Equally this shift can bring a deeper experience of joy and love into the life of a couple that is already happy. This state of mind is also powerful in our daily interactions with friends, family, business and politics.

An Imago Relationship Therapist/Educator can be described as

1. A teacher and practitioner of Imago Relationship Theory and Practice
2. A coach and model of deep connection through the use of the Imago Dialogue
3. A coach who holds the vision of what is possible in the relationship
4. A coach whose alliance is with the relationship rather than with either individual
5. A facilitator of the following steps
 - A. Teaches the Imago Dialogue
 - B. Works with couples and individuals to make a commitment to healing and growth through relationship
 - C. Integrates the five processes through the use of the seamless flow based on what each individual couple needs (Therapist only)
6. A holder of the relational space recognizing the sacredness of witnessing a relationship as the microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe repairing itself.
7. A person who walks the talk in their personal and professional life.

ASPECTS OF IRT PRACTICE

1. Safety. The principle of safety is the organizing concept underlying IMAGO Relationship Therapy structure and process. A primary focus is on the creation of a safe relational space in which to do the work of connection. The use of the Dialogue by the therapist and the partners contributes to reduced reactivity and increased connection. Characterological growth is believed to happen in this context. The therapist helps each partner focus on helping the other to feel safe rather than on waiting for the partner to create the safety. It is also crucial for the therapist to work towards being a safe person for both partners.

2. Hope. Struggling couples presenting for treatment have an immediate need, often unspoken, to believe that there is hope for them and for the relationship. The early sessions must offer a different experience to the frustrated, hopeless and helpless couple. When they begin to mirror, validate and empathize, they are already having a very different experience. As one sends while the other contains and tries to listen and understand - so simple, yet so complex - they soon learn that the sessions are not about blame or who's right and who's wrong. They're about creating a safe place for the growth and healing that is trying to occur to begin to happen. Their active involvement in the process, which includes teaching, learning and homework, is essential. As with any complex task, the more they practice, the more they do between sessions, the sooner the relationship will begin to realize the gains. Working with "busy" couples will necessitate their understanding that the work of change requires time and energy. Exits will need to be closed to generate the energy necessary to do the work of therapy.

3. Commitment to the Process. IMAGO Therapy requires work from couples. To mirror the partner when feeling frustrated and angry is hard work. Couples frequently leave those early sessions emotionally exhausted from the focusing necessary to stay intentional and not become reactive. So a commitment to putting energy into the relationship is necessary. It's also a commitment of time and financial resources. Many IMAGO Therapists ask for a 12 week commitment noting that deep wounds require anywhere from 6 months to several years of focused work to heal. The 12-week commitment is designed to give them time to work through some difficult places with safety. This commitment will often generate renewed hope about the relationship. Occasionally, with highly polarized couples, there is a resistance to a 12-session commitment. Honor and respect the resistance, explore it and determine what they would be willing to commit to. Sometimes it's just for another session. The commitment is not to staying in the relationship, which may be difficult for some highly polarized couples, but to a willingness to learn about oneself, one's partner and the relationship.

4: Intentionality. Many couples begin to relax in early sessions when the Imago Therapist talks about increasing intentional behavior and reducing reactivity. This is an aspect of safety. We convey the centrality of the concept, oftentimes repetitively, that safety comes through the growth of intentional behavior. This also includes helping them understanding the importance of moving toward the elimination of criticism, shame and blame given that spontaneous dumping has such predictable effects on the partners flight or fight mechanisms. As Imago therapists we're pushing for intentional behavior "always" in the service of creating safety. When a couple falls out of dialogue, even after a nice piece of work, and moves into freestyle, anything can happen. It is helpful to increase couples' awareness about John Gottman's research on the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" (the four most lethal prognosticators of marital failure):

1. Defensiveness
2. Contempt
3. Withdrawal
4. Criticism

The most *positive predictor of a favourable marital outcome*: the 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative transactions.

5: IMAGO Therapy is a Dialogical Process: All IMAGO processes, from the couple's dialogue to the holding exercise to the Parent/Child Dialogue to the Behavior Change Request Process to the Container Exercise are all dialogical processes. Couples learn that the reciprocal creation of safety is done with intentional dialogue. Each begins to see the other as separate and worthy of having their uniqueness

honored and accepted within the relational context. We term this process differentiation; a transcendence of the ego to accept the reality of the other.

6: Attunement: As you become more skilled with IMAGO processes, you'll also be more aware of the importance of technique being congruent with context. In other words, your choice of technique flows from what is occurring with the couple in that moment during the session and is a theoretical fit. If the sender accesses some deep sadness during a container exercise or while doing the BCR Dialogue, you can seamlessly move them into the holding exercise, always flowing with the couple. The idea of therapist attunement to the experience of the couple is also a huge variable the overall creation of safety in the office.

7. Integrity. To be in integrity with their clients, good Imago therapists are consistently working to deepen their understanding of theory and their mastery of IMAGO technique and to integrate it into their personal and professional lives at all levels. Being a dialogical person or couple at home and/or being in IMAGO Relationship Therapy yourself to assist you over your own stuck places can be a wonderful and enriching experience, not to mention provide growth and healing. Belief in IMAGO Therapy is predicated on observations and experiences working with couples and on living its benefits in your own relationships. This does not mean that Imago therapists have perfect relationships themselves and do not have their own struggles. We are all on the same journey. Conflict is necessary for continued growth and healing. To truly understand the theory it is essential to begin to integrate it into your own life.

8. Presentation of the Couple: Each couple is different when they come into your office for their first session: Do both see that there is a problem? Is there a desire to change? Are they ready to change? Couples don't always have the same perception of what's going on that isn't working. Vive la difference! One thinks that there is a problem and the other thinks that the only problem is that the partner thinks there is a problem. The dialogue process will begin to bring them into more understanding of each other's perceptions. Many couples will fall into one of three types:

1. Eager Beavers. Those couples who have heard about IMAGO and are ready and eager to do the work, may have already read the book and have or want to attend a workshop;
2. The angry-highly reactive couple who will need tight structure and a lot of work on containment;
3. The Parallel Couple. This couple has been together but out of emotional contact. They're not feeling much pain but they're not very fulfilled and are aware that something is missing. They've developed avoidant coping mechanisms and don't see the other as a source of need fulfillment.

Each of these general typologies will require a bit of a different format and energy. And of course there are always exceptions.

9. Content and Process: IMAGO Therapists are process-oriented and dialogue is always a process, although the substance of dialogue is in the content. In IMAGO Therapy, the couple determines the content to a large degree and the therapist holds them in the process until they're able to hold themselves in the process. Sometimes, the content may be compelling and quite seductive. It can trigger reactions in the IMAGO Therapist as it brushes up against our own issues, feelings and thoughts. This can be wonderful grist for supervision. However, in the session the Imago therapist is concerned with process at all times and the content belongs to the couple. We enable the couples to be able to language all the things in their relationship that need to be articulated – and dialogue is the process that makes it possible. The couples determine the “what”, we teach the “how”.

Harville often refers to the particle/wave duality in quantum physics. He notes that the universe is essentially comprised of energy and matter. It can be observed as a particle and as a wave. Everything has both content and process simultaneously. Like DNA everything has structure and randomness simultaneously. This seems to be the nature of the universe. Therapy process, as practiced by the IMAGO Therapist, mirrors this phenomenon. The therapist will provide a structure (dialogue) that allows for randomness (content). There would seem to always be an ebb and flow.

MIRRORING

Purpose:

- To help trainees understand the power of the mirroring in creating the self of the other.
- To inspire trainees to help their couples move from content mirroring to validating and empathic mirroring.
 - The brain develops through attuned mirroring creating new pathways and connections
 - Limbic resonance creates healthy attachment (see Dan Siegel)
 - We are born with everything we need to grow into our whole selves
 - We need to be mirrored into existence

Process: Mirroring is the process of deeply listening to your partner and accurately reflecting back the “content” of his/her message. A common form of mirroring is paraphrasing. A “paraphrase” is a statement of the message your partner sent to you keeping very close to your partner’s meaning but putting it in your own words. At times word-for-word mirroring is recommended as it honors the Sender’s specific choice of words. Being a “flat” mirror means being an accurate mirror where the affective tone and intensity of the sender are also reflected, without mimicking. Mirroring indicates that you are willing to transcend your own thoughts and feelings for the moment and attempt to understand your partner from his/her point of view. Any response made prior to mirroring is often an “interpretation” and may contain a misunderstanding. Mirroring allows your partner to send his/her message again and permits you to repeat or paraphrase until you do hear them accurately.

Responsibilities of the Receiver: Mirroring requires

- focused attention
- consistent availability and emotional attunement
- durable curiosity
- the willingness to suspend one’s own perspective temporarily and be open to hearing another’s view of the world
- the willingness to allow another to have a view of the world which is different from one’s own
- the capacity to contain one’s own reactions and responses and allow the other to be the “center” temporarily, letting it just be about the other.

Sentence stems and questions ***are limited to:***

“What I heard you say was....” or “What you said was...”

“Did I get it/you?” or “Did I hear you accurately?”

“Is there more?” “Tell me more”.

“In summary, what I heard you say was.... Did I get it all?”

