

When One Partner is Very Stuck

Learnings from the Developmental Model that Inform My Work

Katherine Waddell

Two Kinds of Stuckness

Two main reasons that individual partners in a couple can get stuck and stay stuck.

1

Developmental
Deficits

2

Intrapsychic
Impasses

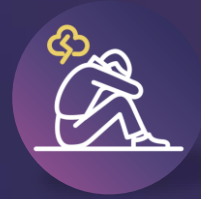
It helps us to think developmentally through a trauma informed lens.



Developmental deficits are about skills and emotional capacities they have not been able to develop or have been cut off because of:



Bad role models in family of origin.



Big developmental trauma or loss in childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood, leading to lack of healthy relational skills.



Neurobiological wiring/
Neurodivergence

Examples: Neglect, Death of parent or sibling,



Addiction of parent, or
Being a caretaker
of the adults or other
siblings due to mental
health issues, poverty,
illness, etc.



Racism, sexism, homophobia,
and other forms of oppression
get internalized leading to self
doubt, anxiety, misplaced self
hatred and unhealthy
relationships with self and
other.

Developmental Deficits require a

solid developmental understanding and a lot of patience, support, cheerleading, humor, coaching and teaching skills from the ***therapist.***

Developmental Deficits respond well to



Motivational work



Targeted developmental assists



Several sessions of concrete, collaborative goalsetting where client sets autonomous goals, and some milestones where they know they are moving in a positive direction.



A series of meetings with the partner present, giving them skills, then practicing in and out of session to develop skills

Intrapsychic Impasses

The second reason




Intrapsychic impasses are : (American Heritage Dictionary)



Intrapsychic: **within** the mind, or self



Impasse: a road, or a passage having no exit; a situation that is so difficult that no progress can be made; a deadlock.

A photograph of a young woman and a young man looking down with somber expressions. The woman is on the left, her hand near her face as if crying. The man is on the right, also looking down. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple and blue gradient. The text is positioned on the left side of the image.

With these two things together you have “a stuck internal situation; a clash between two different parts of the personality,” where there is a lot of gridlock.

What makes it even more difficult is that often people are very defended against the very fact of the existence of the impasse.

Intrapsychic impasses usually began early in life, and the client has had decades of **practice in inhibiting growth in order to protect themselves** in a way that made great sense when they were young, but prevents growth, differentiation and healthy adult relationship.

Intrapsychic impasses often develop as self protections when a child did the best they could, often related to **“little t”** or a **“big T”** trauma.

Examples of this

Could be passive, aggressive partners, trauma survivors, who learned I cannot trust anybody/I must do it myself, folks stuck in the contemplating phase of alcoholism and are conflicted: I want to stop drinking/no it's bad for me, but I want to stay safe, protected, comfortably numb.

Intrapsychic Impasses

are much harder to treat and require more advanced techniques

They respond well to:



2 Chair work, Such as Gestalt, EMDR, Parts work



TA



IFS



Or Any energy psychology that highlights and supports the reality that the client is at war with them self internally. *"Part of me wants X/(growth or change), and another part says, "yes, but!"*, and is the protector part and steadfastly resists change, the agenda of the spouse, or you, the therapist.



**In either case,
here is
a list of do's
and don'ts
for therapists.**

DO:

- ✓ Motivational work first
- ✓ Some breakout individual sessions, to divide and conquer.
- ✓ Refer to good individual therapist, and consult with them
- ✓ Cheerlead tiny growth every time you see it
- ✓ Confront symbiosis
- ✓ Stay out of the middle



Don't

- ✘ Avoid confrontation of the stuckness of that partner
- ✘ Either come on too strong for too soft
- ✘ Refuse individual sessions when a few may be helpful in getting them going
- ✘ Get stuck and stay stuck just like the partner is
- ✘ Let yourself get too frustrated/have high expectations. This is slow work.