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Workfella - The Creative Space

**Domestic Violence:
Recognising Spiritual Abuse –
Its Nature and Impact**

**My Other Self: Sexual
fantasies, fetishes and kinks**



How Therapists Respond to Intimacy, Sex, and the Fragility of Life

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Abstract

How do we, as therapists, respond to our clients when the expectation of contemporary relationships is that 'he' has to last longer than two minutes and 'she' has to have an orgasm? And how do we therapists help couples when we are also influenced by this narrative?

Four important factors influence a couple's sex life and their emotional relationship. Firstly, the psychological symptoms of happiness and relaxation together with a dose of good self-esteem and a positive attitude are required. Secondly, the relationship needs to consist of companionship, fun, romance, security, respect, acceptance and trust. Thirdly, allowing time, privacy, atmosphere as well as creating different environments will influence the satisfaction factor. The fourth factor relates to how each person is differentiated as an individual, yet remains together with the other person.

Arguably, sex and intimacy represent the drive for unity and the ultimate protest against the fragility of life. Yet, sex and intimacy require a creative tension between being one's self and the death-emulating transcendence of orgasm (*la petit mort*: the little death). We explore

how therapists create a therapeutic relationship with a couple when intimacy, desire, eroticism and sex conjure up different meanings for individuals. Additionally, we will explore how therapists can locate themselves and facilitate the intra-psycho, interpersonal and systemic communication that is so paramount in the healthy continuation of a relationship for a couple. It is this communication that enables couples to be both together and separate, to develop their idiosyncratic intimacy, and to discover new ways of dealing with the sexual 'elephant in the room'.

How Therapists Respond to Intimacy, Sex and the Fragility of Life

"When two people are under the most violent, most intense, most delusive and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part" - George Bernard Shaw (26 July 1856–2 November 1950)

Relationships are complex systems of interrelated forces of sex and intimacy – a balancing act of 'being as one' in a couple without losing oneself. As therapists,

our challenge lies in confidently raising with our clients topics such as sex and intimacy. We suggest that a therapeutic approach to working with sex and intimacy requires explicit discussion of both these aspects of an intimate relationship. Being able to inform, educate and support couples who are struggling in these areas may cause us to struggle with our anxiety levels and vulnerabilities.

This paper proposes a framework for engaging in therapy with couples around sex and intimacy, on the premise that eroticism and sexuality are not just part of a relationship but also encompass a relationship in their own right. Together with emotional intimacy, this leads to a relationship greater than the sum of its parts. We believe that the balance of the individual drive to be emphatically who we need to be (which leads to an expression of sexuality) with our fundamental need to attach, attract and to love (an expression of intimacy) is a dynamic balance. Fusion, and flexibility and adaptability mediate this balance.

How do we balance our concurrent drives for separateness and unity that at some level, underpin our personal notions of sex and intimacy? Couples and thera-



pists have to negotiate the paradoxical relationship between sex and intimacy, and male and female notions of these aspects. Perel (2007), illustrates with her comment “tell me how you were loved, and I will tell you how you make love”, that when intimacy and sexual relationships are discussed, all three in the room (the couple and the therapist) will bring their values and attitudes into the discussion. The relationship and interplay between the couple and the therapist will be influenced to the extent that the therapist has explored his or her issues of sexuality and intimacy. Transference and counter-transference occur and, if openly addressed, can be a strong part of the therapeutic relationship. The question is, in the course of reflecting on our practice as therapists, how do we have to be different when working with issues of sex and intimacy?

Limerance: What is Love?

“Limerance”, as posited by psychologist Dorothy Tennov (1928–2007) in King (1997), is an involuntary cognitive and emotional state in which a person feels an intense romantic desire for another person. Limerance could be called romantic love, a need to express love with words and deeds. It describes the feelings of euphoria that is experienced when two people meet and ‘fall in love’. It is a time when we show only our best side to our ‘loved one’ and equally we are infatuated with our ‘loved one’s’ idiosyncrasies. This can also be a time of in-depth sharing of each other’s vulnerabilities. Such vulnerabilities attach us to the other, make us love each other, care for the other and want to protect them. Research

suggests that when people are attracted to another person, the brain releases a rush of chemicals (Fisher 2004). These include dopamine (inducing a feeling of wellbeing), serotonin (giving feelings of emotional security) and others for example, acetylcholine (a chemical similar to amphetamines). These produce feelings of excitement and “oneness” which Perel (2003) contrasts with preservation of autonomy of the self. Such autonomy allows each person in a couple to be alone and separate, and enables each of them to have an interest in the other. The “oneness” is conflicted with the need to preserve ourselves.

