

Treatment Strategies for High Conflict People

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Learning Objectives

- Describe common factors and best practices for working through conflict with difficult people including specific self-regulation skills to teach high conflict people emotional regulation, understanding and empathy.
- Participants will apply strategies to de-escalate conflict in interpersonal work.
- Participants will analyze their own transference and countertransference issues when working with high conflict people.



What Conflict Feels Like

High Conflict and Personality Disorders

- Not all high conflict people have personality disorders, but many do
- Develops out of genetic vulnerability or temperament, childhood trauma, verbal abuse and high reactivity
- Childhood attachment - (insecure or disruptive) neglect of child's emotional needs.



Common Factors

- Parenting not necessarily to blame —takes combination of many factors —poor choices, blaming others, negative experiences related to trauma and loss
- Teen conduct problems, depression and anxiety may play a role
- Healthy coping strategies missing with problematic family interactions
- Mistrust of others develops
- Past pain so keep people at arm's length

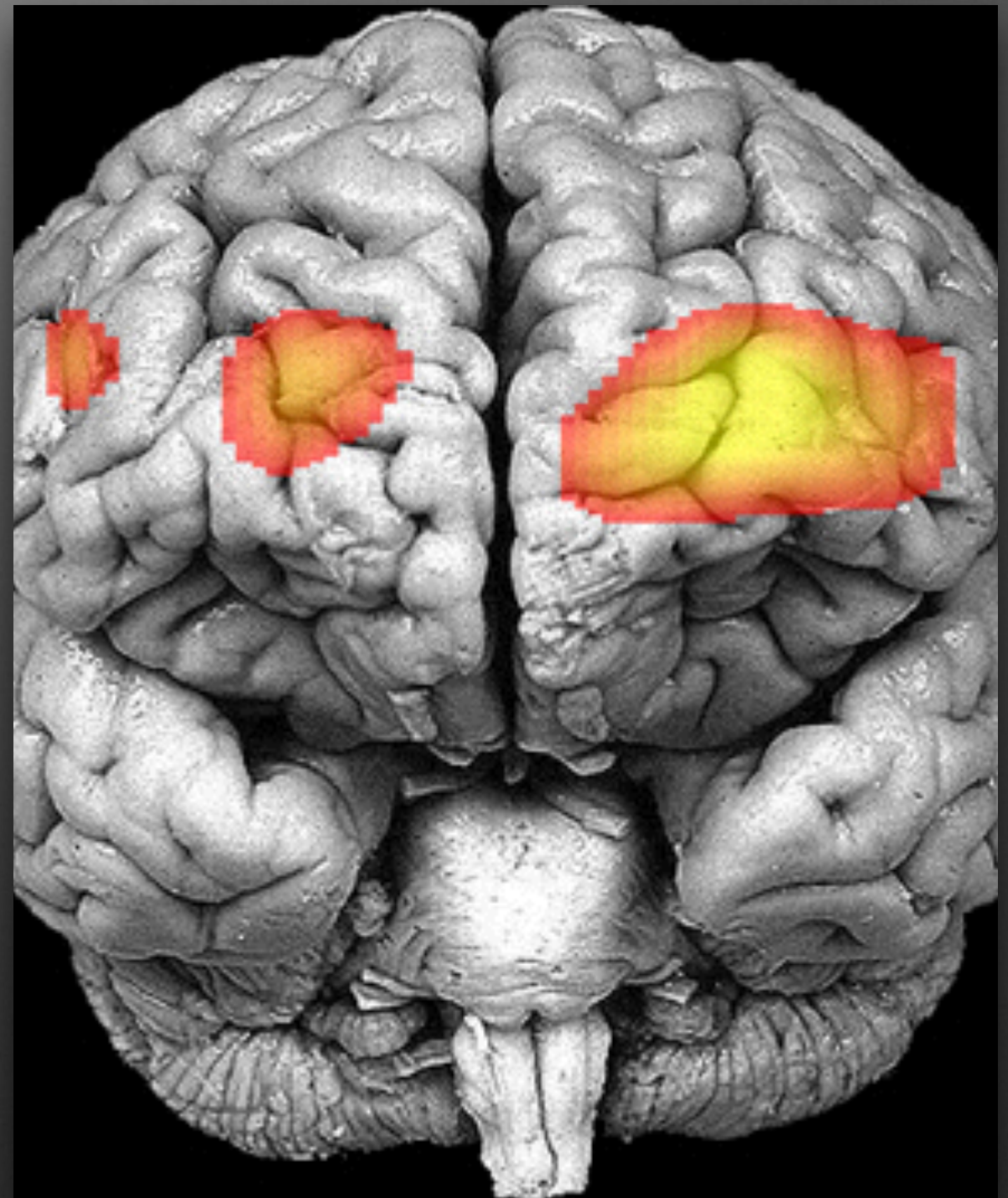
High Conflict: Personality Disorders

- Way of thinking and feeling about oneself and others that impacts all relationships and way conflict is addressed
- Patterns keep repeating but person has blind spots to them
- Lack a clear and coherent sense of identity