Responsibilities of the Sender are to:

- talk about oneself not the partner, making “I” (not “you”) statements
- avoid all shaming, blaming, criticizing, belittling, invalidating of the partner
- send short amounts so as not overload the other; it is not a memory test
- keep one’s message focused on the topic, not bring in other issues
- listen to the entire mirror without interrupting
- check the mirror and see if it is accurate
- send more clearly anything which is not clear or accurate in the mirror
- avoid repeating oneself when the other has mirrored accurately.

Having your words and the way you say them mirrored back to you signifies that the listener is truly seeing and hearing YOU. The attitude conveyed is that YOU, your thinking and feelings, just as they are, are worthy of attention and focus. This is very healing for many of us who did not get enough positive attention and valuing as children. As we are growing up our parents’ job is to attune to us. They do this by mirroring our thoughts, feelings, the characters and personas we are trying out. This mirroring helps us figure out who we are and gradually the different parts of the self coalesce into an integrated sense of “self”. Partners mirroring each other are providing each other with the same benefits that attuned parents give their child: feelings of worth, importance, value and the time and space to figure out one’s own self in the face of other whilst staying connected to the other. A core challenge of relationship is to have a self and be in connection.

Imago Dialogue

“Mirroring”

The first step in the Imago Dialogue is mirroring. One effective way to mirror is to paraphrase, but if you find it difficult to paraphrase without interpreting or distorting, start with word-for-word mirroring. Begin with exchanging positive messages so that dialogue will have positive associations. Later, when you are proficient in the skill and have learned validation and empathy, you will learn how to express a frustration effectively.

Step 1: Make an Appointment

SENDER

The one who wants to send a message must take the initiative.

I would like to DIALOGUE about something. Is now okay?

RECEIVER

It is the Receiver’s job to grant an Imago Dialogue ASAP, now if possible. [If not now, set an appointment time so that the SENDER knows when s/he will be heard, and take the initiative to keep the appointment.]

I’m available now.

Step 2: The Send, the Mirror, and the Check

SENDER

Begin to tell RECEIVER about a topic you wish to discuss. Use “I” language. Let your partner see inside you. Share your feelings about what happened, what you tell yourself, what it’s like for you -- whether the precipitating event was positive or negative.

RECEIVER

Mirror and check for accuracy.

I heard you say... or You said Am I getting you? Or Did I get that?

SENDER

Indicate accuracy. Resend the message if necessary until:

Yes, you got me. or You got most of it and I also said. . . or I’d like to express that again more clearly....

RECEIVER

When mirror is 100% accurate, ask:

Is there more about that?

SENDER and RECEIVER

Continue sending and mirroring until the Sender says there is no more.

Step 3: The Summary

RECEIVER

Summarize the Sender's thought until 100% accurate.

Let me see if I got it all. In summary, what you said was . . .

Am I getting you? Or Did I get all of that?

SENDER

Indicate accuracy and resend if necessary until complete.

Yes, you got it all.

When exchange is completed (Steps 1-3), switch roles.

Imago Dialogue “Mirroring”

Summary

SENDER

Step 1: Make an appointment

“I would like to Dialogue about something.
Is now OK?”

Step 2: The Send

*Tell the receiver about the topic using “I”
language and letting your partner see inside
you. “I feel...”, “I tell myself...”, “My desire
is...”*

Step 3: The Summary

*Listen as partner summarizes until the summary
is complete then indicate accuracy: “You got it
all” or “You got most of it and I also said...”*

RECEIVER

Step 1: Agree to the appointment

“I’m available now”

Step 2: The Mirror and the Check

I heard you say..., You said...
Am I getting you? Did I get that?

*Ask, “Is there more about that?” until the
sender says there is no more about that.*

Step 3: The Summary

Let me see if I got it all. In summary, what
you said was...

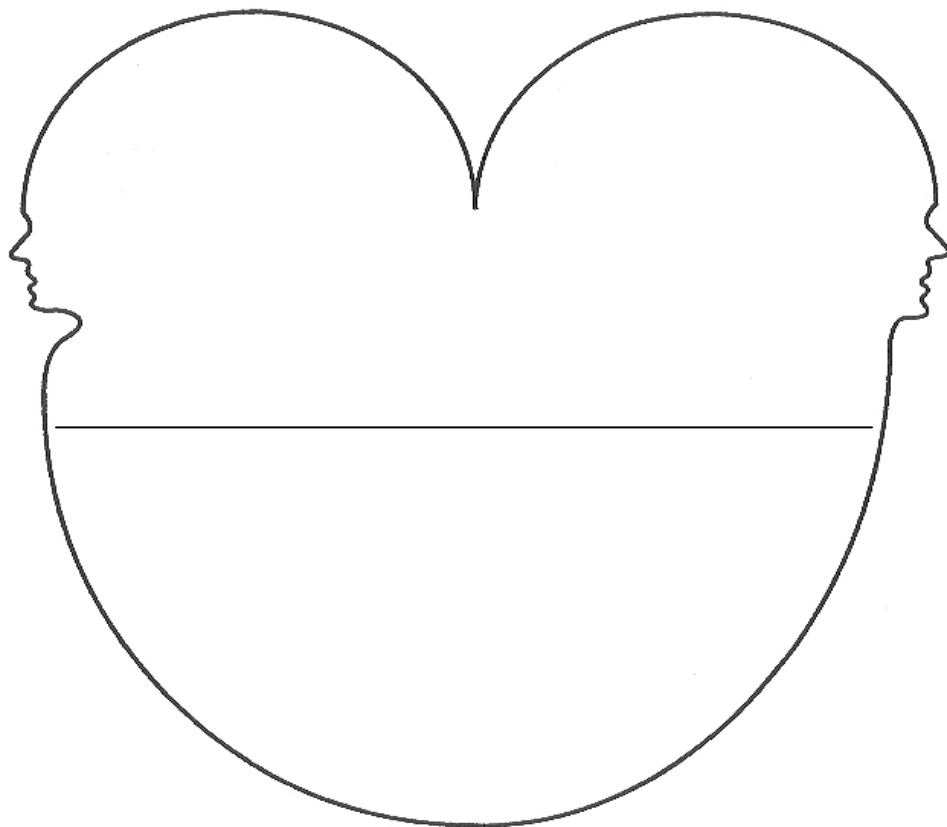
“Am I getting you? Did I get all of that?”

When exchange is completed switch roles.

Traits of Childhood Caretakers

1. Divide the figure below into parts representing your childhood memories of each caretaker or authority figure that took care of you growing up. On the top section, list all of the negative characteristics of each caretaker. On the bottom, list all the positive characteristics.
2. It is important to list the characteristics as you recall them from childhood. Think as a little child. Do not think of your caretakers as they are today or as they became later in life. Use such adjectives as “kind”, “distant”, “warm”, “loving”, “angry”, “cold” and/or phrases such as “never there”, “always dependable”, “never touched me”, etc.

(A). FEMALE - MALE -



(B). FEMALE + MALE+

Underline the 3 best traits

Circle 3 worst traits

(c) What I wanted and needed most as a child was

Positive Memories of Childhood

List below the positive memories of childhood and your responses associated with the memories

Memories	Feelings
	(What you felt) (D)

Childhood Frustrations

List below any recurring frustrations of childhood (e.g. “didn’t get listened to”, “no touching”); and then list your reactions to the frustrations (i.e. how you felt and what you did).

Frustrations	Reaction(s)
	(What you did) (E)

My Personal Imago

(Fill in the blanks from the previous pages)

I am attracted to / at times perceive my partner to be a person who is (A)

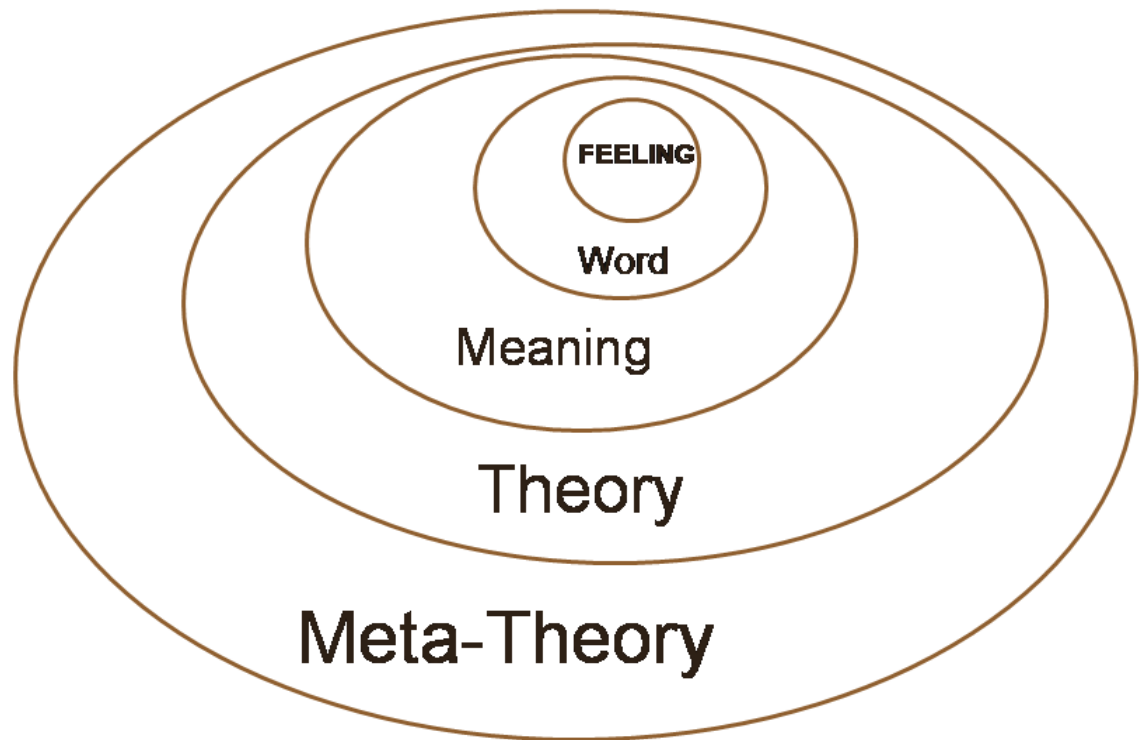
I try to get them to be (B)

so that I can be (C)