Romantic love or limerance lasts from 12 to 18 months. To live in this continued state of “euphoria” is all-consuming. At this stage, the relationship can continue and ‘real’ love and mutual understanding of each other can grow. Alternatively, people who are seeking the feelings of limerance may go on to seek another relationship. Is it possible such people may be addicted to love or the chemical ‘high’ of love?

Why do we ‘Fall’ in Love?

Why are limerance and love so alluring? Greenberg and Goldman (2008) discuss love in terms of its capacity to affect how we feel about ourselves by experiencing attachment to, and attraction of, another person who affirms our identity. Greenberg and Goldman describe love in terms of three core motivators: attraction, attachment, and identity validation. Our relationships flourish in the mutual excitement and joy of attraction. Attraction helps maintain intimate bonds because it evokes positive feelings about the other

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and in us. Attraction provides a buffer, softening future conflicts or bad feelings by offering memories of positive emotional experiences in relationship to another person. We like to attach to other people because doing this regulates our emotions and anxiety about separation – that immutable, existential pain of human experience. The desire and need to attach provide existential security against our separateness through seeking a close bond with another person, yet without subsuming ourselves in the other.

We find our identity in the mutual validation of attraction and attachment. The human mirror of a loved one validates, and affirms us in who we are. Greenberg et al. (2008) posit that we seek relationships in order to validate our identities because we know about ourselves through recognition by another person. These authors make an important distinction between identity and self-concept. Identity is how we know ourselves with positive regard (or otherwise) by feedback from others. Identity is how others recognise us as opposed to the concept of self, which is based on internalised conditions of worth.

Greenberg et al. (2008) propose that conflicts over identity lie at the heart of relationship issues. They suggest that one or other partner has an over reliance

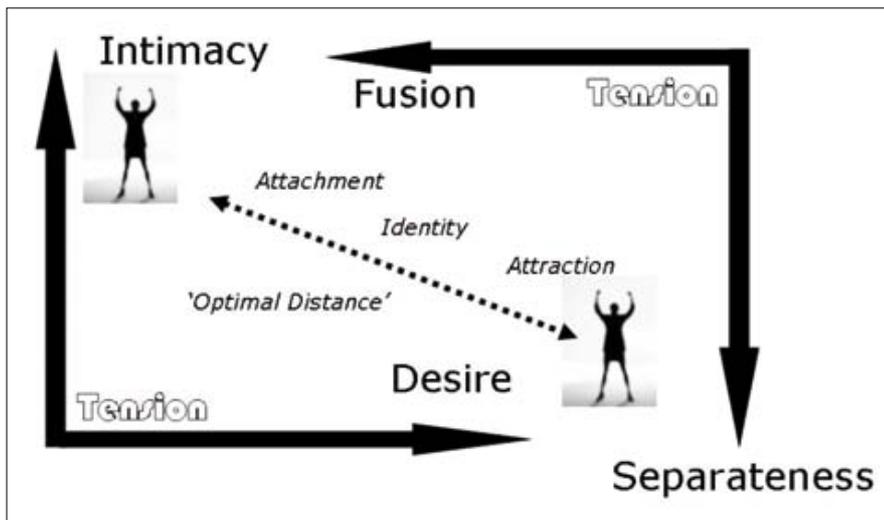


Figure 1. Optimal Distance

on validation from the other and a lesser reliance on their own internal validation, or vice versa. Within a relationship, one partner may seek validation of their identity from the other, which the other is not prepared or able to give. Conversely, one partner may want to validate the identity of the other only to find them unresponsive. Either way, a tension now exists between partners whose balancing points between their needs for self-validation and other-validation mismatch. These tensions manifest as complex negative interactional cycles. These cycles are an intricate emotional dance of primary and secondary emotions organised around fear and anxiety, joy and interest, and shame and powerlessness.