Brain Differences

- EX: BPD—Heightened activity amygdala (emotions)- generates negative emotional states and intense emotional responses
- Prefrontal cortex regulates the amygdala and underperforms so you have an overactive and uncontrolled amygdala



Conflict: It's Personal!

- Conflict not based on an issue, but who the person is and the pattern of behavior that has developed
- Viewed as a personal assault
- Escalate conflict and make it worse, not better
- Create drama
- Threatened by disagreement



Rigid Thinking

- Aren't flexible in thinking so conflict becomes one sided
- Whatever person feels at the moment must be true



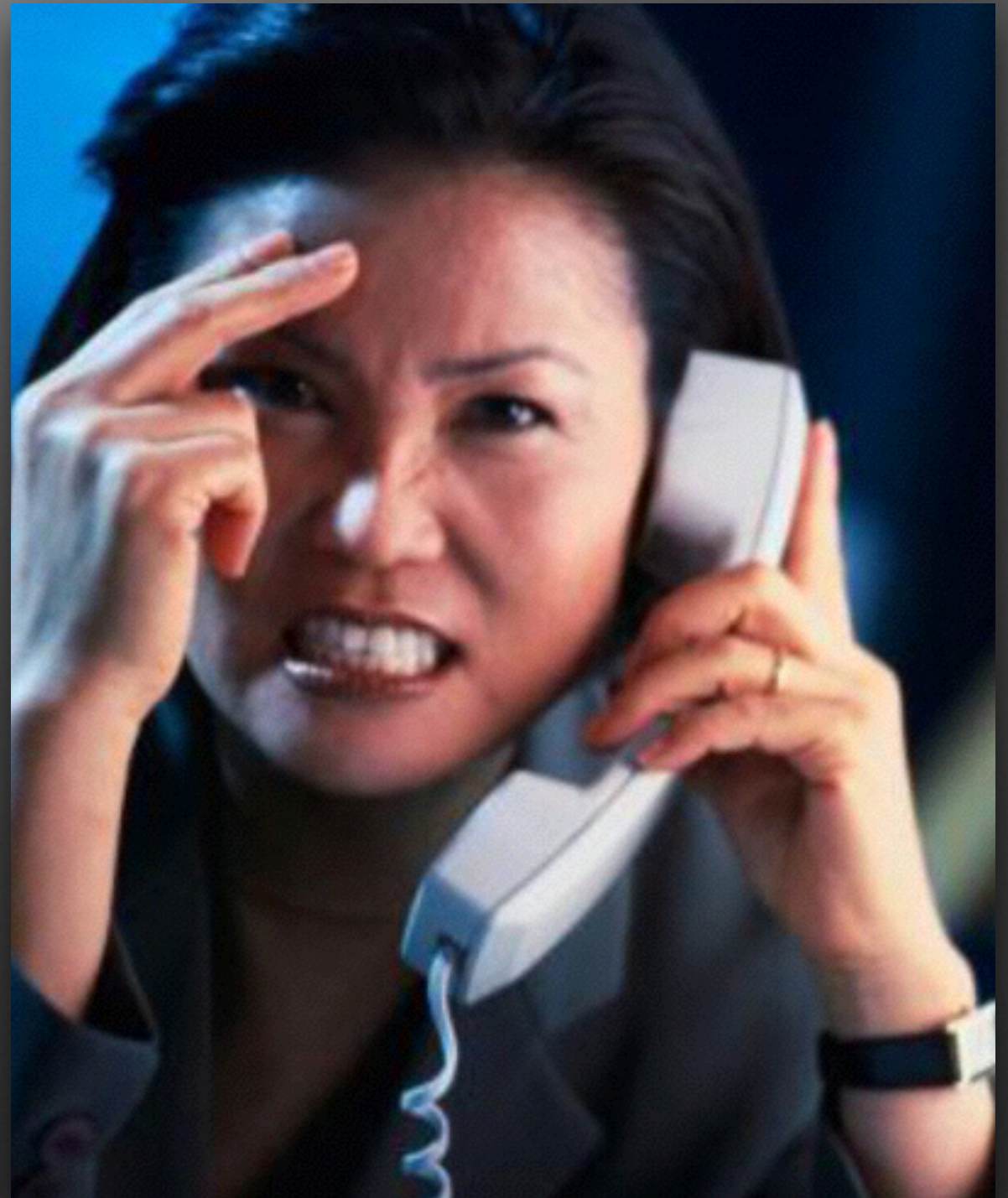
Thinking

- All or nothing
- Black or white
- Good or bad
- Rarely consider other points of view — Their way or the highway!
- Compromise feels like losing



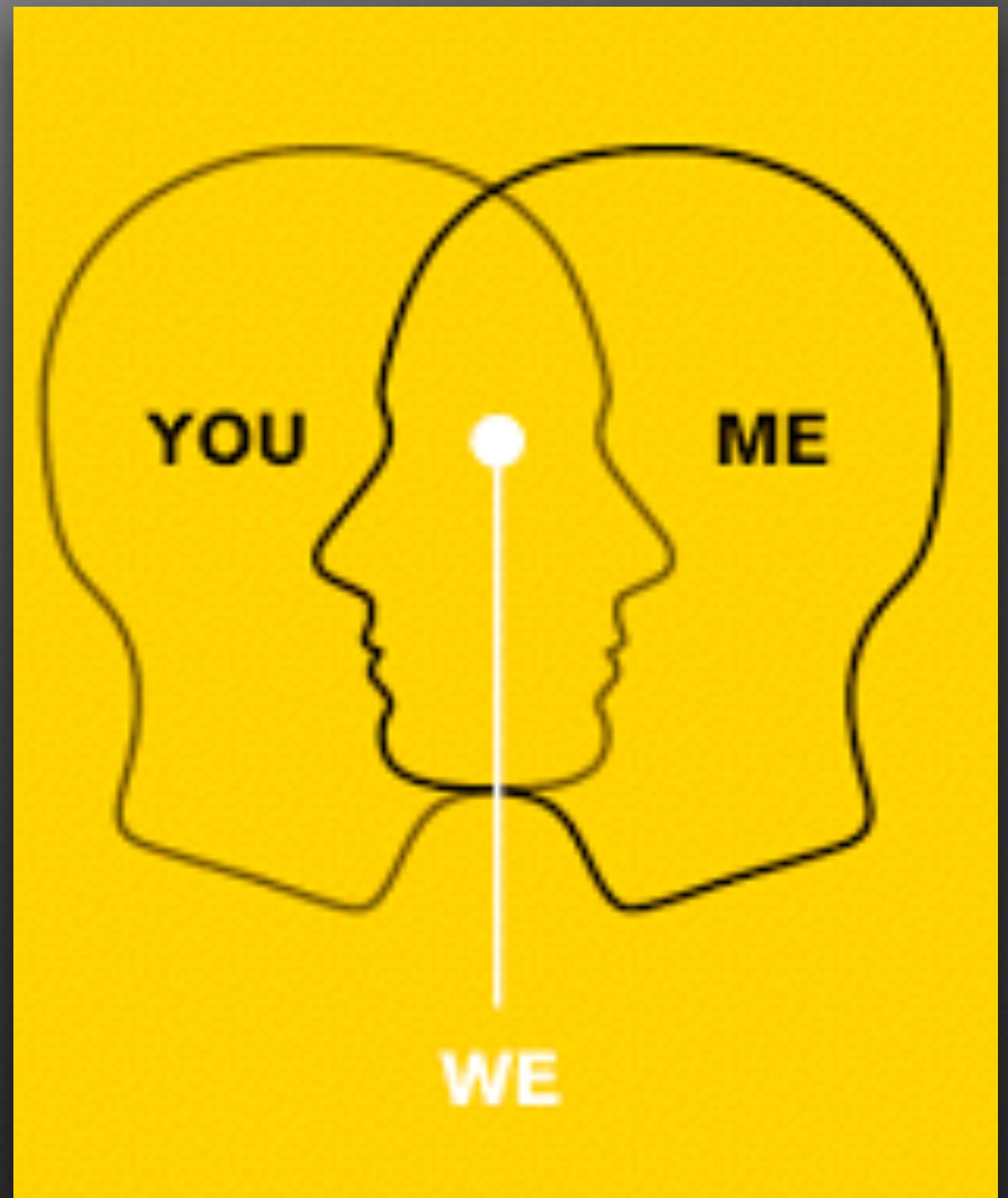
Emotions

- Unregulated emotions
- Can't tolerate distress so blame others
- Avoid responsibility for any part of the problem
- Negative emotions dominate thinking; look for the negative



