

Expanding SE(X) Therapy: Releasing the Body from the Impact of Trauma: Augmenting Traditional Couple Sex Therapy with a Body-based Approach

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This unique clinical case presentation incorporates not only an interesting road block in sex therapy due to trauma history; but also, the dynamic collaboration between two conjoint treatment modalities to promote the “unlocking” of this impasse, with an innovative mind/body integration. The couples’ sex therapy treatment course will be described, followed by the body-based, sex-therapy-informed interventions that were conducted with the male of the hetero-sexual dyad.

The couple reported sex as easy and frequent at the onset of their two-year relationship. When they began living together, Pedro reported a decrease in sexual desire, some erectile issues, and Katy reported an increase in frustration and anger as their sexual frequency declined and interactions were less satisfying. Katy would feel rejected, then frustrated and angry which led her to lash out verbally. Pedro felt criticized, and ashamed leading him to shut down and withdraw. Both partners felt emotionally unsafe during and after these arguments, resulting in a rupture of emotional and sexual connection. Importantly, each member revealed significant abuse histories.

Despite initial positive conjoint sex therapy with relevant homework assignments, the couple continued to engage in frequent and damaging conflict escalation. As Katy described their destructive emotional pattern in session, Pedro could easily get scared, even angry and then at times twitch in his face, shoulders and arm. These uncontrollable bodily reactions (ticks), often become the focus of the dyad. They felt it derailed their attempts at communicating openly and being sexually intimate.

Pedro was referred for body-based treatment. Focus was on the interventions designed to help Pedro complete his interrupted body’s ‘fight-response’ to the sexual abuse sustained at the hands of his mother. As the case unfolded, Pedro began to notice a new and changing bodily awareness. These sessions translated into an amplified ability to respond sexually without twitching, a notable reduction in his aversion to sexual interactions that were initiated by his partner, and an increase in safety to relax in these exchanges.

BEHAVIORAL LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After attending this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Distinguish ways in which body-based modalities can address treatment blocks, linked to past trauma, in sex and couple therapy.
2. Contrast symptoms of a healthy nervous system vs. an unsettled visceral reaction.
3. Discuss the Threat Response Cycle by recognizing:
 - a) Ability to identify the natural aptitude of the nervous system to re-establish the appropriate range of survival responses.
 - b) Identify interventions utilized to process trauma “bottom-up”: body to mind, thereby creating new pathways for self-regulation.
4. Describe: The Polyvagal Theory by Stephen Porges
5. Identify and compile ways in which the increased tolerance for states of activation can promote change and therapeutic movement.

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BIOGRAPHY:

Sharlene Bird, PsyD

Dr. Sharlene Bird is a polyglot and multi-cultural Licensed Clinical Psychologist in NYC. She has over 25 years' experience as a clinician, supervisor and presenter. In addition, she is an AASECT Certified Sex Therapist and Supervisor, an EMDRIA Certified EMDR Provider and Consultant, a (CBT) Cognitive Behavioral Therapist and a Certified (SEP) Somatic Experiencing Practitioner. She works in her private practice in an intentionally integrative manner to utilize optimal interventions that are best suited to benefit her clients. In her professional career, Dr. Bird has frequently lectured stateside and presented internationally in Israel, Brazil, Denmark, Greece and Germany. She has also contributed monthly articles on themes of sexuality, for a year, to Penthouse Magazine. For six years Dr. Bird co-hosted a weekly New York and Miami based open-mic radio talk show on sexuality. Additionally, she has appeared on numerous English & Spanish language media that include, but are not limited to: Telemundo, CBS, and Telenoticias NY/CNN Internacional. You can find further information on her at website: www.drsgbird.net.

Samantha Lutz, PhD

Samantha Lutz is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist in New York and New Jersey and maintains private practices in both locations. She is an AASECT certified Sex Therapist, ICEEFT Certified Emotionally Focused Couples (EFT) therapist, holds a faculty appointment at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and serves on the AASECT Public Relations Committee. She is in her second year of training to become an SEP (Somatic Experiencing Practitioner) and is pursuing certification with AASECT to become a supervisor of sex therapy. She works with individuals and couples in her practice, integrating EFT and sex therapy, and now, incorporating SE approaches when appropriate. Before moving to private practice, Dr. Lutz was the Director of a federally-funded marriage education program at Montefiore Medical Center designed to help low income couples to foster healthy relationships. She frequently gives presentations on integrating sex and couple therapy, and has also published with colleagues on the topics of marriage education, forgiveness and family functioning, depression prevention, and the interactions among communication and sexual satisfaction in couple relationships.

DISCUSSANT

William Talmadge, PhD

Dr. Bill Talmadge is a licensed psychologist in Atlanta, Georgia and a longtime member of SSTAR who retired from clinical practice after 40 years of specializing in couple and sexual therapy. He has authored numerous articles and book chapters, along with the popular book for couples, *LoveMaking: The Intimate Journey in Marriage*, with his wife, Dr. Lynda Talmadge. He is currently involved in presenting workshops on an Integrative Approach to Assessing Couples for Psychotherapy, which was given at SSTAR in 2018, and is completing an article on this work.