Intimacy and Desire

It would appear that the effect of being “in limerance” is temporary, and that after this a more mature relationship between individuals emerges. This happens provided we do not become obsessed or addicted to the pleasurable feeling of confusing our partners for ourselves (that is, the ‘urge to merge’). Within this urge lie the tensions between being in love and being in lust, and between self-validation and other-validation that mediate our separateness and differentiation from fusion and merging.

Perel (2003, 2007) explores the distinctions between intimacy and desire, and whether the relational and individual conditions that each require are mutually reinforcing or mutually exclusive. Intimacy requires a sense of familiarity, connection and emotional closeness. Sometimes, this intimacy may make people feel claustrophobic, trapped or even engulfed by the other’s need to merge or be merged. Emotional intelligence helps us distinguish the anxiety of being too close from the anxiety of being too separate, and to

manage the implicit tension within this dynamic.

However, Perel (2003, 2007) found that desire and eroticism require a sense of freedom, spontaneity and are very much an expression of one’s self-concept. Our upbringing, family of origin, and our social context help us develop from an early age our own individual notions of sexuality. Sexuality and eroticism are expressions of desire for another person. The dynamics of this require people to have a well-founded sense of self and autonomy that can express sexuality and eroticism, and to appreciate otherness without the need to compromise their own sexuality and eroticism.

This places, intimacy and sexuality at odds with each other. In order to be sexual with a partner, one has to be emphatically oneself to give erotic expression to sexuality in the desire for the other. To put it simply, in order to be sexual and to have a sexual relationship with your partner, you have to have an awareness of your sexual self. You have to know your erotic needs and what “turns you on”. This creates desire for the other person. It is commonly known that relationship problems including resentments, attachment needs, and vulnerabilities may be played out in the sexual lives of clients. Perel (2007) refers to this drive as the “ruthlessness of the self”. However, to be emotionally intimate with a partner requires that these boundaries be compromised in order to be close and connected. Yet if one is too close and connected, one loses that sense of otherness. Perel (2003, 2007) summed this up best in saying ‘eroticism exists in the space between the self and the other’. It follows then that a creative tension, between intimacy and desire characterises relationships. Within this tension lies the essential paradox to which Perel (2007) refers; that enhancing intimacy may not necessarily lead to a

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better sex life any more than emphasising ‘better’ sex leads to intimacy. This is because the fundamental conditions that support one are contra-indicated for the other.

Eroticism and the Erotic Relationship

Roth (2001) exposes in his book *The Dying Animal* (which became the film *Elegy*), the power, the nuance, and the beauty of the erotic relationship between his central character, the aesthetic David Kepesh and sexually adventurous Con-suella. The theme at the heart of their relationship is the dimension of distance, the distance that the central character David requires to enjoy his lover’s native eroticism, and the distance his lover requires to express her eroticism and to be sexually validated. It is this distance which becomes the issue in the end, because it is both far enough for their erotic relationship, but too far for an intimate one. And this is ultimately the tension the central character, David explores. It is only when he leaves the relative safety of the remote aesthete, that he can experience the power of an erotic relationship, rather than observing the acts from a safe distance.

