

ST-C Module 1: Explaining the mode cycle model (by Eckhard Roediger)

After the couple comes into your office for the first time and you asked for the fundamental social data, let the couple unfold their default mode cycle for a few minutes. Then interrupt in a very soft way: *“I don’t mean to be impolite but I just want to ask you whether this a typical interactional pattern between you? If yes – despite the precise content – this would give us the chance to analyze it. So, let me invite you to stop for a moment. To find some common ground for our analysis I would like to watch a very brief video with you and base the introduction of our model on it. This will take us about 10 min. Do you agree?”*

We find it very helpful to show couples a short video regarding the so called “still face experiment” (can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>) in order to introduce the model. The video shows all main concepts of in a very “pure” way and allows the couple to get an idea of what we mean when we talk about a “child mode” (“deep inside we all remain vulnerable like the little girl on the video”). Watching the video together creates a joint perspective too.

Therapist: *“Now I would like to introduce our working model to you. It contains just 3 core elements:*

- **2 underlying core needs** everybody has. On the one hand we have the core need for attachment, belonging and loving connection. On the other hand, we have the core need to feel assertive and autonomous, to express ourselves in the world, be respected, gain control of the situation. They are sort of two legs we stand on, a polarity building a balance. You need both legs to stand on, if you want to be in balance. The more you lean on your assertiveness side, the more you turn to be self-centered and people might not like you very much. The more you lean to the attachment side an act cooperative up to sacrifice yourself the more other people may like you but you may lose your sense of self and feel exploited. Thus, we strive for a good balance between the two poles trying to keep you centered in a flexible way.
- **4 negative basic emotions:** basic emotions are “pure feelings”. According the model of Paul Ekman (www.atlasofemotions.org) there are 5 basis emotions. 4 emotions are negatively tainted: fear, sadness, disgust and anger. The fifth is positive: It is joy. You can see them in the movie “all inside out”. The four negative basic emotions work like red lights on the dashboard of a car indicating, that a core need is not met. It’s just like the girl on the still face video: as her mother freezes her expression, the child feels fear within 200 milliseconds. This basic emotion is pre-cognitive. There are no thoughts involved yet. Fear and sadness indicate that our need for attachment is not being met. Disgust or anger appear when our need for assertiveness and autonomy is not met. If you watch the still face video, you can see how primary fear (or sadness) can shift into a secondary anger when the child tries to connect with her mother in a more aggressive way. If the mother gives in, this will not result into the same good feeling you have when you connect in nice and loving way. We feel happy or contented, when

our two core needs are adequately met, like in the beginning and the end of the still face video.

- **3 major coping behaviors or coping modes:** *Have you ever seen two dogs meeting for the first time on an opened field? It's usually a potentially threatening situation for both of them and they have 3 major options to interact with each other: fight, flight or surrender. And that's really about it. We call them "coping styles". And we humans are really not that different when it comes to interacting with each other: we can try to dominate and become the dog on the top, we can surrender and become the dog laying on his back or we can back off and go into any kind of avoidance. We cannot escape these three options. Our goal in therapy is to soften the edges of these three coping styles and try to make use of them in a moderate and flexible way. So instead of surrendering we cooperate, instead of dominating we take a firm stance, and instead of detaching we step back and distance from our emotions but try to remain available for the partner. This flexibility is what we call „healty adult“.*

The idea in schema therapy is to help the couple to find a way out of their “fixed roles” if they feel uncomfortable with them. We try to support both partners to encounter each other on eye level in a more or less balanced and flexible way. This requires access to the full spectrum of coping behavior, being in touch with all possible emotions and caring for the two core needs in a balanced way.

We try to explain these 3 core elements of schema theory to the couple in the first or second session as a framework of our work. Check back if they grasped the message. Make use of every-day examples. Try to link every-day situations with the elements of the model. This could be an early homework for the couple.