

# Slicing Down:

*Deepening Emotional States in Couples Therapy*



**Sean Tonnet**

CREATING STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS



# Exercise

Whats the Deal with  
Emotions Anyway?





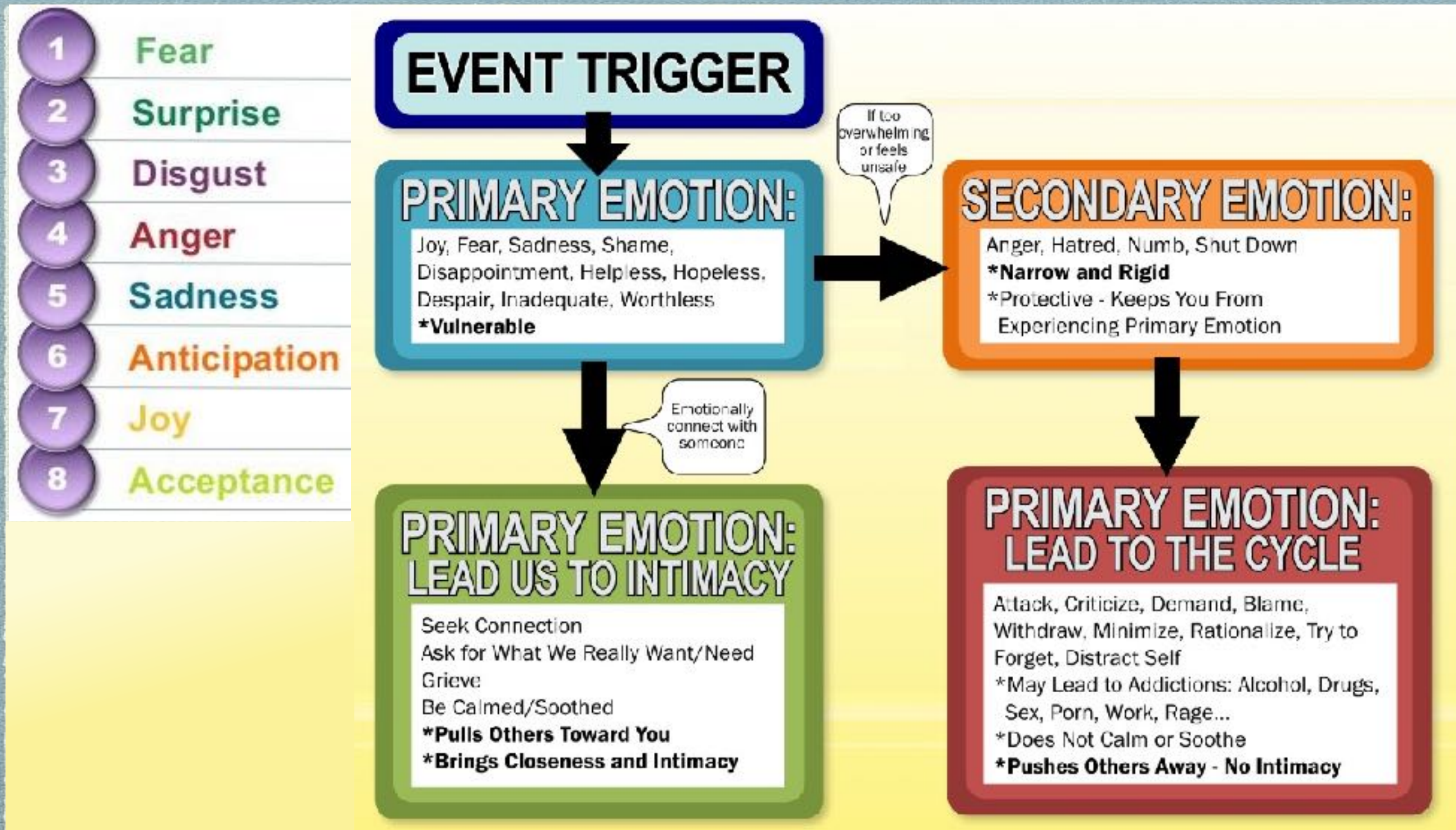
# Emotions



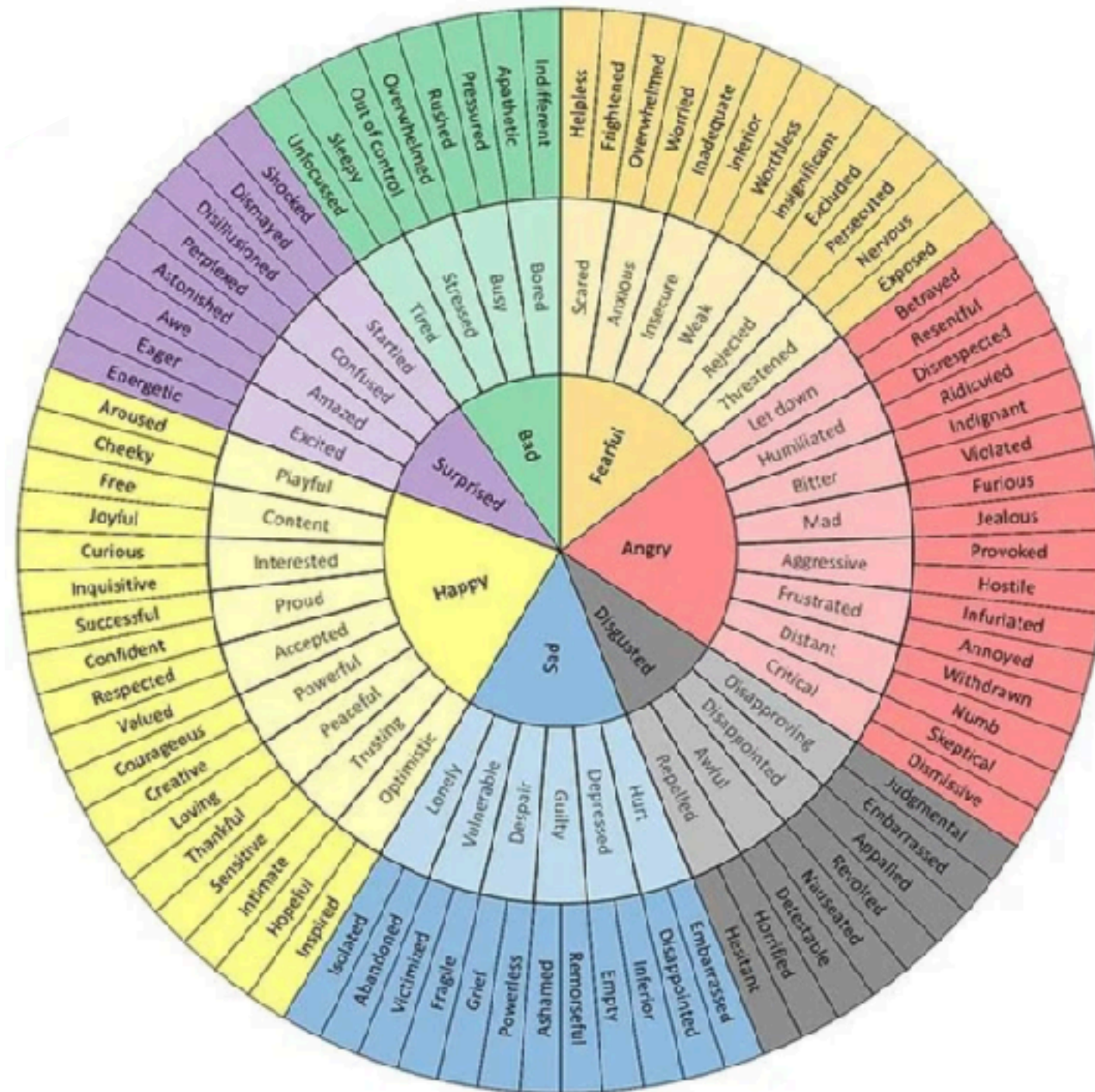
- ✦ Emotions are connected to our most essential needs.
- ✦ They rapidly alert us to situations important to our well-being.
- ✦ They also prepare and guide us to take action towards meeting our needs.
- ✦ Emotions can be *Primary*, *Secondary* and *Instrumental* (Greenburg, 2004)



# Emotions









# Therapy & Emotions



- Psychotherapy's primary emphasis is on the change process being wrapped around 'the corrective emotional experience'
- Understandably, Gestalt therapy places a strong emphasis on emotional experience, viewing feelings as a gateway to understanding oneself and one's needs.
- Instead of avoiding or suppressing difficult emotions, clients are encouraged to fully experience them with awareness.
- In Gestalt therapy, emotional expression is not something to be managed or contained but is an integral part of healing.