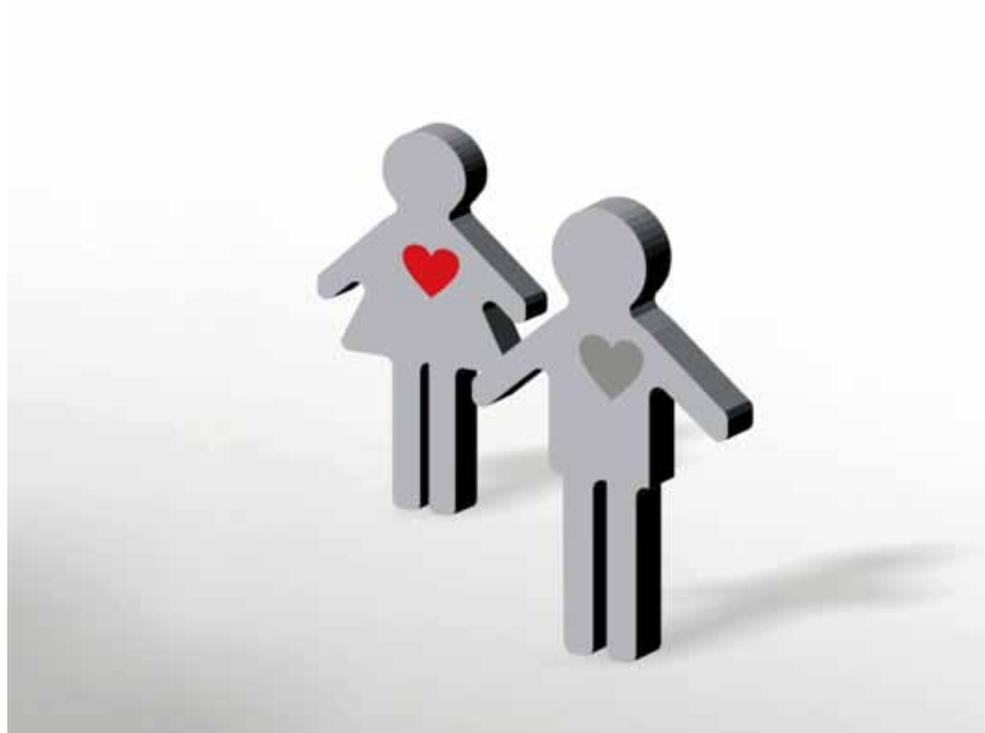
In Luis Brunel’s film *Belle de Jour* (1967), based on the novel by Joseph Kessel, Severine Serizy (Catherine Deneuve) assumes a double life alternating between a marriage where she appears frigid and unresponsive to her husband, and spending her weekday afternoons in a brothel. It is here in the brothel that the protagonist feels safe and uninhibited to explore her compelling sexual fantasies. The orderliness of her double life is thrown off-course when she meets a flamboyant gangster who wins her heart and thus intrudes on her double life. The complexities mirror the mystification of her need for both intimacy and eroticism.

Indeed, between Brunel (1967), Roth (2001) and Perel (2007), we are introduced to yet another rich dimension of human relationships. Human beings are perhaps the only species to overcomplicate their relationships by compounding sex and intimacy and by seeking meaning in both. It is with this theme in mind that Perel (2007) explores the origins and parameters of erotic desire, and the meaningful expression of the erotic self with an other

Where did our sexuality come from? What influences it? What is the significance of the erotic self? These are the themes Perel (2007) explores. She notes that the nature of desire and eroticism is irrational and does not succumb to reductionist logic. Sex is the opportunity to play out our deepest desires, fears and longings, and to heal our profound wounds. The body offers a primal form of communication. Despite our celebration of the talking cure, the language of the body remains largely beyond words, yet it is with language that we symbolise embodied experience.

There are many influences on our sexuality, according to Perel (2007). These include the way in which our family of origin encouraged our dependence and independence, and also our family and social context for sexual attitudes. These factors influence how we sublimate and convert childhood humiliations and pain. Perel (2007) makes the point that the paradoxical, irrational expression of our sexuality is often about the pleasure and excitement of embodied experiences, which have caused us the most pain in our formative years. Sometimes we can be shocked by sexual behaviour that is seemingly at odds with the public persona. We take vicarious, salacious pleasure in the media's exposure of upright, staid public figures engaging in sexual practices (such as sadomasochism, or bondage and discipline), seemingly at odds with their status. We find out that we are human after all! Perhaps this also acknowledges our secret fear that, deep inside us in the place beyond words, lie our own unexpressed hurt, joy and pain waiting to be given life in our sexuality.

