

Partners Response To Negativity

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Question: I'm observing that in the moment when the avoidant partner moves forward, the angry/ambivalent partner often uses that initial approach as an opportunity to download more of their anger or criticism.

In a recent paper I described how the strange situation can be used as a mental model to predict approach and avoidance behavior on both ends of the attachment spectrum (Tatkin, 2007). We know that the Avoidant is likely to pull back or move back when approached by a primary attachment figure especially when in autoregulatory mode. However the Angry/Ambivalent individual tends to move forward until reunion and then stiffens or moves back. This can be witnessed as a physical moving or pushing away or through negativistic behavior. The partner's attempts at repair is experienced as a reunion gesture and as such triggers a psychobiological anticipation within the Angry/Ambivalent individual of imminent rejection, impatience, or some other form of withdrawal by the other. If we look at

the strange situation with the insecure-ambivalent child and the preoccupied mother, reunions often result in a dyadic failure to down regulate separation distress. Both mother and infant remain in a hyperaroused state with mother unable to soothe her resistant child. This results in a premature redirection of the child's attention to toys or the environment which is experienced as rejecting and punishing (Kernberg, 1997; Mahler, Bergman, & Pine, 1975; Masterson, 1976; Sroufe, 1985; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001; Volling, McElwain, Notaro, & Herrera, 2002). This frustration with the child's fussiness and ambidexterity has been described by Mahler observations of mother-infant pairs during both the practicing subphase (proper) and the rapprochement period.

It is important for both partners to understand that this is a psychobiological reflex and therefore nonconscious. The reparative action is for the partner to move forward in the face of negativism. This is very similar to what John Gottman describes as positive sentiment overrides (Gottman, 1999). The rejected partner floods his or her negativistic partner with positive sentiments that are the exact counter to the negativism presented. For instance, if she says to him, "You look handsome tonight," and he says, "Okay you must want something from me... You need money right?" She must respond in kind but in a

reparative fashion by physically moving forward and into the eyes. She might say something over-the-top like, "My very handsome husband, I don't need any money and I don't want anything from you except for you to be mine." This is the exact opposite of what is expected. This does not have to be done all of the time just enough of the time. **Doing things enough of the time, whether negative or positive, leads to a perception of all the time.**

Sooner or later the negativistic partner will have to take responsibility for his or her own rejecting/punishing behaviors and make things right with the partner as soon as possible. The therapist must be alert to a common claim by angry/ambivalent/resistant individuals that their partners couldn't care less about their feelings or well-being. This is the tea pot calling the kettle black for it is likely both partners are oriented to a one-person psychological system and therefore neither could care less about his or her affect on the other when in distress.

Once again, the repair action on the part of the rejected partner must be to move forward, go directly into the eyes, and counter with full positive intent. **[NOTE: this action is contraindicated for Type D individuals!]**

(Disorganized/Disoriented)] The negativistic partner believes he or she is a natural burden to the primary attachment figure and experiences an immediate sense of guilt and anger with the expectation of imminent frustration and withdrawal on the part of the other. This is a hardwired response imprinted by early attachment organization. This is very similar to Fairbairn's anti-libidinal ego that defends against disappointment by sabotaging positive expectations (Fairbairn, 1972).

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