Emotions

- Difficulty empathizing with others
- Lack self-awareness, especially regarding the effects of their own interpersonal behavior on others.
- Relationships: poor impulse control, impaired thoughts and reactivity



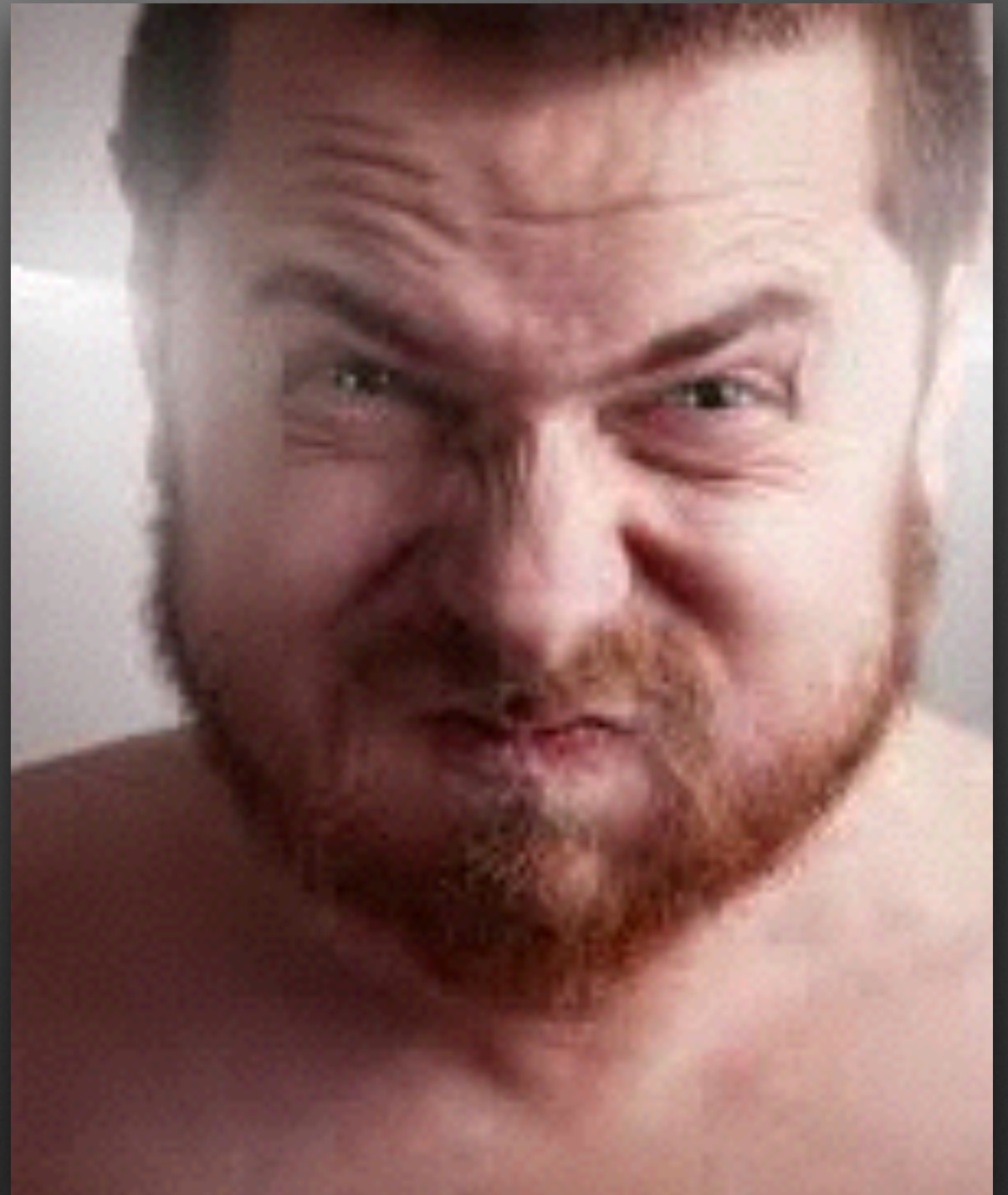
Emotions

- Intense- dramatic and emotional appeals, used to manipulate making rational conversation or conflict resolution difficult.
- Used to charm others and get sympathy