In our formative years, a combination of family influences and the social context drives our sexual self-discovery. Open acceptance of sexuality as much as fear, mistrust and guilt informs our erotic life. That which is most denied in us becomes the most desired and the most elusive to express. According to Perel (2007), we express our fantasies on a "private stage", a safe place in us where we act out our innermost desires and heal our deepest wounds. It is on this stage that the hurt ones become the healed, the weak become the strong, and the strong surrender the



burden of dominance. The true expression of our eroticism is when we stand naked and vulnerable on the public stage of sex with another person whom we love. And herein lies the work for us, as therapists.

The implication for the therapist is that the erotic relationship is worthy of exploration in its own right, but by means that at first glance may appear counter-intuitive. Our natural tendency is to presume that sexual issues and matters of intimacy are symptoms of each other and that more intimacy leads to better sex, and vice versa. However, in matters of sexuality, focusing on intimacy by attending to communication as the medium for togetherness is contra-indicated for the individuality which sexuality requires. Gottman and Silver (1999) remind us that "no other area of a couple's life offers more potential for embarrassment, hurt and rejection than sex". The challenge for the therapist is in being able to talk about sex with a couple in clear and open dialogue. Within a loving relationship, there must be sufficient space to express and give meaning to sexuality. It is within such a space that the therapist can help a couple explore this aspect of their individual lives together.

Dancing with Differentiation and Fusion: The Essential Tension

Schnarch (1995) discusses differentiation and intimacy (fusion), emphasising the importance of a couple being differentiated as two individuals in order to work with the sexual relationship, as distinct

from the emotionally intimate relationship. According to Schnarch (1995), "developing a clearly defined sense of oneself permits greater involvement with loved ones without the risk of losing oneself in the process, or requiring distancing manoeuvres ... differentiation determines a person's capacity for self-validated intimacy". Schnarch discusses self-validated intimacy as related to our sense of self-worth, from which emerges our capacity to accept and validate our own individual intimate needs, as distinct from requiring validation of ourselves from others. Schnarch further elaborates that negotiation and communication are ineffective when people are emotionally fused. Communication may entrench fusion as a defence against the anxiety of differentiation. He proposes that the "solution is to help the couple differentiate".

Schnarch (1995) describes "differentiation" as "maintaining a clear sense of self in the face of pressure by loved ones to conform". In a committed relationship the "task" is to "find out who you are with a partner who is overeager to tell you". This links in with the Greenberg et al. (2008) notions of "identity wars" in which the fight is really over the balance between sexuality (which requires identity and a notion of self) and intimacy (which tends towards fusion). Anxiety occurs in relationships when one's self-concept ("self-definition") is more defined in relation to their partner than it is from self-validation. The more self-definition comes from self-validation, the more a partner can, as Schnarch (1995) puts it, tolerate "anxi-

eties that frequently occur in exploring sexuality”.

According to Greenberg et al. (2008) and Schnarch (1995) sexual and intimacy issues arise from an over-dependence on receiving validation from the other (other-validated intimacy). This occurs because people who are over-intimate (fused) may become anxious if new sexual behaviours are introduced, as these threaten the validation one partner depends on from the other. Introduction of novelty needs differentiation, which needs more emphasis on self-validation.

Schnarch (1995) eschews the model of therapy in which the “relationship is the client” as a means of dealing with sexual and marital issues. This is because sex and the relationship in which it occurs can be viewed in the context of differentiation and fusion, where the former leads to sexuality and the latter to intimacy. A relationship can then occur between two differentiated people who maintain a delicate balance between differentiation and intimacy. This enables sex and intimacy to be modulated by the balance between individuality and togetherness. The ‘whole’ relationship is both individual and intimate in a balance tolerable to both partners.

However, working on the relationship where the relationship is the client, directs attention away from the individuals need to differentiate from the other. Instead, working in the relationship focuses attention on developing a robust self-concept and identity. He further indicates that sex and intimacy are mutually enhanced when individuals in a couple allow themselves to be truly known to the other. He suggests this is the basis for dealing with interpersonal, systemic and individual aspects.