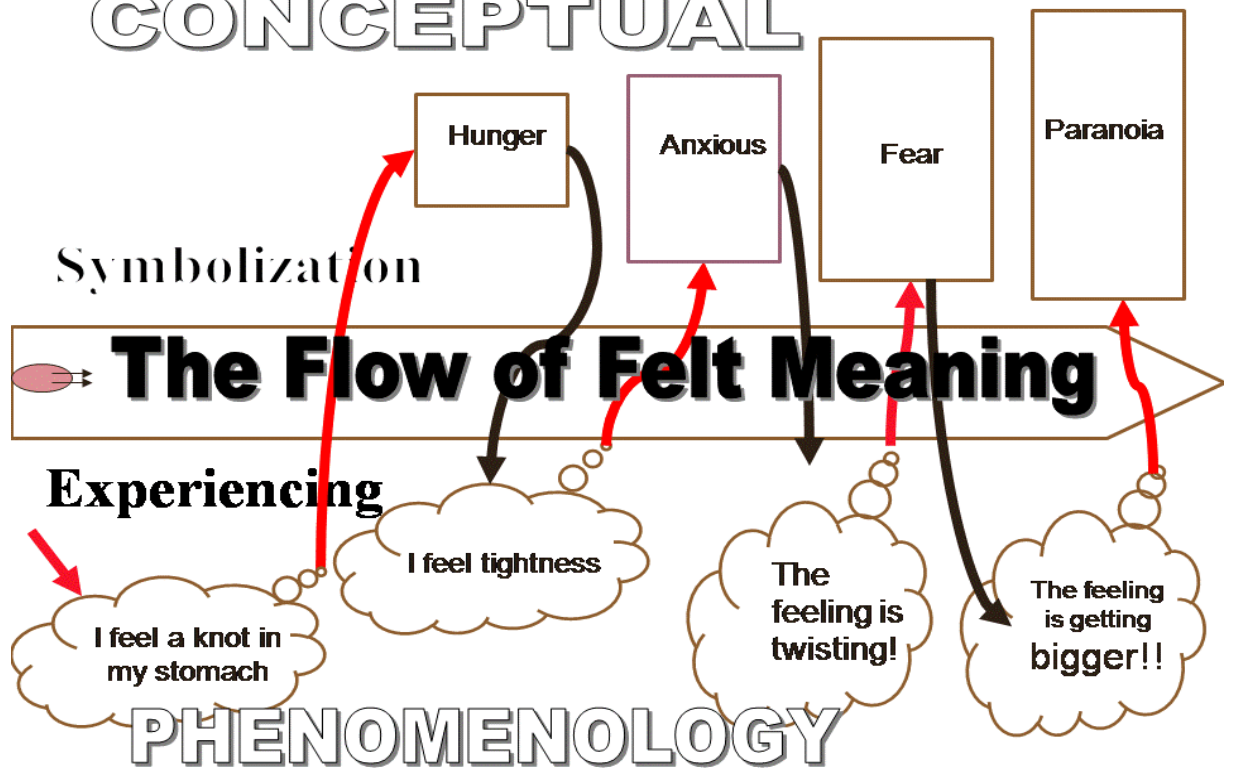
and feel (D)

I stop myself from getting this sometimes by (F) _____

PERSPECTIVES AND PHENOMENOLOGY



CONCEPTUAL



Phenomenology Assumption or Reality?

Purpose: To be more aware as therapists of our own assumptions about our clients, how quickly and unconsciously we often make these assumptions and how these assumptions differ from observable phenomena. This will allow us to be more open to experiencing our clients with more curiosity and less judgment or preconceived ideas. It will also enable us to guide our couples to see each other more openly, to discover themselves through their own projections and become curious about each other.

Phenomenon: *An occurrence of fact that is perceptible by the senses (American Heritage Dictionary)*

Phenomenology: *The study of phenomena*

- Our senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste & touch) pick up information from our environment and send messages to our brain.
- Our brain works to make sense of the data input by sorting, comparing, and categorizing the phenomena
- The brain only has past experience to draw on in coding, sorting and making sense of information
- It has to do this very quickly so that it knows whether to react and how
- Our data input systems (perceptions) are distorted by a whole range of neurological, psychological, social and cultural factors
- Our perceptions impact on your physiological experience of the event or environment
- The brain makes quick interpretations of the input data and physiological experience which trigger a further emotional response
- The brain then chooses response behaviors based on these interpretations and emotions.
- Not knowing how to interpret data leaves us not knowing how to react and this can be detrimental to our survival
- Not knowing how to interpret data triggers anxiety
- The brain prefers to make a guess at an interpretation than tolerate the anxiety of not knowing
- Guesses are the assumptions we make about incoming data. They are not the truth. They are the stories we make up to make sense of our world as quickly as possible so we know how to be and to react in the service of our survival.
- Like all of our defence mechanisms they tend to create the very thing we are protecting us from and trigger defensiveness in others.
- Making these kinds of assumptions (diagnoses) about our clients can be very detrimental to them and to the therapy, stopping us from seeing the complexity of who they are with fresh eyes.

Process: Levels of Awareness Exercise

Video clip of couple

- I observe with my senses...
- My felt body experience...
- I interpret that to mean... the story I tell myself...
- I feel...
- My reactive impulse is to...
- My clinical analysis/diagnosis is...
- My decision on how to react/respond is...

Daily exercise: Practice going through the following exercise at least once a day for a week. Try it in different settings – professional, personal, political, social, etc.

- I observe...
- My felt body experience...
- I interpret that to mean... (**Come up with at least 6**)
- I feel... (Notice if you have different feelings depending on the nature of the story you make up)
- My reactive impulse is to ... (Note if the impulse changes depending on the nature of the story)
- My clinical analysis is... (Note if the clinical analysis or diagnosis changes depending on the nature of the story)
- My decision on how to react/respond is... (Notice if your decision is different when you interpret the situation differently)

Imago Supervisory Process

Purpose: To help each trainee

- Fine tune their therapeutic skills as a facilitator of the Imago process
- Identify the ways in which they support connection and the ways in which they contribute to the rupture of connection
- Help you become more aware of your own character structure, lost and denied self, and growth edge as it manifests in your therapeutic work
- Experience a feedback model that invites them into their growth rather than injuring them

Process: After each practice session, (with the therapist mirroring)

- A. The therapist will give him/herself feedback – (group member mirrors)
- B. The practice couple will give the therapist feedback one at a time
- C. Observers, if any, will give the therapist feedback
- D. The clinical instructor, if present, will give the therapist feedback

The therapist may record the feedback on audiotape or may ask for it in writing.

The feedback format is...

- What I felt in my body as therapist was.../ what I felt in my body being with you/witnessing you as therapist was...
- Something I liked about myself as the therapist was.../ something I liked about you as the therapist was...
- My technical suggestion is...
- My growth gift* to me/ to you is... and what that would look like is...

* The growth gift addresses the character structure and defensive adaptations of the therapist. It is to be offered lightly as a possibility and like any gift may have more to do with the person offering it than with the person receiving it, or both. The growth gift is to be received lightly by the therapist to see if it fits, has value. It is a gift to be appreciated and possibly used or stored.

Example:

- What I felt in my body was tightness in my throat and jumpy legs.
- Something I liked about myself as the therapist was that I kept the couple mirroring each other.
- A technical suggestion for myself if to have the receiver cue the sender when to pause so s/he can mirror before reaching their memory limit.
- A growth message to me is “I am enough and my presence is safe” and what that would look like is that I would sit back, be still talk less.

