



Overview of the Bader-Pearson Developmental Model

Your Roadmap for Couples Therapy Sessions

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1

Symbiotic–Symbiotic

Developmental Tasks of Falling in Love

- Bonding
- Falling in love
- Emphasizing similarities
- Establishing a boundary around us as a couple

Symbiotic–Symbiotic (Enmeshed/Conflict Avoidant)

“We are one.”

Developmental Stalemate

- Consuming need to merge; being inseparable
- Dependency
- Loss of individuality
- Fear of abandonment
- Behavior becomes passive and reactive rather than self-initiated
- Interactions focus on masking differences

Diagnosis (what you will witness)

- Nonverbal, manipulative communication designed to mask or obscure differences
- Use of *we* and *us* rather than *I* in conversation and in therapeutic sessions
- Severely symptomatic child, or severe symptoms in one partner who is the identified patient
- **Paper Exercise:** Swiftly evokes clear pattern of enmeshed interaction; marked avoidance of self-definition with excessive efforts to obscure conflict
- **Diagnostic Questionnaire:** Provides a historical overview of the emergence of the enmeshment over time

Treatment

- Establish initial treatment contract focused on couple's view of the problem; then describe the enmeshment.
- Build an alliance with couple; then facilitate personal responsibility-taking by each partner.
- When working with a whole family, use projective techniques that elicit each member's perception of the family as a whole.
- When appropriate, begin shifting from the family as a whole to the couple's relationship.
- Facilitate differentiation in both partners while managing fears of aggression and self-assertion.

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Symbiotic–Symbiotic

Developmental Tasks

- Bonding
- Nurturing
- Establishing a boundary around us as a couple

Symbiotic–Symbiotic (Hostile-Dependent)

"I can't live with you, and I can't live without you."

Developmental Stalemate

- Conflict and aggression used to maintain distance and emotional contact
- Poorly developed sense of self; little differentiation
- Emerges when symbiotic fantasy begins to crumble
- Common pattern in couples with borderline and narcissistic partners
- Open and ongoing expressions of anger, bitterness, and blame
- Competitive, escalating, hurtful interactions
- Unable to negotiate
- Unable to perceive impact of their own behavior on partner
- Strong projection of feelings and assumptions onto partner
- **Paradoxical patterns:**
 - Demand nurturance, yet reject it when offered
 - Simultaneous fear of abandonment and engulfment
 - Pronounced separation anxiety that is adamantly denied
 - Positive responses of one partner often interpreted as manipulative or rejected outright as given "too late"

Diagnosis

- In therapeutic sessions, extremely difficult for partners to identify and articulate what each wants, thinks, and feels
- Rapid escalation into regressive behavior
- **Paper Exercise:** Competitive, angry, escalating transactions without any negotiation or give-and-take

- **Question of Attunement:** Expect mind reading, so requests are vague, generalized demands for nurturance leading to failed response. Since there is very limited capacity for autonomous interaction, as soon as one errs the other will punish or withhold.

Treatment

- Diffuse conflict as quickly as possible.
- Establish limits and behavioral agreements about fights.
- Keep both partners thinking when angry and channel their anger through yourself.
- Signal a confrontation and confront personalizing.
- Predict future fights.
- Help partners learn to apologize and be accountable.
- Facilitate direct, positive interactions.
- Develop consistent, caring behaviors.
- Increase ability to tolerate tension and differences.
- Encourage partners to develop outside friendships and activities.
- Use humor.
- Develop empathy as a way of increasing the capacity for other-differentiation and for experiencing the separateness of the other.
- ***Once conflict is contained***: Help partners develop and maintain a vision of a better future for themselves.

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Symbiotic–Differentiating “Don’t betray me.”