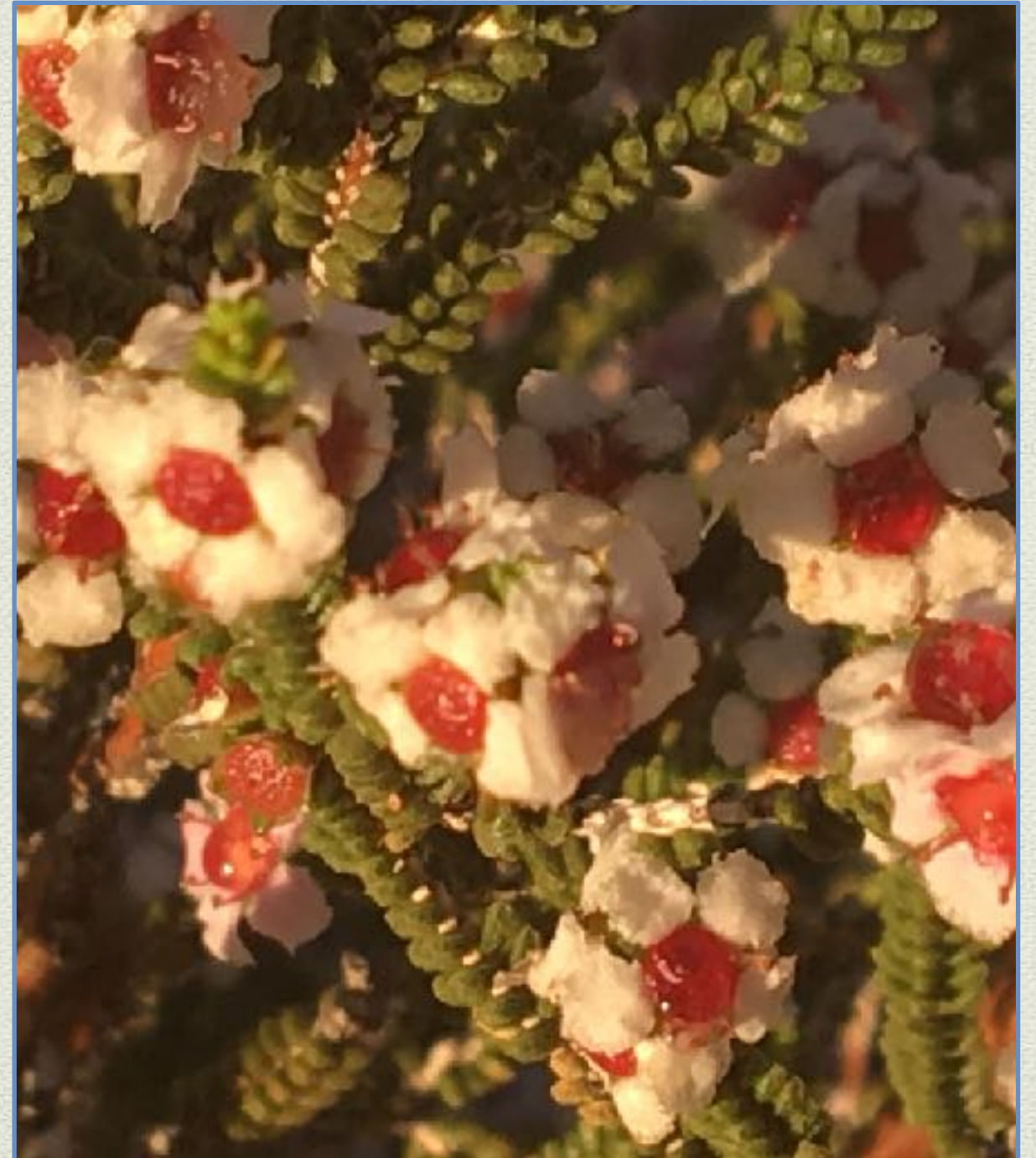


# Exercise



## Emotions in Couples Therapy.

*What do you see as the relevance &  
Importance of emotions in Couples  
Therapy?*