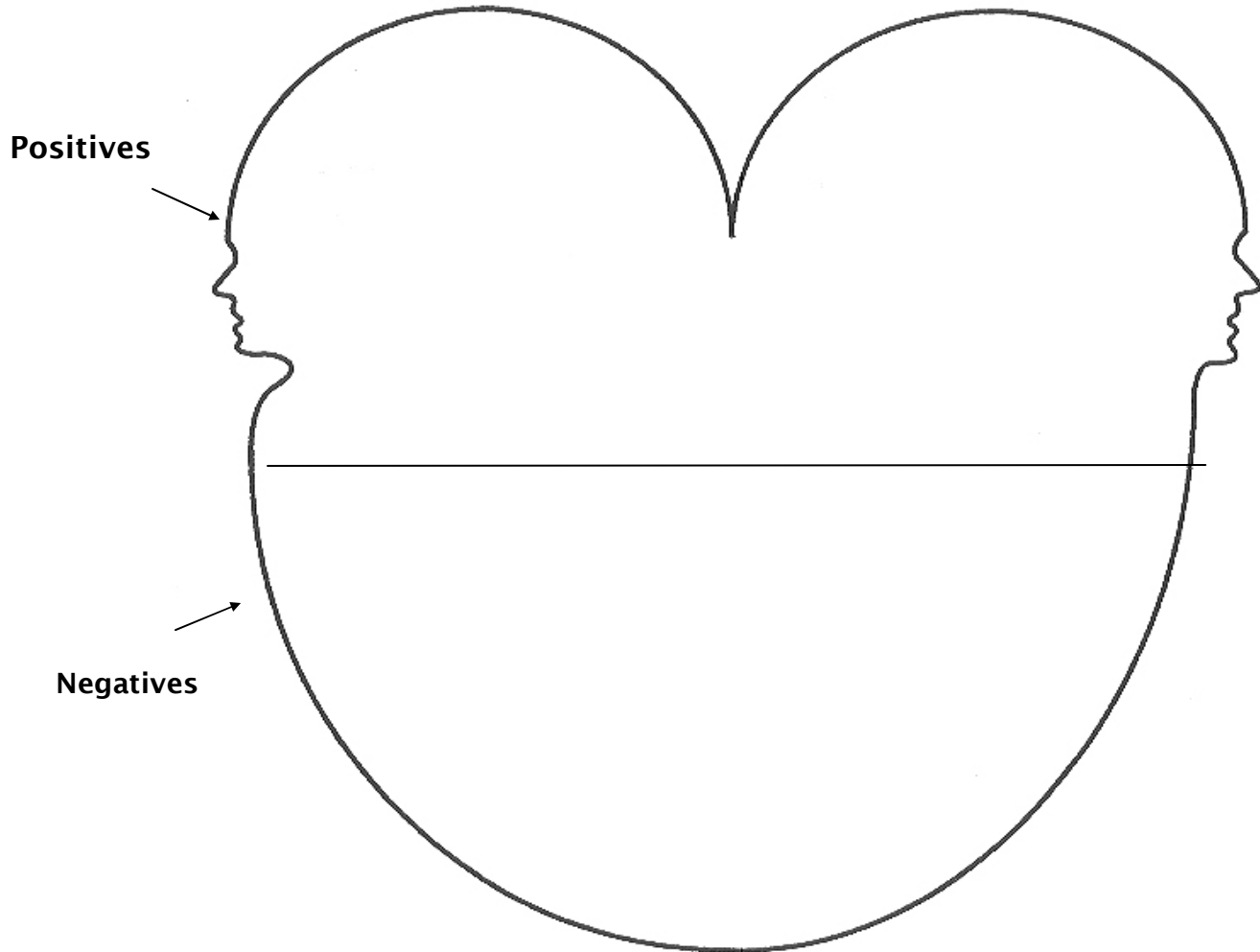
Journal Page

Suggestions: Something I learnt or re-learnt about myself...
Something I learnt or re-learnt about Mirroring...
A question that I am sitting with is...

Homework

Power Struggle Partner Profile

1. In the figure below, list the positive and negative traits, which describe your partner as you experience her/him.



2. Underline the three best traits. Circle the three worst traits.
3. Complete these sentences:
 - a. What I get from my partner that I enjoy most is...
 - b. What I want most from my partner and don't get is...

Frustrations with Current Partner

1. Using the chart below, in Column A, list all the ways your partner frustrates you. Frustrations are behaviors, not character traits that your partner does that upset *you*.
2. In Column B, record the feelings you have with each frustrating event. Use a feeling word such as “angry,” “sad,” “scared,” “guilty,”
3. In Column C, describe what you typically do in reaction to each frustration (a behavior).
4. In Column D, identify what you *think* may be the hidden childhood fear underlying reactive behavior.

A. Frustrating Behaviors	B. Feelings	C. Reactive Behaviors	D. Hidden Fears
When you . . . you always . . . never . . .	I feel . . .	Then I react with . . .	To hide my fear of . . .
<i>e.g., are late and don't call</i>	<i>...angry</i>	<i>...sulking</i>	<i>... being abandoned</i>

Desires and Longings

*Underneath anger is a hurt, and behind each hurt is an unmet longing or need.
This section guides you in identifying your deep longings.*

1. Study your list of frustrating behaviors on page 24. Cluster and summarize those that are similar and list them in Column A.
2. Similarly, in Column B, cluster your feelings. In Column C, cluster your reactive behaviors. In Column D, cluster your fears.
3. In Column E, list what you think might be the **deep desire** underlying each frustration sequence. Make each sentence as short as possible and **state it as an absolute**. E.g., “Always be on time for everything.” “Be available whenever I want you.”
4. Circle the item in each column that is the strongest or most intense for you.

A. Frustrating Patterns	B. Feelings	C. Reactive Patterns	D. Hidden Fears	E. Desires
When you . . . you always . . . never . .	I feel . . .	Then I react with	To hide my fear of ..	What I really want is .
<i>e.g., are late and don't call</i>	<i>...angry</i>	<i>... sulking</i>	<i>...being abandoned</i>	<i>... to feel important.. .</i>

Information Synthesis

Below are fifteen incomplete sentences. The parenthesis at the end of each sentence contains the location of the information you need to complete the sentences. Using that information, complete each sentence. **Do not write anything in the shaded box until instructed to do so.**

1. In my
I tend to be drawn to a person who often is (items circled in Partner's Profile on p. 23)
2. with whom I frequently feel (item circled in Column B, p. 25)
3. because s/he frustrates me sometimes by (item circled in Column A, p. 25)
4. which activates my worst fear which is (item circled in Column D, p. 25)
5. I wish this person would always be (items underlined on p. 15)
6. and only give me (item circled in Column E of p. 25)
7. and especially (items on p. 15 C)
8. so that I could always feel (items on Traits of Childhood Caretakers page 15) .
9. When s/he doesn't, I feel (item circled in Column B, page 25)

10. and try to protect myself by typically reacting with (item circled in Column C, (page 25).
11. to hide my fear of (item circled in Column D, page 25)
12. When I react that way, I invite my partner to be (page 26, #1)
13. instead of (page 26, #5)
14. and that leaves me without (page 26, #6 and #7)
15. and without the feeling of (page 26, #8).

Imago Relationship Therapy Basic Clinical Training

Module 1A - Day 2

Morning

Check-in – group or dyads

Meta-theory – from the Cosmic Journey to the Relational Paradigm

Introduction to the Imago Dialogue - Validation and Empathy

Demonstration of the complete Imago Dialogue

Practice: Imago Dialogue with supervision

Lunch

DVD – Through Conflict to Connection

Afternoon

Pleasure and the Fear of Pleasure

Appreciations dialogue – DVD from Couplehood as a Spiritual Path

Practice

Process

A clinical session - The Seamless Flow – DVD

Closure - High energy to access vitality and positive energy

Meta-theory

THE FOUR JOURNEYS OF THE SELF – From the Cosmic Journey to the Relational Paradigm

Imago Relationship Therapy has its origins in marital therapy. Reflecting upon the broader implications of the unconscious dynamics in relationship, Harville Hendrix developed a set of meta-theoretical assumptions about the nature of the universe (cosmology) and thus human nature (anthropology).

To understand where we are, we need to understand our backgrounds – our cosmic origins, evolutionary inheritance, psychological development and social adaptation – as well as how these influence the unconscious purpose of intimate partnerships. The following describes the concepts of each journey and how to use them with couples to help them understand the purpose hidden in their relationship dance.

The Cosmic Journey

What are the main concepts of the Cosmic Journey?

Why might we share these ideas with couples?

How might you share these ideas with your clientele?

- I. We live in a connected universe.
- II. The basic unit of that universe is the dyad.
- III. We are incidents of pulsating energy that emerge from a dyadic process.

In order to better understand who we are and why we eventually pick the person that we fall in love it is helpful to know ourselves in a larger context. We are all a part of the cosmos and in that sense we have been on a very long and profound *cosmic journey*. Ken Wilbur in his book **Sex, Ecology & Spirituality** starts out by writing that: “Something strange is going on (referring to the universe)...” First there was nothing in the universe and then there was something. That something did not stay as a condensed ball of energy. It exploded throughout the universe. What gets more interesting is that it did not stay as inorganic matter and gases but it shifted to an organic level. Then it gets even more intriguing in that things did not settle at a viral or bacterial level but moved to more and more complex structures such as dolphins and humans. What is important to know is that the universe appears to be conscious and it keeps evolving to higher and higher levels of consciousness.

So what does this have to do with people, clients and therapists? Well, if you think about it, we all come from the **same source**. Additionally, we are all made of the **same stuff** and that stuff is energy. And for some strange reason energy has decided to configure into certain forms like inorganic matter, biological matter and even these things we call humans. Additionally we all have the **same yearnings** – the need to mature and become our full potential, to heal and repair and feel safely connected.

Since we are all made of the same stuff and that we all come from the same source, one of our natural states is that we are all in **connection** – everything is in connection at all times. You can never be out of relationship. We are a part of the tapestry of nature. We are connected to everything. If one views everything as connected, the concepts of inter-dependence and interconnectivity become primary and the idea of independence-dependence becomes secondary. Most therapies and theories have tried to get clients to self-actualize and become independent. The idea is to love yourself more, heal yourself, actualize and then you'll be ready for relationship. Somehow this approach has not translated into good relationship. Les Greenberg writes “In attachment theory, one is not as concerned with the structure of the psyche or the specifics of the contents, or the mechanisms such as projective identification, etc., but on the human beings innate goals of security and protection. Security and protection, feeling safe comes from a sense of feeling connected. Maintaining closeness to others is considered to be an innate evolutionary survival

mechanism... Interdependence is the goal of healthy attachment... the ability to maintain connections is the true sign of optimal development.”

