

“We Can’t Communicate”

The most common presenting problem in couples therapy



with Dr. Ellyn Bader

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Communication Problems are **almost never** what the couple thinks they are



“We Can’t Communicate” It’s The Most Common Presenting Problem

What is a communication problem?

What is the real problem?



Partners think they need communication guidelines and behavioral skills

Presenting Problem

**You Can Address This When
You Think Developmentally
Intervene Incisively**

Video goes here
Description of the Problem
0-3:19

“We Can’t Communicate” What do they really mean?

My partner does not understand me

My partner does not understand me and if they did, they would give me what I want

I am communicating just fine and my partner is the problem - my partner does not listen!

If we were communicating, my partner would stop doing X and start doing Y



Couples want the rewards of good communication *without* developing the emotional muscle of Differentiation



Emotional Openness

**They want good
communication
without Emotional
Vulnerability**

Often the real problem has more to do with thwarted development and shows up in the form of



Lack of Accountability or Integrity

Lack of Motivation

Ongoing Defensive Self Protection

Denied regression

When Severe Enough

The “simple problem” of lack of communication hits on all these

And then they need what they may not want



It is not sequential learning of behavioral skills or cognitive/behavioral strategies



It is a more complex evolution of emotional capacities

Watch For Most Common Ineffective Strategies

Blame

Resentful Compliance

Confusion

Victim / Poor Me

Withdrawal



Video goes here
Ellyn Begins to Intervene in
Communication Problem
0-7:32

Ask for Individual Accountability

Circumscribe what Belongs on Each Side



When you ask for individual accountability, you usually trigger some type of defensive avoidance

Client will divert your attention or partner's question

They might say to you:

Why are you always picking on me?

Why is it always my fault?

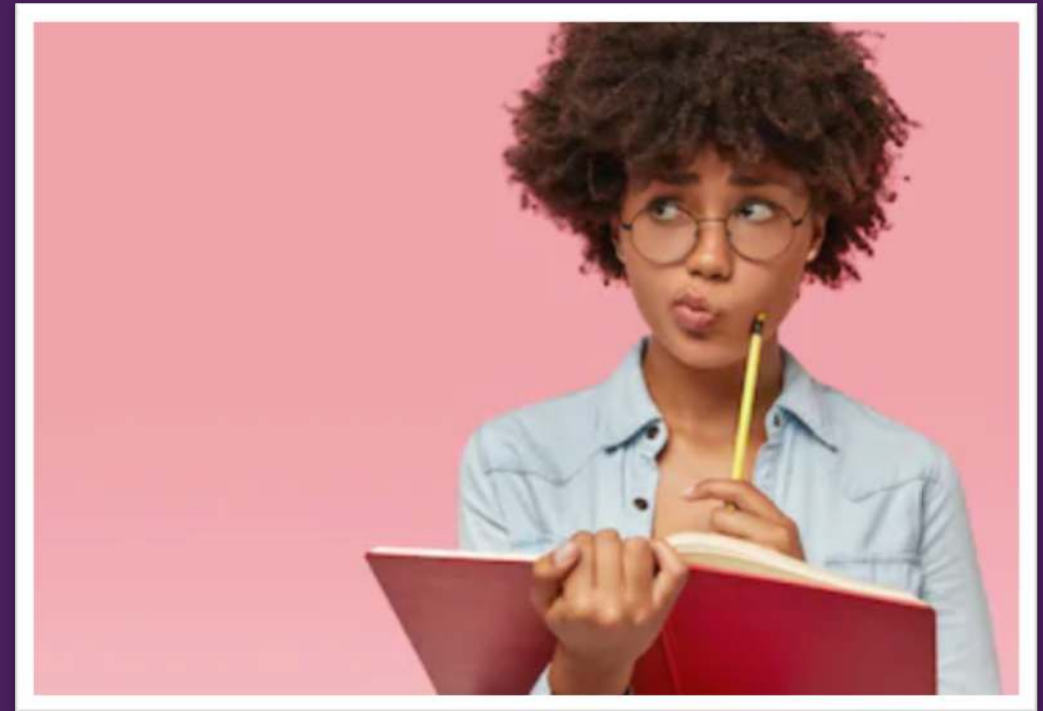
You have so many choices when you encounter a smokescreen