Anger

- Excessive anger from past disappointments and emotional neglect
- Don't admit to anger or handle it in appropriate ways
- Used to influence, keep people away and to control



Actions and Consequences

- Not connected-blind spots
- Extreme action follows intense emotions—yelling, disrespect, silent treatment, rumors, hitting, stalking, threatening, lying
- Push others away-don't want to lose control
- Blaming leads to feeling stronger and safe. Attack vs reflect



Actions

- Don't change their behavior, even when receiving repeated negative feedback
- Don't want to solve, want advocates—Seek allies to be on their side
- Lie -often feel desperate
- Bring up the past
- Look to punish those who have hurt them



How do you know?

- During conflict—When you question, confront, hold accountable = escalation, drama, manipulation and a loose grip of the facts
- Self-defeating patterns that continue to distance them in relationships



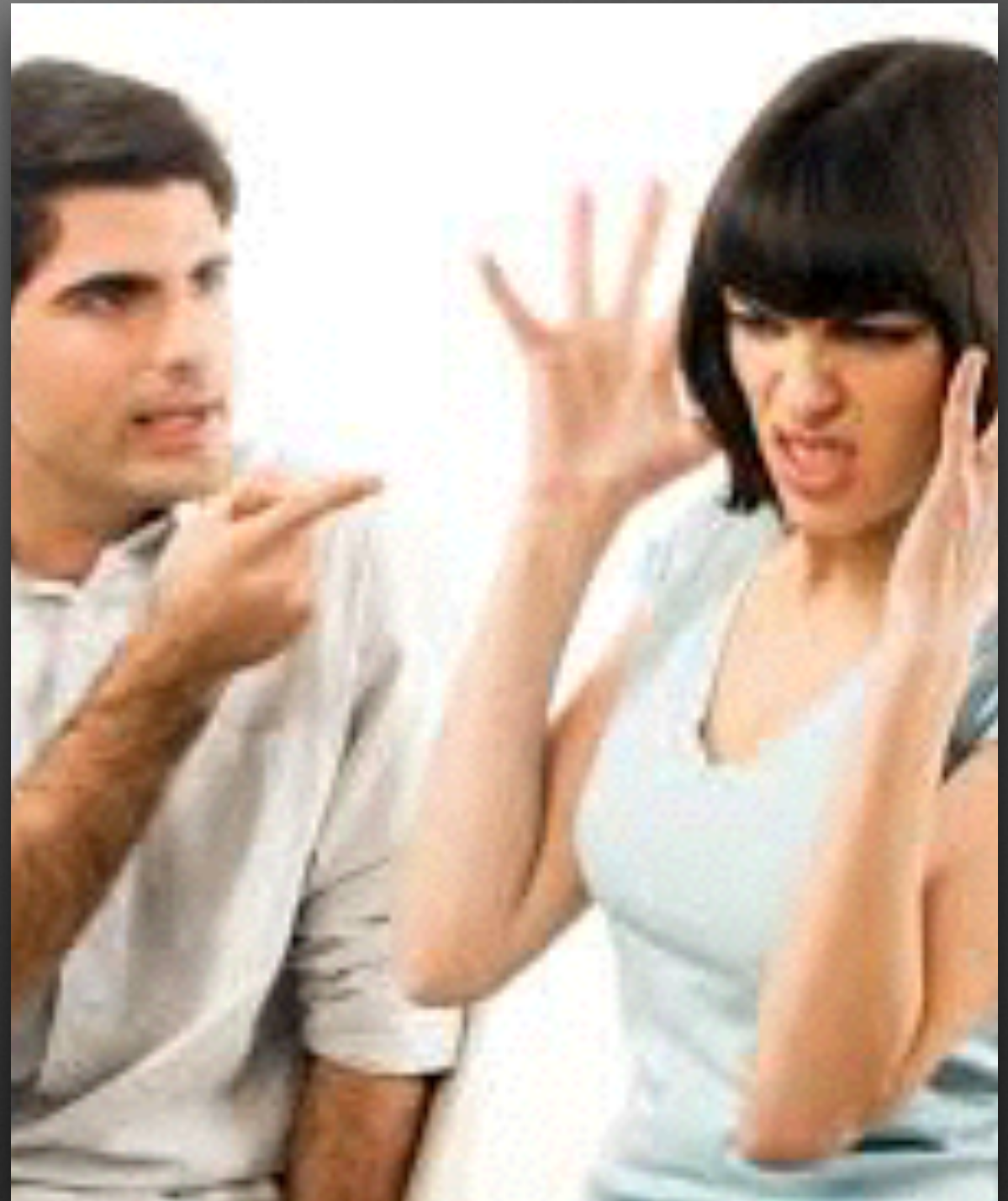
Conflict

- Escalating conflict often characterizes couples who divorce early
- The absence of both negative and positive affect during conflict=emotionally disengaged interaction pattern which often leads to divorce



General Guidelines

- Don't tell the person that they are high conflict or have a personality disorder—this labeling backfires, escalates rage and irrationality
- Instead, listen, show empathy and respect to lower defenses and make room to begin to develop trust



Guidelines

- Don't fight back or prove you are right: Doesn't work, will try to find allies to prove you wrong.
- Stay calm: When things escalate, say, "We can revisit this when we are both calmer."
- Assess your safety: Don't confront when there is domestic violence, serial infidelity or out of control spending unless you are safe and controls are in place

Guidelines

- Do not react to their emotions-this distracts from the issue and leads to more blame
- Instead, relate to the person around tasks that need to be done or solutions
- Focus only on behavior
- Think like a detective—just the facts



Guidelines

- Choose your battles: High conflict people like to fight and have drama
- Minimize contact
- Aware of triggers and develop better coping