Developmental Tasks

- *Symbiotic* (description on p. 5)
- *Differentiating*
 - Learning to express self clearly and openly
 - Shifting toward internally defining sense of self with independent thoughts, feelings, and wants
 - Reestablishing boundaries
 - Developing the capacity to tolerate differences
 - Learning to risk expressing one’s differences
 - Defining clear areas of responsibility and authority

Developmental Stalemate

- System becomes unbalanced for the first time
- ***Symbiotic Partner:***
 - Feels threatened and betrayed
 - Attempts to tighten the symbiosis via “clinging” behavior
 - May be characterologically passive
 - Has little empathy for partner’s desires
- ***Differentiating Partner:***
 - Has feelings of guilt
 - Feels angry at denial of differences
 - Boundaries collapse easily

Diagnosis

- Look for anger, grief, or despair with disillusionment of romantic fantasy.
- ***Diagnostic Interview:*** Symbiotic partner will focus more on similarities and highlights of initial bonding, while differentiating partner will focus on differences and disillusionment.
- ***Personal History Exercise:*** Use this exercise to diagnose origin of impasse in the symbiotic partner, such as “I’ll never go out alone again.”

- ***Paper Exercise:*** Symbiotic partner does not define what the paper is and tends to relinquish it rapidly to the differentiating partner, who defines it.

Treatment

- Help partners resolve the loss of the symbiotic stage.
- Identify and express thoughts, feelings, and individual desires.
- Help partners tolerate the anxiety inherent in recognition of differences.
- Encourage differentiating partner's movements toward self-expression while interrupting symbiotic partner's dependency patterns.
- Help partners identify their individual contributions to current difficulties.
- Establish clear lines of responsibility-taking regarding issues being discussed.
- Generate motivation for change in passive symbiotic partner.
- Help partners learn to tolerate assertion and anger.

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Symbiotic–Practicing

“Don’t leave me/Leave me alone.”

Developmental Tasks

- **Symbiotic** (see p. 5)
- **Practicing**
 - Attention directed to external world, independent activities and relationships
 - Rediscovery of self as individual
 - Consolidation of self-esteem and individual power
 - Blossoming of individuation process whereby the individual learns to express him/herself creatively in the world

Developmental Stalemate

- **Symbiotic Partner:**
 - Feelings of betrayal and abandonment
 - Attempts to intensify enmeshment
 - Fear of loss of relationship escalates into angry and demanding behavior
- **Practicing Partner:**
 - Stance of stubbornness and self-centeredness
 - Loss of empathy for partner
 - Lack of emotional connection to partner; withdrawal
 - Feels betrayed by partner’s engulfment

Diagnosis

- Previous history of mutually satisfying symbiosis
- Minimal differentiation between partners; few mechanisms to handle conflicting wishes, desires, or emotions
- An unexpected developmental shift in one partner resulting in increased demands for independence
- **Diagnostic Interview:** Reveals historical evolution from an intense symbiotic phase to a phase in which active differentiation did not occur between the partners to the stage in which one partner shifts to intense individual development
- **Personal History Exercise:** Often reveals parallels between the current practicing behavior and how the individual separated from the family of origin.

Treatment

- Help partners learn how to manage differentiation and support one another's independence.
- Therapist must balance opposing therapeutic goals of partners:
 - Symbiotic partner wants the spouse to "be like he/she used to be."
 - Practicing partner wants to continue self-expansion unimpeded.
- Initial establishment of discrepant goals is sometimes necessary.
- Help partners structure time together.
- Help practicing partner set self-selected limits that circumscribe the scope of activities.
- Help symbiotic partner initiate activities that are self-directed and self-focused.
- Identify and resolve pertinent intra-psychic conflicts from childhood.

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Differentiating—Differentiating “I’ll change if you’ll change.”

Developmental Tasks

- Actively working out how to manage the differences that exist in personality styles, goals, and desires
- Actively defining self and managing the tension of hearing the partner’s self-definition

Developmental Stalemate

- Successful fight style being developed
- Use of projection and manipulation to push partner toward change
- Ongoing hassling

Diagnosis

- Discover how couple has managed conflict thus far in relationship.
- Discover whether couple has developed a workable fight style.
- Discover whether partners can maintain their boundaries via separate activities, friendships, etc.
- **Paper Exercise:** Effort spent in examining the process of how partners are going to decide who gets the paper; may not finish in 5 minutes
- **Question of Attunement:** The level of differentiation in each individual will determine how clearly the request is made and how accurately partners assess their own capacity to respond.