So as an Imago therapist, one does not look for psychopathology in clients. One looks for places of disconnection and connection. The therapy work centres around helping the couple restore their connection - becoming aware of how they co-create connection and disconnection.

As the universe tends to be evolving and becoming more and more conscious there seems to be a telos in nature – a goal that it is going towards. When an acorn is dropped in the soil it has a mission to grow to its full potential – a full oak tree. And somehow the universe is moving towards its full potential. Since we are a part of the universe and if you believe that it is moving towards completion or higher levels of consciousness, then we need to be in alignment with it. Nature had to set up structures to get us to evolve. Marriage or committed partnerships are one of the best and most therapeutic means of doing that. Therefore, committed partnerships are structures set up by nature to evolve itself and us to a higher level of organization. As an Imago therapist one of your tasks is to help facilitate the couple to a higher level of relating with one another. Hopefully as they become more conscious they will take it out into the world and help it evolve!

We are all made of energy and energy has a characteristic of **pulsation**. When we feel safe we tend to pulse rhythmically. Our hearts pump in and out; our lungs fill with air and exhale without difficulty. When our pulsation is in balance, we feel a sense of relaxed joyfulness, a oneness with the universe. For many, the womb was the closest that we ever came to this idyllic state. One of the main yearnings is to feel safe and experience our pull pulsating aliveness. Why else would people be seeking out therapies, drugs, etc., in an attempt to feel fully alive? An Imago therapist helps create a safe holding environment for the couple so they can start to pulse in a relaxed manner in each others' presence – helping to restore the connection to each other and the universe!

Core Concepts of the Cosmic Journey

- We all come from a common source
- We are energy, and our original state is one of neutral pulsating energy.
- We live as a node of energy in a cosmic field. We are connected and related to all. We are in communion with the universe.
- We live in a culture that supports the notion of separateness, but separation is an illusion. Imago Theory reminds us that our original state is one of connection.
- Our natural essence has been disturbed, creating a rupture in connection. As a result we have become disconnected from nature, ourselves and other people.
- We yearn to feel connected once again.
- With the help of our partner, connection can be restored.
- We have the same goals as the cosmos – to be safe, to be healed, and to be whole.
- The universe is expanding and moving toward greater consciousness. Our job is to expand and become more conscious.

How this fits with Imago Theory

Our culture is counter to nature and the cosmos. The cultural value is that incompatibility is the grounds for divorce. The belief of Imago is that incompatibility is the grounds for marriage. Committed love relationships are about restoring connection.

Imago theory proposes that the universe is a nexus of conscious connections rather than a polarity of disconnections.

As Imago therapists we focus our attention on the quality of the contact and connection between partners much more than on how each partner works independently. Couples present in our offices with essentially the same complaint, which is that the connection that they had at the beginning of the relationship has been ruptured. They often do not know that the rupture began at birth and has carried on through life. The rupture causes pain and is experienced as a disconnection from self, others and the cosmos. Consciousness of connection is lost and as a result we live with the illusion of separateness.

How and why we use the cosmic journey with couples

As Imago therapists we may introduce didactic learning and visualizations into the experiential learning of a couples' therapy session, from the very first session.

This information normalizes their journey from the connectedness of Romantic Love (which mimics the connection they felt at the beginning of life) to the disconnection experienced in the Power Struggle, and their unconscious drive to re-experience connection as they move toward a more conscious relationship.

Knowledge about the journey educates partners about the focus on contact and connection in their relationship, and helps them to become aware that they co-create their own context, that they are both responsible for the 'between' in their relationship and that they have the power together to create the quality of connection they both yearn for. Understanding the cosmic journey helps couples to understand that what they are unconsciously trying to do is to experience connection.

The Evolutionary Journey: The Tripartite Brain

The human brain consists of three parts (MacLean, 1964):

the brain stem or Reptilian Brain	}	Old Brain
the limbic system or Mammalian Brain		
the neo-cortex including the frontal lobe	New Brain	

The primary directive of the brain is to keep the organism alive. The brain scans the environment checking for safety or danger. When it picks up cues that it is safe, it is available for and interested in experiencing and expressing aliveness. It has many ways of doing this through play, creativity, nurturing and mating. However, when the brain picks up signals of danger it will move into defence mode. It will do whatever it can to keep the organism alive.

The reptilian brain or brain stem

- reacts rapidly and instinctively to a cue in the environment
- is poor at evaluating the degree of threat – all danger implies the threat of death, causing you to react at times to small cues as if they were life threatening
- cannot learn through reasoning, but can learn slowly through repeated reparative experiences.
- has little sense of time – past and future are experienced as present

The Mammalian brain or limbic system

- is the site of strong emotions – fear, rage, hurt
- reacts based on the emotion
- is connected to all other parts of the brain

Our old brains have four main defensive options, which develop into one of two primary reactive styles in the face of repeated or perceived threat:

<p>FIGHT FLIGHT</p> <p>MAXIMIZING reactive style</p> <p>Exploding energy outwards e.g. chimps,</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SUBMIT FREEZE/HIDE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MINIMIZING reactive style</p> <p>Constricting energy inwards e.g. turtles,</p>
--	---

'Chimps' (those of us who jump up and down, beat our chests, make a lot of noise) tend to get into relationships with 'turtles' (those of us who withdraw into our shells and stay there till the coast is clear). Of course the more the turtle stays in its shell the more the chimp jumps up and down and bangs on the shell and screams 'come out and talk'. And the more the chimp jumps up and down and screams, the more the turtle stays in its shell and says 'No way am I going out there', and the more the turtle stays in its shell the more the chimp jumps and so on, until the turtle comes out snapping or the chimp ambles off into the forest and pouts for a week. When our primary defensive style fails we always have our secondary style as back up.

Much of what goes on in intimate relationships when there is conflict can be explained in terms of old brain functioning and the survival impulse. The reactivity endemic to many partnerships is our old brain's response to the threat of danger; we protect ourselves with all the resources of our animal ancestry (fight, flight, freeze, submit). It worked alright in the swamp and the jungle. It is counterproductive in intimate relationships because each of the old brain defences increases the danger for the partner and stimulates their need for their 'natural' defences.

The Neo-cortex

- takes time to 'boot up'
- has extensive memory banks
- gives meaning by drawing on past events to come up with a set of assumptions
- can strategize and design complex plans
- can be hi-jacked by the old brain in the service of survival
- can distinguish actual from potential danger and evaluate the degree of threat

The frontal lobe

- is a recent development and about the size of five peas
- provides us with the capacity for self-awareness, allowing us to metaphorically turn around, look back at ourselves and be aware of how we are feeling, thinking and behaving
- allows us to respond to the cue based on self-awareness

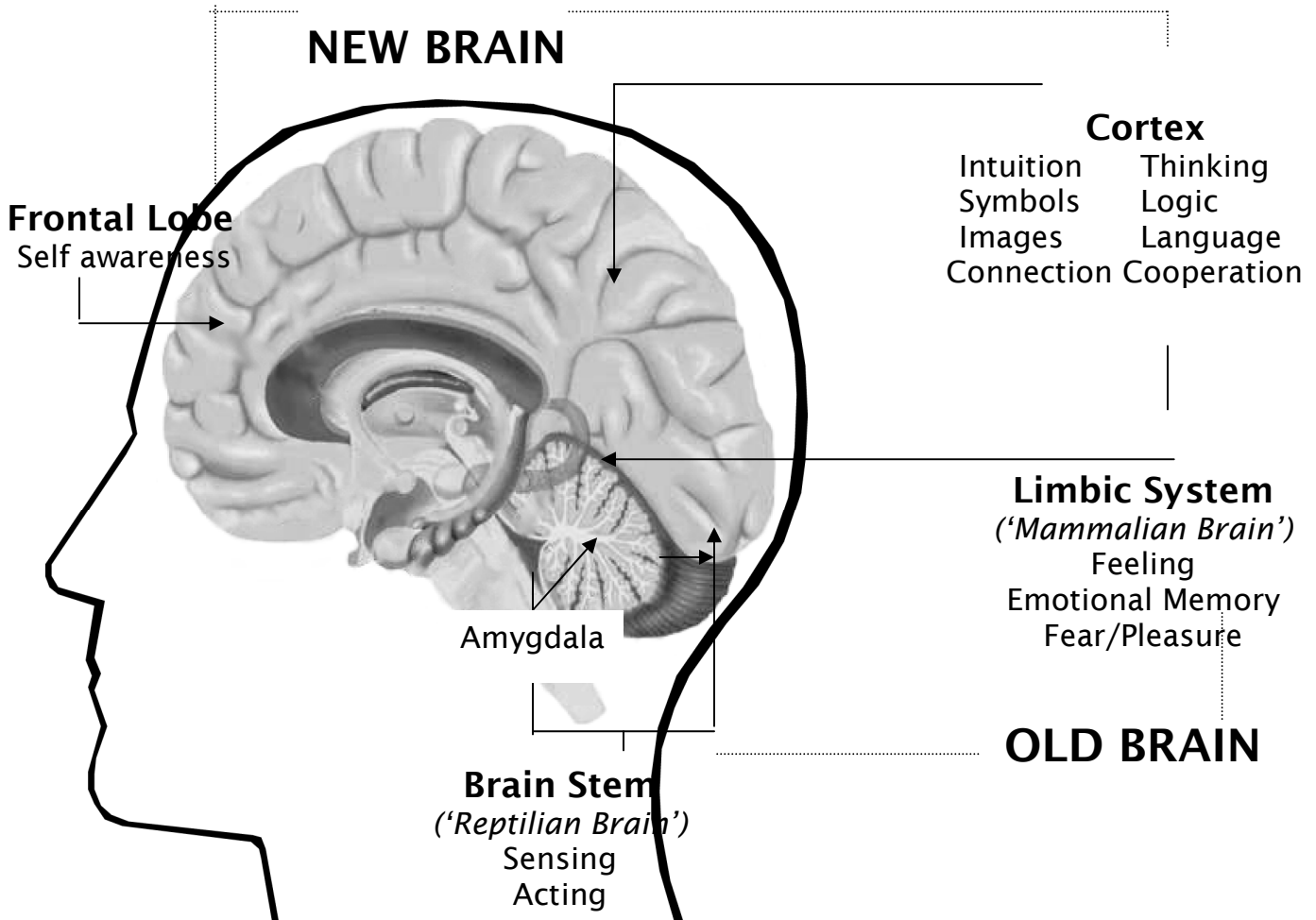
Why we teach the evolutionary journey to clients