Schnarch (1995) posits that couples are either forced into higher levels of differentiation to resolve these tensions or back into fusion to face a compromise. His explanation of differentiation is similar to the notion of the “Holon” developed by Koestler (1968). Both Koestler (1968) and Schnarch (1995) view differentiation as a basic life force for humans to actualise as distinctly themselves – as unique from others – and to relate to others as self-actualised individuals. In humans, this drive manifests as a clear sense of self in the close proximity of another person, even under pressure to conform. The ability to self-soothe anxieties and build resilience to the anxieties of the other leads to clear thinking and well-modulated feelings (instead of emotional reactivity). These are the characteristics and capabilities required to modulate differentiation and fusion to allow a sexual relationship and intimacy to flourish. Schnarch (1995) considers that we are

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more fused than differentiated, especially couples entering a relationship. Relationship issues, especially around sexuality, are driven more by deficits of differentiation than by fusion.

A Model for working with Sex and Intimacy in Relationships

Perel (2007) discusses sexuality and eroticism as existing between self and other. Greenberg et al. (2008) propose that identity conflicts organised around a tension between self- and other-validation lie at the heart of relationship issues. Schnarch, (1995) believes that we are all too fused, our life-long mission being to differentiate ourselves and relate at the same time. Like Perel (2007), Schnarch (1997) proposes that sex has a language of its own. However, Schnarch (1997) gives an explicit example of drawing symbolic meaning from explicit acts of sex. He works with clients to extract specific meaning from the type and manner of their sexual practice. In contrast, Perel (2007) explores the subtle symbolism and the sources of individual sexuality, validating the diversity and innovation in sexual practice which become available to couples as an expression of beautifully symbolic eroticism.

The common factor uniting these views is that differentiation (or separation) and fusion are proxy dynamics for sexuality and intimacy respectively. Furthermore, a loving relationship between two people is both erotic and intimate, and that one aspect may not necessarily enhance or enable the other. Each aspect is unique, in its own right, and is ultimately constrained by our ability to help our clients make explicit meaning of their erotic symbolism and of emotional intimacy. The sexless relationships which Arndt (2009) describes may well be secondary to fusion. Her examples may support the view that a therapeutic approach to working with sex and intimacy requires that the therapist focus on both differentiation

and fusion. We, like Schnarch (1995), suggest that this requires a counter-intuitive approach that works in the relationship, focusing on individual, intra-psychic issues as well as communication between individuals in a couple. Differentiation then enables each person to experience the relationship through the eyes of the other and fully express their sexuality and intimacy. The state of balance between differentiation and fusion identifies people as individuals in the limelight of their partner’s love. This enables them to join together but as individuals and to continue to remain emphatically who they are.

This requires a delicate balancing act. Somehow, people have to sufficiently define as themselves, and at the same time engage in relationship without losing that sense of self. In addition, people need to experience a sense of identity in the mirror of the other. The challenge in a relationship is whether each person is at a compatible point of balance between the anxiety of separation and the smothering of fusion.

We suggest that relationship tension might be eliminated or minimised when people in the relationship feel sufficiently who they are, acceptably identified and attracted to and by the other. At this point, differentiation and fusion and their proxies of sexuality and intimacy are at what Perel (2007) calls the “optimal distance”. Both co-exist in a dynamic harmony within each person, and between them (see Figure 1). Perhaps this is the definition of true love: an optimal distance experienced as a dynamic balance between two people in a relationship. Through this balance, each person is both truly themselves and known to the other.