# Emotions & Couples



- Successful couples therapy pivots around deepening awareness of emotions between partners.
- Partners who allow themselves to become intensely involved in their emotional experiences, are likely to have the most relationship changes in therapy.
- Emotions at the contact boundary can become a pathway for intimacy
- Deepened emotions, disclosed in a new way, creates new contact experiences of positive reaching and responding between partners.
- Healthy relationships are a restorative meeting place, where we can calm and regulate emotions (Johnson 2014)



# The Big Picture

The big picture goal is to track and reflect on key emotional moments, supporting a shift in the couple's connection and interactions from:

"It seems like you don't want to spend time with me. You are always so busy. Ready and available for the kids, but not when I need you. Its always the same and you get frustrated if I bring it up"



"When you turn away from me I am so scared you will reject me. That you will leave us. My hope is that you there will be more connection between us and when there isn't I can find more okay-ness with my fear"

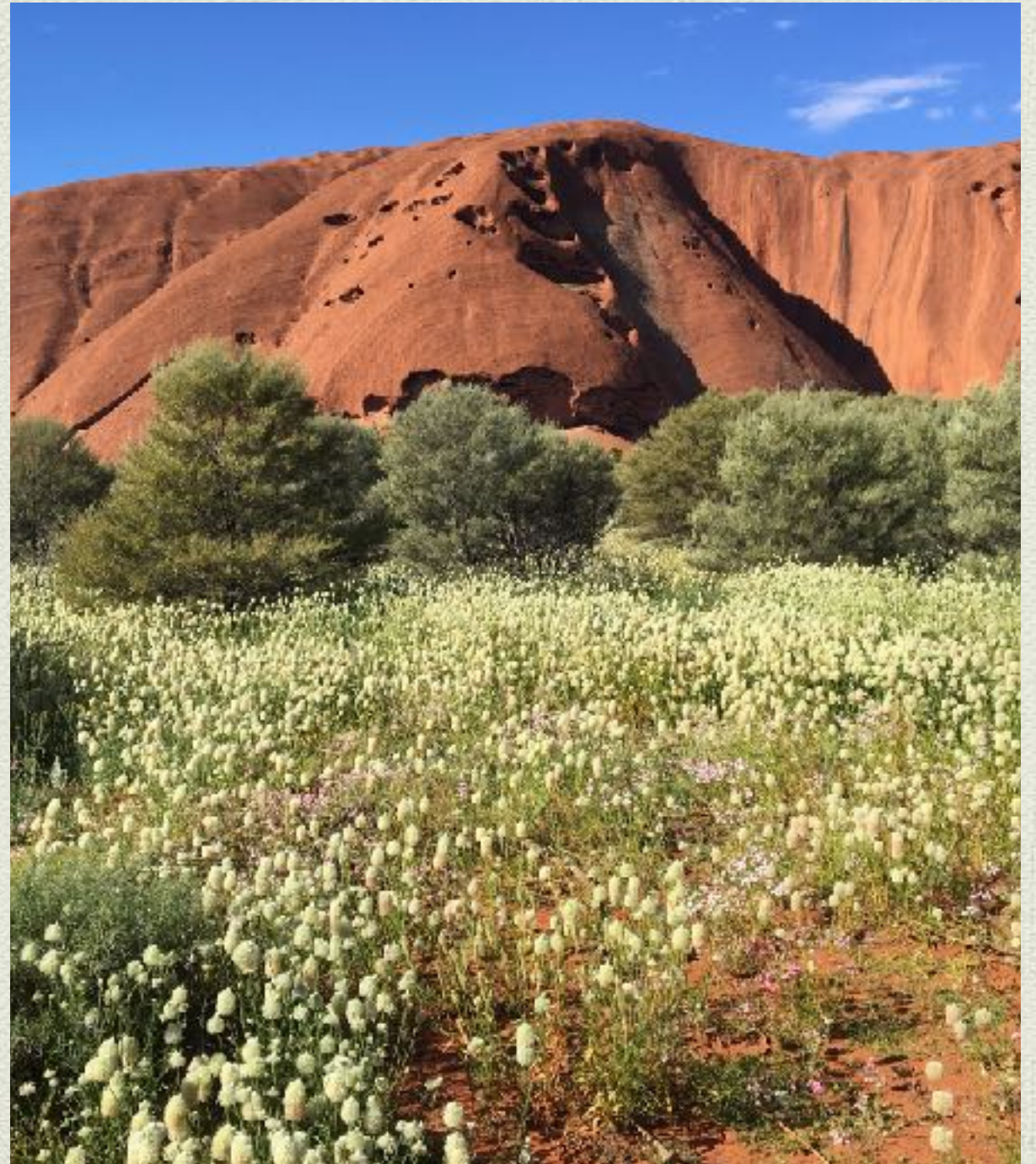
- ✦ Vague to vivid
- ✦ Obscure to tangible
- ✦ General to specific
- ✦ Then to now
- ✦ Global to personal
- ✦ Passive to active
- ✦ Abstract to concrete