We teach the evolutionary journey to clients to:

- educate them about the polarity of their energy - the chimp and turtle – as natural adaptations to pain, which become embedded in the brain in the service of survival
- help them see that there are different ways of organizing energy when in pain: some people constrict energy while others expand it. This helps them to view their own and their partner's behavior in a less judgmental way as simply two survival strategies
- raise their awareness about the impact of this polarization of energy on the relationship, and thus to learn to manage their energy differently
- give them the key that the potential to heal lies in their amazing polarity and that they need to become more like their partner
- clarify the importance of the growth stretches required to manage their energy differently – for the maximizing partner to contain and the minimizing partner to express
- help them understand the importance of safety given that we have a basic sensitivity to pleasure and distress. If we feel safe we feel free to play, mate, create, and work. If we feel unsafe our defensive adaptations will cause us to flee, fight, freeze or submit
- help couples see that each person is responsible for keeping their partner safe by avoiding distress and enhancing pleasure. The question is 'Am I safe or dangerous for my partner?'
- underline the importance of making the appointment at the beginning of the Dialogue
- help them laugh at themselves and with each other when they see themselves going into 'chimp' and 'turtle' patterns. This helps them to distance themselves from these behaviors and observe themselves using their frontal lobe without shaming
- help them understand they have two powerful forces within – the force to survive and the force to connect. Sometimes these feel as if they are in conflict
- help them see that their interpretations and feelings are not facts – they are the result of their brain trying to make sense of the situation and to work out how to react using minimal information

- help them to use their neo-cortex to ask their partners questions rather than assuming they know what their partner is thinking.

Diagram: Our Evolutionary Legacy



Brain graphic from Driesen, PhD, Jacob. Major Components of the Limbic System. (n.d.). Retrieved July 25, 2004, from http://www.driesen.com/brain_view_-_7.htm.

Innate Directives of the Brain

To Stay Alive (*Reptilian/Brain Stem*)

To Experience the Aliveness (*Mammalian/Limbic System*)

To Express the Aliveness (*Human/Cortex*)

The Imago Dialogue

The Purpose is to help couples move from symbiotic fusion and disconnection to differentiation and connection by creating greater safety between them so that the un-articulated parts of the self can emerge and be integrated. This process allows a couple to see their partner rather than their own projection, thereby deepening understanding and empathy.

The Process: Dialogue is the essential tool/skill of Imago Relationship Therapy. Everything is done within the framework of Imago Dialogue or its variations. At its most simple, it is a communication technique. At a therapeutic level it is a healing process in and of itself. At its deepest level it is a spiritual practice.

1. At the level of a communication technique: It has a structure, position, roles, rhythm, rules and responsibilities and is adaptable to any situation or topic. It starts as a technique, with practice becomes a skill, and eventually can become an art form!

Structure:

- a) Appointment and role allocation (allows receiver to shift from reactivity to intentionality)
- b) Sender sends message
- c) Receiver Mirrors and Summarizes (listens)
Validates (understands)
Empathizes (attunes emotionally)
- d) Switch roles and repeat. .

Position: Face to face, sitting close together, open body posture, feet on the floor, hands easy in lap, eye to eye, heart to heart, knee to knee

Roles: Sender - expresses
Receiver - listens and mirrors.

Rhythm: 3 steps and change. (The 3 steps are mirror, validate, and empathize)
3 steps and change
3 steps and change

Rules: Rule # 1 – Stay in the process
Rule # 2 – Stay in the process
Rule # 3 – If you fall out of the process, get back in as quickly as possible

Responsibilities of the Sender:

Speak about oneself not one's partner
Send in small amounts
Check mirror and resend any modifications
Keep to the topic
No shaming, blaming, criticism, contempt, belittling, etc.

Responsibilities of the Receiver

Mirror the other as accurately as possible and check accuracy
Ask, "Is there more?" to invite other to next level of self awareness
Contain one's own reactivity, facial expressions, tone, and nuances
Visit the other's world with openness and curiosity
Validate the other's reality
Attune empathically to the other's emotional experience

2. At the level of a healing process the Imago Dialogue meets the basic psychological needs of the first four developmental stages:

- **Attachment stage:** During the attachment stage, we need consistent availability, warmth and empathic attunement. In Imago Dialogue, the receiver is providing the kind of focused attention, warmth, availability and eye contact that we needed as infants.
- **Exploration stage:** The structure of the dialogue provides a safe, protected space within which the sender can explore freely, not the outer world, as we needed to as toddlers in order to survive and thrive, but the inner world, which we need to know just as fully to survive and thrive in the relational world.
- **Identity stage:** During the identity stage we needed our parents to mirror us in all the aspects of the self that we were trying on and expressing. In dialogue, the partner provides the kind of accurate, non-judgmental mirroring that allows us to see ourselves more clearly. If the reflection does not fit us, we can try on something else or adjust it a little. "Is there more?" allows the un-articulated parts of the self to emerge and be integrated.
- **Competence stage:** We need our parents to provide attuned direction, to give appropriate feedback and delight in our success. The structure of the Dialogue provides the Sender and the Receiver with the guidance and direction necessary to experience success in communication and to become effective at relationship; the feedback is in the deepening connection and the transformation of the relationship.

3. At the level of a spiritual practice: Imago Dialogue is a discipline akin to prayer or meditation, requiring the receiver to transcend the self, to let go of ego. It is a spontaneous oscillation of energy, consciousness, connection and Love.

Imago Dialogue:

- **Interruptions** all the conversational bad habits that keep us from the closeness we want. It slows down the action in emotionally charged situations. It insures that we hear what our partner is actually saying and then respond to that. It is a communication structure that, when entered into with good intention, replaces criticizing, analyzing, attacking, pontificating, fixing, talking over or mind-reading the partner with
- Is a deep sharing of the self.
- Is a back and forth conversation, a dance where partners take turns to lead and to follow.

Restored connection is not necessarily an agreement or a solution. It is a place where both partners are relaxing into the knowledge that they are two different people with two different brains and each can honor the viewpoint of the other.

Pointers for Dialogue:

- Help couples start with mirroring. When they can mirror, not just to the words but the music of the other's send, Validation and Empathy can be added.
- Always get them into the Imago position.
- People like to be mirrored in different ways – word for word/ paraphrase. Help them mirror in the way their partner feels most heard. Invite them to receive feedback from their partner.
- Coach the Receiver in using the "Pause" signal to avoid getting on overload
- Help them make Imago Dialogue the over-learned response.
- If they get reactive get them back in process as quickly as possible by...
 - Calling a pause for one or both to self-soothe. Help them use deep breathing, mantras, safe place visualization or other centering techniques to help lower reactivity and release. Then have the Receiver mirror the last piece as accurately as possible, or have him/her just mirror the affect e.g. I hear you're feeling really angry with me
 - Going into the Receiver role yourself and starting to mirror, validate and empathize, modeling the process and helping both to feel heard. Get them back into connection with each other as soon as it is possible to get them in good connection with each other.
 - Having them close their eyes and use Focusing Techniques

Imago Dialogue

SENDER

Make an appointment

State topic in one sentence

Speak about oneself not one's partner
Send in small amounts

Check mirror and resend any modifications

Keep to the topic

No shaming, blaming, criticism, contempt, belittling, etc.

RECEIVER

Agree to appointment

Mirroring

Let me see if I've got you...
I heard you say... *or* You said....
Am I getting you? *Or* Did I get that?
Is there more about that?

Summary mirror

Let me see if I got it all....
Am I getting you? Did I get all of that?
Or Is that a fair summary?

Validation

You make sense, and what makes sense is....
I can understand that ... given that....
I can see how you would see it that way because sometimes I do....

Empathy

I imagine you might be feeling....
Is that what you are feeling?