Treatment

- Pace of therapy is determined by degree of differentiation present in each partner.
- Use questions to help partners identify, understand, and articulate feelings.
- Bring pertinent intra-psychic childhood issues into awareness.
- Facilitate conflict management via use of the Initiator/Inquirer process.
- Provide role model for partners, being non-reactive to their demands and outbursts.
- Discriminate between problem-solving and issues involving more complex developmental skills.
- Provide a larger context for viewing specific problems.

- Facilitate differentiation from family of origin and re-owning of projections.
- Identify familial, societal, cultural, and/or work-related factors that may be inhibiting the differentiation process.

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Practicing–Practicing

“I want to be me!”

Developmental Tasks

- Developing strong personal identity that is not dependent on how relationship is faring
- Increasing solidity of differentiation as an underpinning

Developmental Stalemate

- Energy overinvested in self-development and expression
- Staunch defense of boundaries
- Fear that greater intimacy will leave to loss of self
- Power struggles characterized by “I-want” demands
- Use of projection and transference under emotionally charged circumstances
- Repetition of early script decisions
- All of these are greatly intensified when the couple does not have a foundation of positive bonding and active differentiation.

Diagnosis

- Marked lack of emotional connectedness in sessions and in daily life
- Defensive presentation of each partner’s side with polarized views
- Competitive dialogue leading to impasses in problem-solving
- Practicing-practicing couples who have differentiated together will still have power struggles, but with decreased intensity
- **Paper Exercise:** Both partners are well defined about what the paper represents, but often are unable to give to the other or compromise; often the exercise is not completed in the five minutes allotted.
- **Diagnostic Interview:** Reveals no anxiety for either partner in having separate activities or friendships

Treatment

- Focus on sexuality as a way of developing strong, flexible boundaries.
- Partners learn ways of maintaining separate individualities while resolving conflicts
- Help partners relax boundaries.
- Help those couples who have not actively differentiated together learn how to manage differentiation, while continuing their independence.
- Help partners identify and express feelings.
- Help partners identify and resolve intra-psychic childhood issues.
- Help partners develop a decision-making process that involves giving without anxiety.

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Practicing–Rapprochement

“One foot in, one foot out”

Developmental Tasks

- **Practicing** (see p. 15)
- **Rapprochement**
 - Return shift toward relationship for intimacy and emotional sustenance
 - Reemergence of vulnerability
 - Greater ease in negotiating
 - Balance between “I” and “us” becomes more firmly established
 - Ongoing utilization of skills learned in previous stages
 - Capacity to respond with consistency
 - Capacity to give to partner even when inconvenient to do so
 - Further resolution of remaining childhood issues that interfere with successful coupling

Developmental Stalemate

- **Practicing Partner:**
 - Fear of “putting myself second”
 - Fear of over compromising
 - Conflict over empathizing with partner’s intimacy needs versus responding to personal needs for growth and individuation
- **Rapprochement Partner:**
 - Alternates between periods of intimacy and over-determined efforts to re-establish independence
 - Conflict over supporting partner’s growth and independence versus seeking to gratify personal needs for greater intimacy

Diagnosis

- **Diagnostic Interview:** Elicits the characteristics described under the developmental stalemate

Treatment

- Identify temporary incompatibility of respective stages.
- Explore each partner's desires.
- Learn to balance one's own wants and desires with partner's by tolerating increasing levels of ambiguity without rapid problem solving.
- Being in different stages isn't a problem.



Rapprochement–Rapprochement

“Homeward Bound”

Development Task

- (See p. 17)

Developmental Stalemate

- At this advanced stage of development, stressors to the relationship usually come from external sources such as a job promotion, a potential move, an ailing relative; intra- and interpersonal processes are generally highly developed and integrated.

Diagnosis

- Diagnosis at this level occurs primarily through eliciting and observing what is right in the relationship: all the strengths and abilities that are present and operative in the relationship.

Treatment

- Therapy at this level is primarily facilitative rather than treatment-oriented.
- Ask partners what most deeply touches them when they are vulnerable.
- Focus them on learning to give when it is not convenient.
- Use a future focus via developing a relationship vision, setting goals, or using “The Thirty-Day Plan.”
- Sexuality expands and deepens.