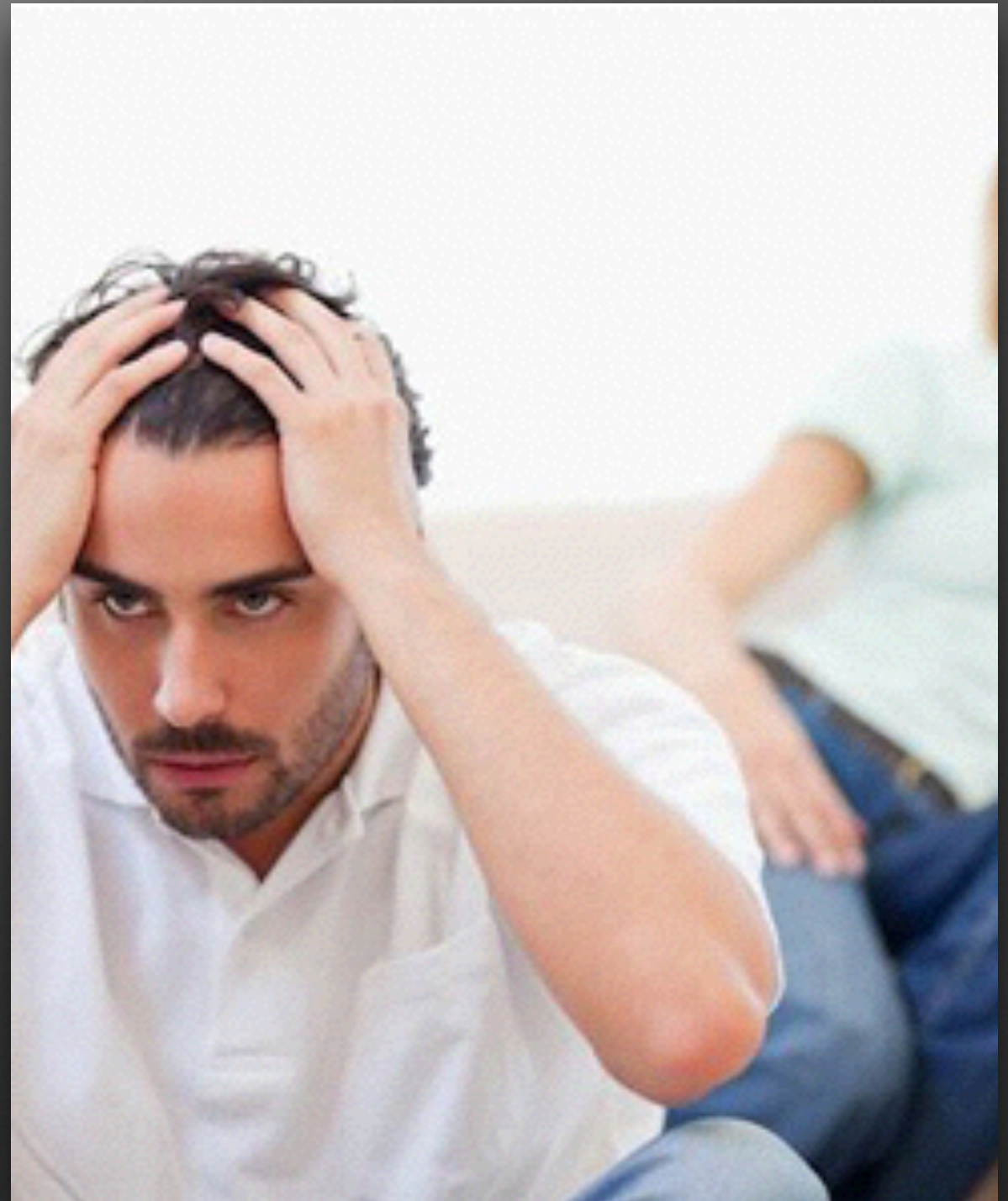
Guidelines

Thanks for...
Not Yelling

- Set a structure and expectations for the conflict talk:
Rules for fair fighting— no yelling, name calling, interrupting
- Meet in a public place if that helps keep things calm

Guidelines

- Keep emotions from escalating: Eliminate push back
- “I understand your frustration. I am paying attention to how you feel and what you say.”
“Let’s see if we can come up with a solution.” “You may be right. Tell me more.”



Guidelines

- Establish boundaries: If a boundary is violated be calm but firm, don't bend
- Repeat the expectation and revisit rules
- Do not ignore the person because it triggers feelings of abandonment



Guidelines

- Disengage from the drama and manage your own thoughts: take a time-out, concentrate on your reaction.
- Do not bring in allies to advocates for your position: If you need a mediator, OK.



Guidelines

- Do reality testing: Can do this in indirect ways.
- EX: “ Sometimes people get really angry at others when they are hurt and want to make them pay. Do you know what I mean?”



Guidelines

- Be patient: Change is slow. Person has to see the benefits of trying and making change.
- Talk about the elements of a healthy relationship. Help the person see that certain behaviors are more effective in relationship than others (See healthy relationships on next slide)



Guidelines

- Avoid—blaming, criticizing, idealizing, projecting, raging, embarrassing, demeaning, yelling, lying and needing to be right.
- Instead—respect each other, support, empathy, sharing thoughts and feelings without fear of negativity, mutual trust, honesty, fidelity.

SUM: Guidelines

- Identify what triggers conflict
- Avoid “...but”
- Exit strategies if conflict gets out of hand, “When we talk, it needs to be respectful.”
- Identify the inappropriate behavior and ask the person to stop in order to continue
- Control your part



Case

