

ST-C Module 5: Accessing the vulnerable child mode (with externalizers; by Eckhard Roediger)

We make use of this exercise every time if a client is unable to access his or her vulnerable side connected with vulnerable emotions like fear or sadness. We need to be in touch with our vulnerable side if we want to be opened for a soft and good-willing connection with others (we called this the need for attachment). Showing vulnerability in a healthy relationship activates the caretaking system in our partners. Clients can feel this activation when watching the still face video and feeling compassion with the suffering child. To be able to reconnect both partners need to be in touch with their “soft side”. The following exercise helps to set this side free if clients are mostly in a dominant or angry (or disgust-driven) detaching mode.

1. Interrupt the unfolding mode cycle

“Ok, I can see you are both very triggered right now. Do cycles like this happen frequently in your relationship?” (Probably yes). “Ok, this means this is a more or less typical conflict. So let’s stop here and stand up together to try to understand better the pattern or the mode cycle you are in right now.”

2. Identify the active coping mode

Therapist and clients should be standing side by side in one line looking down on the chairs below. Therapist: *“This might surprise you but we are not going to get into a discussion. The content of your fight does not really matter right now. Let’s try to analyze the pattern and understand the mode cycle”*. Since we want to start working with the dominant (angry protector or dominance) modes we address ourselves to Betty (the example is drawn from the Schema therapy for couples book): *“Is it okay if we start with you, Betty? (Don’t forget to talk about the “Betty-chairs” below in the third person). Let’s think in terms of our three coping options: dominant, detaching or more submissive, ok? Tell me Betty, what mode do you think Betty is in, when she is telling XXX to Tom?”*

3. Identify the active child mode

Ok! Let’s move to the active emotions “behind” that chair. What emotions do you think “fuel” this behavior? Right! It is some kind of anger (or in case of an angry or disgusted protector some disgust or in a milder form feeling annoyed). And what leg is Betty leaning on in terms of the expressed need?... Right! She is more on the assertiveness side”. (The therapist adds a chair or the assertive-angry side behind the dominant coping mode according to figure 2).

4. Become aware of the coping mode’s dysfunctionality

We all have an assertive side and sometimes it makes sense making use of it. But let’s now look at the effect on the relationship. What is the desired outcome if Betty becomes dominant?... Right! She wants Tom to cooperate. But is Tom still cooperating? Not really. Otherwise you would not have come to my office. So what is the actual outcome?...Indeed. He is backing off withdrawing into a detached mode (or a self-soother).” Now the therapist turns Tom’s chair away. *“So, this is not what you are really striving for. Are you willing to change your strategy and try something else?”*

5. Access the vulnerable child mode

If Betty agrees the therapist continues talking to Betty standing beside him or her: *"You remember the two legs metaphor? Everybody is born with these two legs, right?"* (the therapist adds a chair for the vulnerable child mode beside the angry child mode chair). *So let's now try to get in touch with Betty need for a loving connection and the hidden vulnerable side, ok?... Would you, Betty, please sit down beside me on this chair?"* (At the same time Tom sits down on the turned away chair. The therapist takes a seat close by and a little bit behind the client and talks with a very soft voice to Betty addressing the vulnerable side of her). *"Ok, what do you feel in your body looking how your dominant side pushes Tom away?"* Usually looking at the back of Tom induces some painful feelings, for example a tight feeling in the chest. If this happens, we reached our goal and might continue by saying: *"Thank you for opening up so much. Being in touch with these softer feelings now, what do you need from Tom? What do you wish Tom to do?"* Usually the client wants Tom to turn their face to them again. If so, you can ask Tom to turn around and you continue; *"What do you want to say to Tom now? What shall he do?"* If the client is able to talk in a functional way you can move to step 6.

If Betty remains reluctant to get in touch with her soft emotions and remains angry you continue like this: *"Ok, Betty. I see you are still caught in your anger, so are still dragged to the angry child and assertiveness chair. This is ok, but it doesn't help us now, because the game remains the same. Are you willing to try something different?"* If the client agrees you can for example start the Honeymoon imagery exercise (module 6). If Betty is trying to speak softly to Tom but is not capable doing so you can move to module 9 and stand up with Betty and teach her how to do that.

6. Reconnecting

- You can ask them to stand up, connect by looking into each other's eyes and holding each other's hands for moment and getting aware how they feel. This makes sense in the beginning of therapy to emotionally reconnect them. You might end the session by discriminating how they feel now and at the beginning of the session. The rule extraction is: If the shift to the vulnerable side they still can emotionally connect.
- In the beginning of therapy, you might use the soft feelings of Betty asking everybody to close eyes and invite Betty to float back in time to a childhood situation. This is the beginning of the conjoint imagery exercise in module 8.
- Later in therapy you might start a connect talk exercise to work on a specific problem (module 9).

If the dominant clients continue remaining reluctant to get in touch with their vulnerable side and adequately express it, this is a bad sign about the outcome of the couples therapy. They will probably not reconnect in an emotional level and some kind of "living together apart" construct is the best possible outcome.