And it is easy to go very far afield

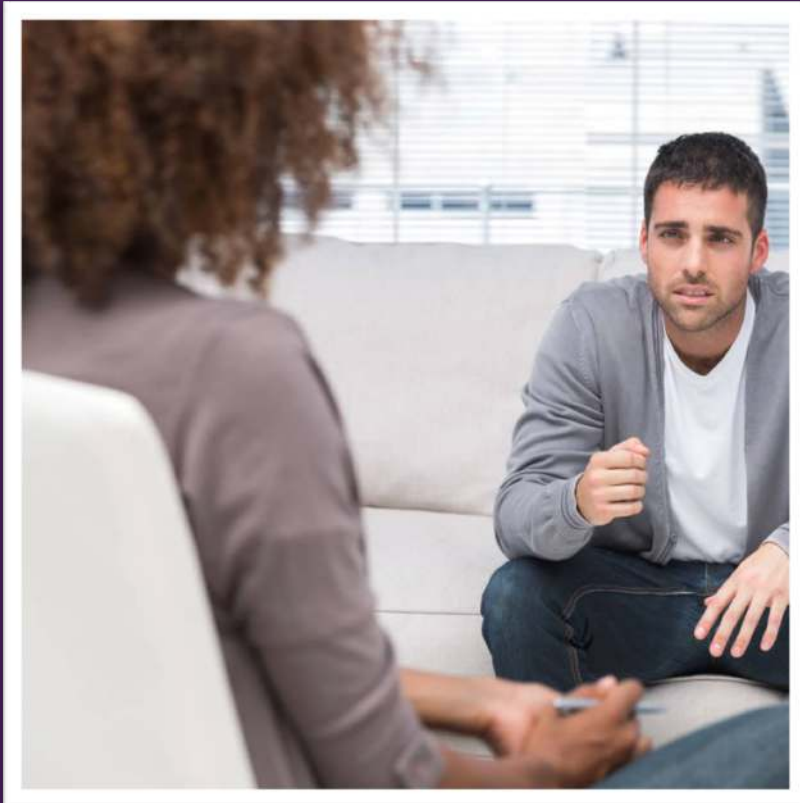
Example

Client says, “My partner is so withdrawn, why are you always picking on me?”

What is your response?



They appeal to...



...you to
back off

...your fear
of conflict

...your desire
to be empathic

...the part of you that does not
want to be seen as a “bad”
therapist

...your guilt

...your fear of
relationship disruption

Video goes here
Ellyn Begins to Intervene in
Identifying Individual
Issues
0-15:14

Slow Down



Help them slow down

Emotional partner who is now actually communicating clearly will want to rush away

Slow down and see the nonverbal empathy if and when it is occurring

Let's Summarize...