- Married couple in their late 30s with 2 children ages 6 and 8. Both Christians. Husband with narcissistic personality traits or disorder in a high conflict relationship with his wife. Pornography issue for years, which he minimizes and blames wife for her “lack of caring for him.” Resident and under much job stress.
- Wife impulsive and confrontational. Histrionic traits. Fearful he will start using porn again and policing his behavior. Brings up the issue often due to his avoidance of it. Stay at home mom who works at a glamor job for fun. Talks to him like he is one of her children.

Attack-Attack

- "You always put me down. Can't you ever just get off my back? And then you wonder why I never want to tell you anything?!"
- "Who would want to talk to you when you are so self focused! You never think about my needs. It's all about you."
- "Maybe if you stopped thinking about yourself so much, you could meet my needs and I would be nicer."
- KEY: Bring the conflict to a close until we both calm down (Intentional strategy with a goal in mind—down regulating the conflict)

Fought Intensely

- 4 Horseman present
- Attachment injuries (both insecure)
- Emotional distancing and silence
- Negative Sentiment Override
- Flooding
- Fragile friendship and romance

Negative Sentiment Override

- Neutral acts are seen as negative
- Don't respect and turn away
- Broken trust
- Fail to recognize partners positive gestures 50% of the time
- The more negative, the more problems communicating

Goals

- Not uncovering ego defenses
- Assess safety: If there are dangerous behaviors like domestic violence, make sure safety and controls are in place.
- Gottman distinguishes between character violence and situational violence (workable)
- Situational domestic violence, both people play a role in the violence and take some measure of equal responsibility.
- Characterological- perpetrators externalize blame and have attitude that the other person's words were just as violent as their physical violence.