Working with the Tension between Sex and Intimacy

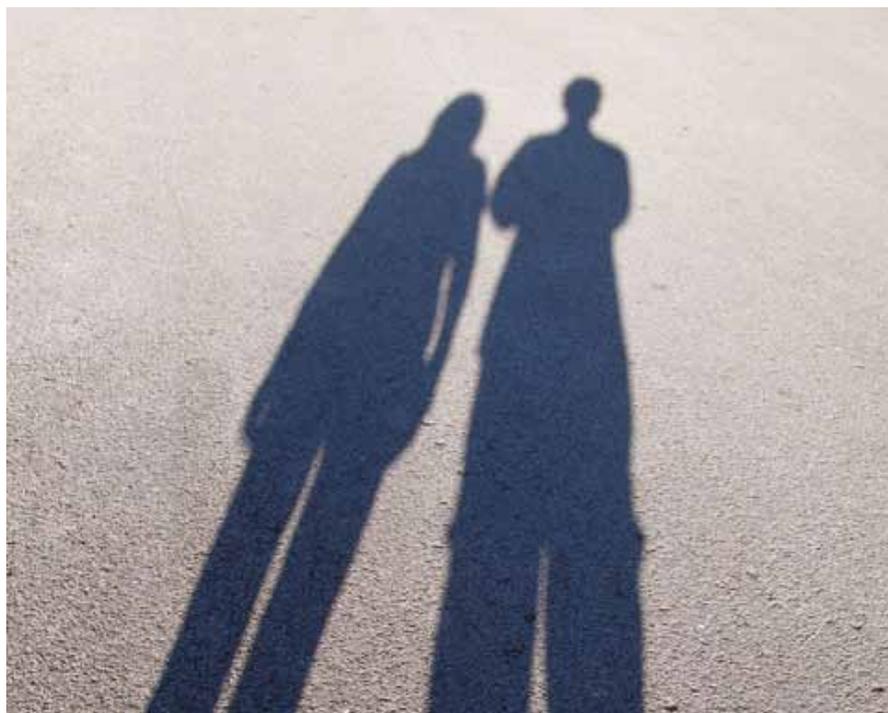
The key according to Schnarch (1995) is to enhance an individual’s tolerance of separation anxiety rather than relying

on traditional systemic models, which focus on anxiety reduction by facilitating fusion. He posits that the therapist's capacity to tolerate their own anxiety of differentiation limits their capacity to work with their client's anxiety. To differentiate, and to help a couple face the individual personal growth to do so, require the therapist to tolerate the intense anxieties generated by the implicit and explicit threat of relationship breakdown. In fact, Schnarch (1995) posits that couples need to reach a "critical mass" of anxiety before change occurs. The therapist must not only create the conditions for this but also tolerate the tension.

There is a level of anxiety about broaching sexual topics. Therapists may be reluctant to explore the intimate needs of the client or a couple, due to their own vulnerabilities and anxieties around sex and intimacy. This could then lead therapists to inadvertently collude with their clients in establishing a level of anxiety and explicit disclosure that enables discussion but is below the threshold for change. Often for a client, this is the first time they have the opportunity to talk about their sexual lives, and their needs and wants. Perhaps one anxiety is that discussing intimate needs with people may result in a transference that may appear in the form of sexual seductiveness towards the therapist.

Horney (1973) says that when sexual seductiveness occurs it is a signal that the person is full of anxiety around their connections with people and that such connections are basically poor. Sexual desires towards the therapist readily disappear when the therapist interprets them as a need for contact. This can open the road towards working through and lessening these anxieties.

We suggest that therapists need to provide a language to help each person in a couple find their respective balance, and to bring to awareness the symbolic meaning of the erotic for both the individual and the couple. We believe that this balance between our individual drive to be emphatically who we need to be (which leads to an expression of sexuality) with our fundamental need to attach, attract and to love (an expression of intimacy) is a dynamic balance. This is mediated by each person's balance between separation and fusion, and their flexibility and adaptability in dynamically moving and managing this balance in relation to the other person. Therapists must take the initiative to raise the topic of sex in the context of the relationship. Additionally, therapists must be comfortable with their own ideas and feelings in order to create conditions of comfort for their clients to openly discuss their sexuality and to express their individual eroticism.



However, with sexuality, is also important to remember that sometimes 'a cigar is just a cigar'. We have presented a uniquely Western, reductionist view of sex and intimacy as both separate and related drives for individuality and interdependence, ultimately resolved in the moment of *la petit mort*. We risk mechanising both sex and intimacy and therefore losing the evanescent beauty of human coupling. The Eastern world with its whirling dervishes, sacred sex, and the Tantra realised this long ago. In *la petit mort* we are indivisible, and the work of the therapist is to enable a couple to find their individual and interdependent journeys to this ultimate experience.

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