VALIDATION

Validation is the skill of communicating to another that you can understand the world from their point of view. You can see the sense that their perspective makes, understand their logic and *accept its validity*. It does not mean that you agree and share the same perspective.

Responsibilities of the Receiver: Validation requires:

- Acknowledging that there is more than one way to view the world.
- Leaving your own world view and visiting the world of the other
- Accepting that another's perspective is as valid as your own.
- Giving up the idea that there is a right and a wrong way to see things.
- Giving up "being right" and making the other "wrong" if their perspective differs from yours
- Recognizing that there is no objective truth...that each person's perception is valid for them.
- Transcending the self

Sentence stems:

"You make sense and what makes sense is..." or
"I can understand that you feel (think)...given that..."

Responsibilities of the Sender:

- To have sent enough information during the mirroring phase to allow the other to understand your feelings and why you see the world the way you do
- To accept the validation without insisting that the other give up their perspective and agree with you, see the world the same way you do or feel what you feel.

EMPATHY

Empathy is the capacity to imagine how another might experience whatever it is they are talking about on a **feeling** level, the capacity to attune to their feelings based on what they have said. This differs from imagining what you would feel in that situation.

Responsibilities of the Receiver: Empathy requires

- Going beyond what the other has said about their feelings and allowing yourself to imagine their feeling experience. Feelings can usually be expressed in one or two words, e.g. angry, happy, frustrated, lonely, loved.
- Checking out whether what you imagined is true for them.
- Giving up the symbiotic assumption that the partner feels the same as you would in that situation
- Giving up the symbiotic certainty that they "must" be feeling what you imagine.

Sentence stem:

"Based on what you have said, I imagine that you might feel... Am I getting you?"

Responsibilities of the Sender:

- To check out whether what the other is imagining fits one's own experience
- To let the other know whether it fits
- To send a more accurate feeling word if it doesn't fit.
- To let yourself experience the connection as the other imagines your feelings.

Conscious Relationship

Dissolving Emotional Symbiosis Through Differentiation

Definition of Differentiation:

Differentiation occurs through the process of dialogue when partners are able to accept that the other has a separate experience and may have perspectives and beliefs that are as valid as their own. Differentiated partners realize that it is only in accepting the differences between them and tolerating the tension of these differences that they grow into their true selves and achieve the satisfactions of mature love.

An Expression of Differentiation:

“So I understand that you see this situation very differently than I do. Your perspectives are just as valid as mine. I understand that, given what I know about what your experiences have been and what is important to you. Rather than seeing anything bad in our differences I am working at seeing in this the creative tension of growth.”

Pleasure and the Fear of Pleasure

Within the model of Imago Relationship Theory, relationships are primarily about connecting to full aliveness. Full aliveness is expressed through the experience of pleasure. At times, we focus on the healing of childhood wounds only so that blocks to the experiencing of full aliveness can be worked through and people can grow beyond their adaptive defences. Massaging painful memories does not enhance aliveness. Pain elicits defensiveness. Within an environment of safety, our defences can dissolve.

Pleasure provides the safety that enables the accessing and articulating of more of the self. Safety also allows for enhanced receptivity to pleasure. When we are defended, we will not let the pleasure in and when we are able to drop the defences, we are able to receive love. Pleasure supports the reciprocal flow of opening the self and receiving the other.

Happily, love relationships are about healing the pain and growing beyond the adaptations so that we can fully experience joy. Our sexuality is one way that we can experience intense pleasure in our relationships. In Imago Therapy we focus on encouraging couples to rediscover a diversity of ways to express their love, ways that often came so naturally during romantic love but which disappeared within the defensive atmosphere of the Power Struggle.

Fear of Pleasure

As children we come into the world with a wonderful capacity for pleasure. Children know how to play, to laugh and to have fun. However, sooner or later as we grow up many of us learn to fear pleasure and to defend ourselves against it.

To the old brain...

Pain = Danger = Death
Pleasure = Safety = Life

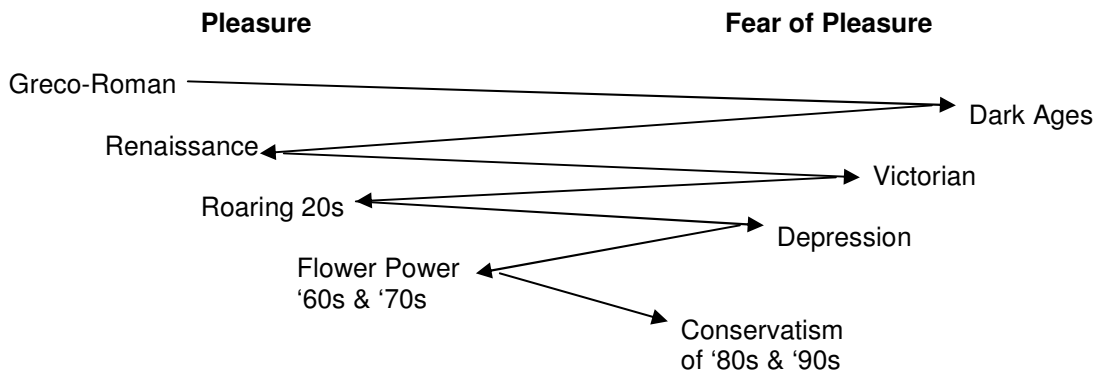
We long to experience pleasure, seek it out, go to extreme lengths to experience it, pay large sums for it. We will even risk our lives to taste it and when we do not have it we feel upset, empty, deprived, enraged. It seems simple enough: if pleasure equals life and pain equals death then we embrace pleasure and avoid pain. If it were that simple there would be a lot more happy people in the world and a lot more happy couples wallowing in their pleasure and staying away from anything that would cause them pain. It does not seem to be that simple.

We also fear pleasure. Most respond to this idea: "Not me, no way!" The possibility that in some ways it feels safer to be in pain than to be in pleasure feels counterintuitive. Yet many can remember times when they were having a wonderful time, feeling alive, close, connected and then did something to spoil it, or the partner did. There are several reasons why we might do this. **Survival:** The fear of safety makes sense in survival terms. The primary purpose of the old brain is to keep us alive, so are interested first and foremost in one thing – **danger**. It scans the environment looking for danger and when it finds some it call on the defences, which help us to feel safe again. We feel safer when we are behind our defensive character structures. We feel safer when we are armed to the hilt with nuclear weapons, when we are behind our castle walls, when we are detached and cold, or when we are holding on tightly to our beloved even if we know they hate that. Our defences give us the illusion of safety and so we use them.

When we experience pleasure with our partner we feel more alive, creative, playful, caring, joyful and safe. We relax our defences and risk showing up more fully, being more fully ourselves and more fully alive. Whenever there is a relaxing of the defences and we take risks our old brains send out signals – **danger, danger, danger, red alert, breach in the defences, we're**

vulnerable here, energize to stay alive. So paradoxically safety becomes dangerous to the old brain. We move into defending ourselves by mobilizing our energy – we either maximize our energy or constrict our energy (minimize) and this will be the very thing that will cause pain to our partners, who will in turn defend using strategies that cause us pain and we augment our defences against that pain. The higher the walls the safer we feel, the more we hold on to our partner the safer we feel. We attack the partner by finding some fault just when we are having a really good time so as to feel even safer. However, we get tired of the pain and we long for joy and aliveness even in the midst of war. We move again to seeking out pleasure, we feel safer and we relax and so on. We expand and constrict, pulse closer and further away.

Throughout history we see this pendulum swing between pain and pleasure. Whenever there has been a large expression of the life force it has been followed by a period of darkness, constriction of pleasure, repression.



Our fear of pleasure is based in our own brain's survival agenda. We are designed for survival.

For many of us pleasure is also **unfamiliar**. We have become familiar with pain. We know how to cope; we know how to survive the pain. But if pleasure is unfamiliar; then we do not know how to cope with it, how to be with it, or whether we can survive it. The emotions of pleasure can be just as intense as those of pain and we fear we cannot survive the intensity. We might lose control, blow apart, and fragment so we hold ourselves back. Better to stay safe in the familiar.

Pain has also been a path to experiencing **empathy**. We long for the connection of empathic attunement. It has been said, "Pain is inevitable, and suffering is optional". Perhaps pain is personal and separates us from other, whereas suffering is relational – it connects us with other. When we experience and express our suffering, perhaps we are attempting to elicit or induce empathy, which is the fuel of connection.

Another aspect of our resistance to pleasure is our **unconscious self-hatred**, our belief that we do not really deserve pleasure because we are bad. If we had deserved it our parents would have given it to us and we would have got to keep it. So if we did not get it is because we did not deserve it and we did not deserve it because we are bad. Sometimes we project that out onto the partner – you are the one who is bad and does not deserve pleasure from me. How often do we reward ourselves with some treat when we have behaved in accordance with the parental "shoulds". How often do we withhold ourselves, sexually or emotionally, because our partner does not "deserve" the pleasure of our loving due to some "infraction" s/he committed, because of his/her "badness"?

We also got the message that any pleasure we do get we have to **earn**, we have to work hard for it, we have to do our homework and chores to get a ½ hour TV show, we have to eat our vegetables to get our dessert, work hard for 50 weeks of the year to earn our two weeks' vacation

and if we work like that for five years we get an extra day. If you are really nice to me, jump through 47 hoops in exactly the right way then I will reward you with sex or whatever.