# Exercise

What do you imagine are the 'blocks' in couples therapy to deepening emotional states?

- *The Relationship dynamic*
- *Each Individual*
- *The Therapist*





# Exercise



## Deepening Emotions in Couples Therapy...

*What are some ways we can do this?*

***Break Out Groups***





# Deepening



## Look For The Emerging Emotional 'Themes':

- ✦ Holding an emphasis on the emotional intelligence of the relational field.
- ✦ Looking where client's present with undifferentiated emotions - global, indistinct or specific: "We both feel like crap", "I don't know what I feel", "He's always angry" "She's always nagging"
- ✦ Considering the primary -v- secondary emotions within specific couples dynamic

## Session Management - Slowing Down

- ✦ Orientating clients in the first session(s) towards understanding your work.
- ✦ Good couples therapy requires picking an effective but shifting focus while establishing and nurturing all four relationships of couples therapy (Yontef, 2011)
- ✦ Look for the places to slow down, and expand the window of tolerance. There is no entry into processing emotion without this (Johnson, 2020)
- ✦ Gatekeeping is the art of directing the flow of communication between the partners and therapist in a couple counselling session.



# Deepening



## **Working within Window Of Tolerance:**

- ✦ Trauma survivors need finely tuned support to be engaged at a working distance from emotion. They have survived by fluctuating between suppression and hyper-activation of emotion.
- ✦ 'When arousal falls within the Window of Tolerance, various intensities of emotions and physiological responses can be processed without disrupting the function of the nervous system' (Siegel, 2014)
- ✦ Couples therapy is working on the edges of what is tolerable. Therapy that is too safe or too challenging won't support change.
- ✦ Reduce the intensity of emotional laden words for partners who perhaps aren't used to strong emotions or have a negative bias or trauma activation around their emotions.

## **Conjecturing - Attachment and Emotions:**

- ✦ Utilising the evidence around attachment theory and emotions to offer some confidence in conjecturing. Using our internal radar about what's going on beneath the surface for each partner.
- ✦ Provides an opportunity for the therapist to take more risk.



# Deepening



## Experiments:

- Experiments are a pillar for deepening emotional states. They can be used to heighten, expand and contrast emotions, while also offering a couple opportunity to try out new emotional positions and behaviours.
- Experiments need to be nonviolent, focus on present experience, the therapist tracks the ongoing results, and is able to be unpacked with the couple afterwards.
- Experiments can be derived from anything you track, such as gestures, pace, inflection, beliefs, methods of self-protection, posture, feelings, images, and tensions.

## Phenomenology & Dialogic: Tracking, Reflecting & Validating:

- Every physical tendency, verbal inflection, body posturing, or languaging is a pathway to deepening emotions.
- Empathic exploration and conjecture, reflection of feeling, heightening and validation, the therapist is able to mirror and perceive the client's emotional state, enhances emotion depth and regulation (Elliott et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2015).
- Self Disclosure - Self as instrument in therapy. Your own emotional experience.
- Creating the 'secure attachment base' for clients.



# A Road Map

Supporting couples to have a more resourced and aware dynamic. Responding effectively around the sensitivities and core wounds of self, and other...

a. What is the perceived 'danger' cue noticed by a partner

*"When I see that look on your face..."*

b. Cognitive meanings made or being made-up

*"I tell myself that you are disgusted with me..."*

c. Bodily sensations experienced

*"and it feels so painful in my heart"*

d. What did that lead to? Automatic action tendencies & reactive secondary emotional

*"I get angry at you and yell"*

e. And as we explore these at each step, each door is a path into discovering & formulating the primary attachment fear or core wound/pain.

*"But whats going on under that is I feel despairing and like I will never be good enough for you"*





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0415 919 123



sean@tonnet.org



www.seantonnet.com.au



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