When Working with Communication Problems

A predictable sequence



Therapist describes the communication problem

Therapist begins to intervene in the communication problem



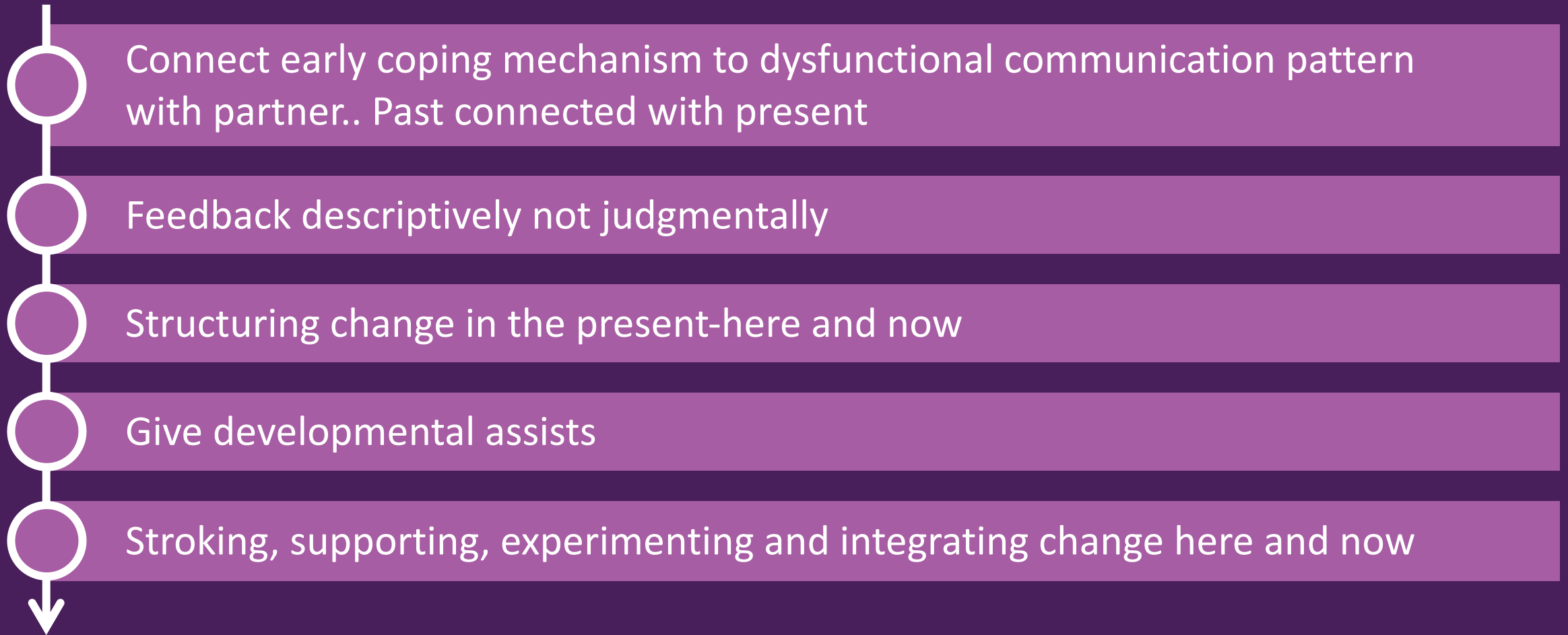
Somewhat of a predictable sequence



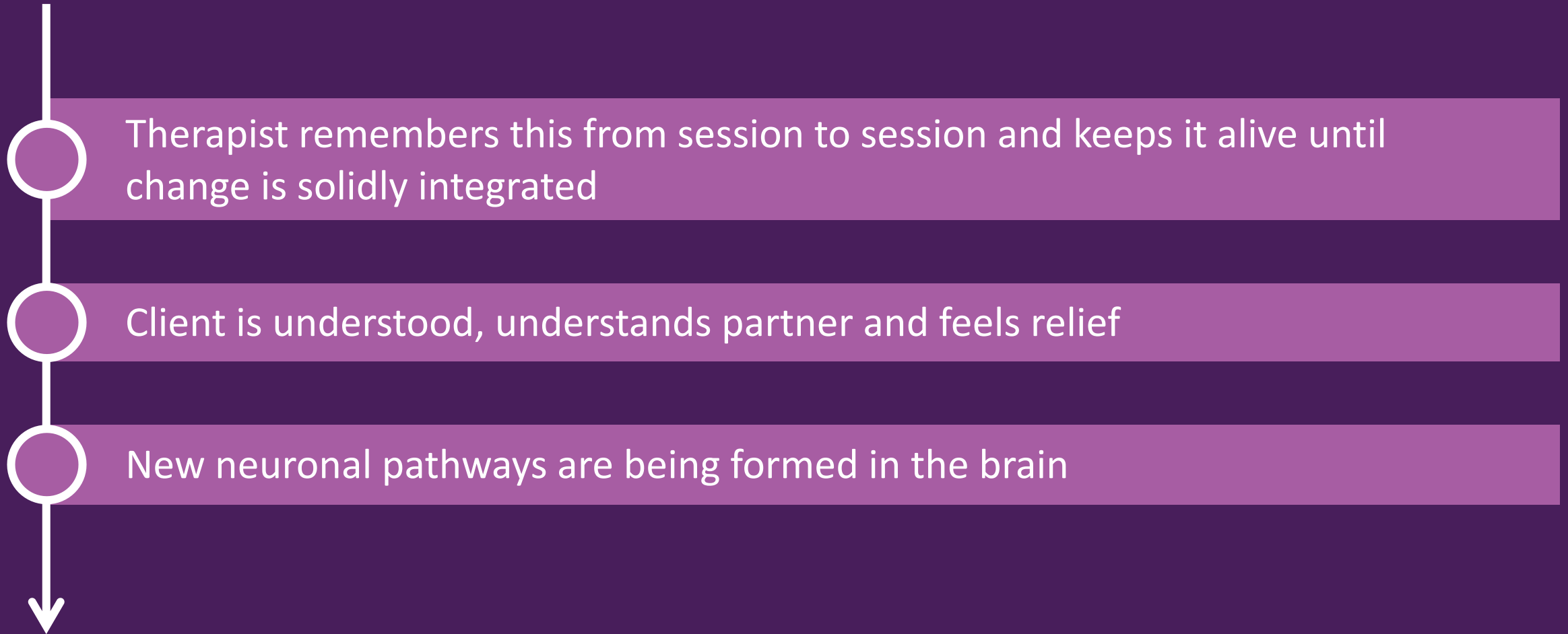
Therapist hopefully skillfully describes and defines each partner's contribution to the impasse

Identifies defensive self protection strategy- fight, flight or freeze

Somewhat of a predictable sequence



Somewhat of a predictable sequence



Video goes here
Healing Connection
0-9:49

For more information about



Training in the Developmental Model of
Couples Therapy

Please visit us at

www.couplesinstitute.com/developmentalmodel

Training will be open only from
September 13 through September 22
650.327.5915