When we do allow ourselves to taste the sweetness and joy of pleasure, along with it comes the **reunion grief** of all the years when we have not had it. As we get it we start to fully experience the sadness and loss of the not having. We touch the depression and anger of our grief. To protect ourselves from that grief we do not let ourselves have the pleasure. Many will express this sadness in therapy when they start to experience the potential of being in a loving couple.

Finally, when we let ourselves experience pleasure it leaves us very vulnerable because we can lose it again, it can be taken away from us. We **fear the loss** of pleasure. As long as we do not experience pleasure, we cannot experience the pain of its ending. We may remember childhood warnings not to experience the full aliveness because it would end, parental instructions to “Stop larking around. Someone’s going to get hurt and you’ll end up in tears”. We may remember during the Romantic Stage the preoccupation with songs such as “You’ve lost that loving feeling”, and “You don’t bring me flowers any more” that voiced our fear that this intensity of passion would end. We live with the knowledge that in all likelihood one of us will die first.

All this results in us **resisting** or rejecting whatever pleasure is available. Freud noticed the difficulty that his patients had in receiving the very thing they had always longed for. It is the topic of Harville and Helen’s latest book **Receiving Love**, the folk wisdom “Beware what you wish for, you might get it” also reflects the awareness of our ambivalence in receiving the very things we want the most.

Many have tried to solve the tension between the longing for pleasure and the fear of pleasure by turning to pleasure substitutes such as food, alcohol, drugs and sex to feel good. While these may provide a momentary “hit” of the feeling of pleasure, it is often fleeting and leads to a further subsequent rise in the loss or absence of pleasure, thereby increasing the longing and creating another whole layer of problems.

As Imago therapists we want to tap into the pleasure. It is the life force; it increases the safety and the life energy. The body chemistry of pleasure is much healthier than the body chemistry of our defences. However, we need to be aware that there is also a natural impulse to resist and sabotage pleasure and reject the gift of love. It often shows up when couples have been doing really well in a session and you start to relax and sit back feeling really good about the work you are doing with them. Then they come in the next session looking as though they are back at square one, maybe even talking about separating! Whilst being careful to validate their current pain, sometimes it is helpful to normalize this for them and let them know that the experience of pleasure will bring up the resistance to pleasure, what some of that resistance is and that it is a process that takes time. The current crisis can be explored and reframed as a sign that they have been on the right path, doing some good work and that the increased safety and pleasure they are experiencing has activated the danger signals and defences against pleasure. Holding the tension between staying alive and amplifying the life force can be a difficult balancing act.

Right from the start when working with couples we are thinking, “Increase the pleasure, decrease the pain, live the vision”. In each session we include aspects of each of these either implicitly or explicitly. Sometimes whole sessions are focused just on the pleasure in their relationship.

For example:

- Something may flow out of an appreciation or when they express their intentionality since the last session. This can be highlighted and amplified using sentence stems. The significance of the current pleasure can be deepened by connecting it with pleasurable memories from childhood or with needs that did not get met in childhood.

- They may take a pleasure item from their vision and explore it in much more detail.

- The therapist may introduce an exercise from the Re-Romanticizing work.
- Something may flow from a frustration around not having enough fun together.

Given the importance of pleasure, its role in increasing safety (as well as danger), Gottman's research around the need for five times as many positive interactions as negative ones, and the positive health effects of the body chemistry of pleasure, it would perhaps make sense to focus largely on pleasure right from the start of therapy. This is why we are focusing on pleasure and re-romanticizing right at the start of the training and we will weave it throughout. In working with couples the initial focus of the therapy is often on the frustrations because this is what they come in with and if you push the pleasure agenda too explicitly too quickly the clients will probably experience you as out of attunement with them. While they usually come to therapy motivated by pain and this needs to be addressed and lessened it is also important to start to introduce pleasure. The brain cannot pay attention to the pain whilst experiencing intense pleasure. Passion and aliveness in the relationship have often become associated with conflict.

Couples experience their life force most strongly when they are angry or hurt. When they are fighting is often when they are most in contact with each other and with their own caring about the other and the relationship. That is when they are having their most intense feelings about their partner and expressing them with the most vehemence. As you are working towards helping the couple decrease the intensity of the conflict, it is important to introduce the couple to other ways of experiencing their passion and aliveness, to give them glimpses of the intense exuberance of joy, as well as of the deep sense of well being that is associated with living in connection. For many couples it is better to feel pain than to not feel at all. Couples will create contact around pain if there is no way to bond around pleasure. It is important to move gradually towards intense emotion being associated with pleasure rather than pain, something they may not have experienced since Romantic Love.

It takes skill to weave in the pleasure from the start whilst making sure the pain gets addressed, to keep that balance. Use your knowledge of the Imago processes as well as your creativity and that of your clients in making the sessions and the relationship pleasurable for yourself and for the clients. If you are not having fun working with your couples it is probably not very healthy for you or for them.

In summary, there are inherent forces pushing us towards full aliveness and also powerful forces holding us back from experiencing our full aliveness. As Imago therapists it is important to be aware of both of these.

APPRECIATIONS DIALOGUE

This can be introduced in the first session and used to start or end subsequent sessions or prior to some work around anger and frustrations. Level 1 can be used alone, or Levels 1 and 2. At times also including level 3 can deepen the work and the mutual understanding.

Level 1

Something I love/appreciate/value about you is...

Level 2

That helps me to feel...

Level 3

What that feeling reminds me of from my childhood is...

If Sender can't make any connections they can say: **Thank you for helping me to feel things I don't remember having much chance to experience in my childhood.**

If Sender states they never had that as a child, they can say: **Thank you for bringing some healing to that place in me that didn't get that as a child.**

If Sender connects with a positive memory they can say: **Thank you for reconnecting me with some positive experiences from my childhood.**

Switch roles and repeat.

Journal Page

Suggestions: Something I learnt or re-learnt about myself...
Something I learnt or re-learnt about The Imago Dialogue...
A question that I am sitting with is...

Further Reading: The Cosmic Journey by Harville Hendrix, 1996

"In an ontology of separation, reality is composed of discrete, essentially self-contained entities, composed of a density called "matter", which interact with each other, along a continuum of positive and negative valences, but which have no intrinsic connection. This view is reflected in the Newtonian and atomistic view of reality, which posits objects as closed although interactive; views space and time as absolutes; and posits an absolute point of reference. In this ontology, the relationship between these entities is secondary to their delineation and to the preservation of their welfare and boundaries. In the human sciences, this is reflected in the primacy given to the individual and the secondary valuation of context and relationship. The central valuation of the individual makes autonomy the goal of development and independence and self-sufficiency the indicators of maturity. In the healing professions, this view is reflected in the status of psychotherapy as the reigning model of treatment, and in conflict-free intra-psychic functioning as the goal of therapy. Connection and relationship are seen as a problem to be solved, but they can be solved only after successful resolution of intra-psychic functioning and clear, firm delineation of self-boundaries.

In an ontology of connection, reality is viewed essentially as a tapestry in which everything is intrinsically connected. There are no entities as such except as distinguishable points, or nodes, in the tapestry of being, and these nodes which appear as matter are essentially energy present in various and distinct densities. Relationship is not only the primary reality, but the nodes are essentially constructed by their interaction with their context, which is essentially comprised of other energetic nodes. Thus, the tapestry of being is comprised of the connective, energetic points and their interactions, both of which have equal ontological status. Entities exist in a context which influences their structure and function and which, in turn, influences the dynamics and valences of the context. Each in some sense co-creates the other. This view of reality is expressed in physics by relativity theory and quantum mechanics and in psychology by Core Energetics, developed by John Pierrakos, with whom I have done considerable personal and intellectual work. The energetic, relational theory views entities as open, essentially connected, and mutually influencing each other, views time and space as a continuum, posits no absolute point of reference, and views all things as in motion. In this view, connection, relationship, and constantly changing interaction are ontological; the perception or experience of separation and inaction has no ontological support and is, therefore, illusory. What this suggests is a vision of the universe as truly a universe, a dynamic, constantly changing cosmic oneness, a unitary organism, essentially alive and thus conscious, with no independent parts. This cosmic oneness is expressed in every perceived part, in galaxies, solar systems and planets. The earth as an eco-system is a living, conscious organism in which all animate and inanimate parts are conscious, interdependent, essentially connected, and dependent on the whole.

For the human sciences, an ontology of connection means that a human being is essentially a unitary, vitally alive, conscious organism with no mind-body split. In addition, all human beings are connected, interdependent and mutually influential and cannot become immune to contextual influence. For therapy, this means that the focus is placed on the interactive "between" of Martin Buber and also on the internal world of individuals, both of which constitute the context. IMAGO therapy, dependent upon and expressing this world view, is therefore a "relationship" therapy which views marriage partners as conscious, energetic interactors with constantly fluctuating boundaries, constituting an interdependent whole, which is itself an instance of the cosmic process. Developmental

processes are contextually determined, character structure is fluid and context-dependent, and affective exchanges are responses to contextual stimulation. Partners are unable to not influence each other; there is no such thing as a static state, self-sufficiency or independence. The goal of therapy is to become self-reflectively conscious, consciously intentional, differentiated, and accepting of one's dependency. At the same time, one strives to become aware of oneself as both co-creator and a creature of context. This is the basis for the position that since wounding occurs in relationship, healing and growth can occur in the context of the relationship.”