Conflict Goals

- More constructive dialogue, not necessarily conflict resolution or who is right.
- Dialogue without escalating negative affect (down regulate), especially contempt



Reduce the 4 Horseman

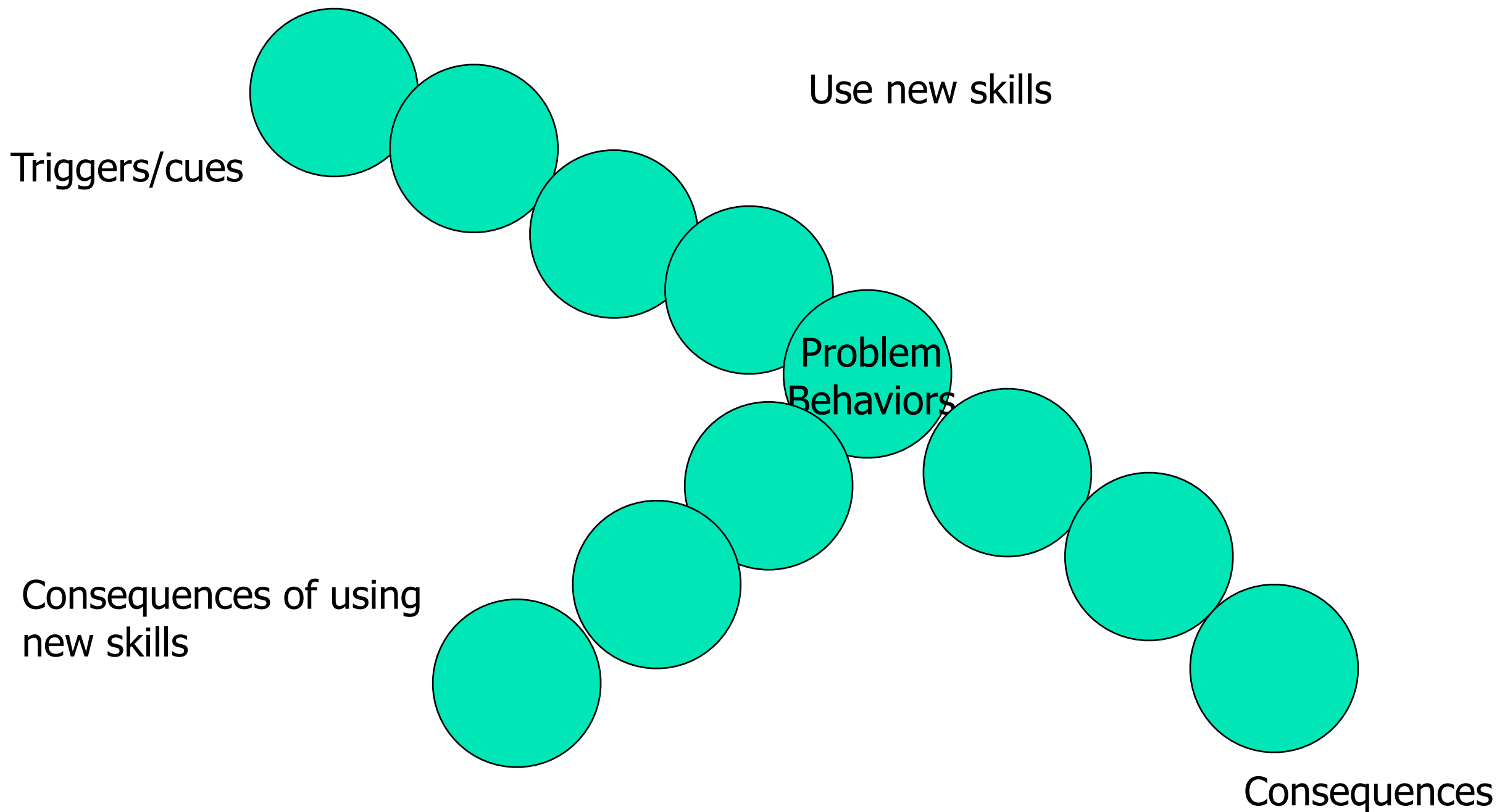
- Stop interactions when they appear, especially contempt--ring a chime, kitchen timer, video playback
- Complaint versus criticism; Stop insults, put downs or name-calling (contempt) and be respectful
- Take responsibility for even a small part of the problem versus becoming defensive

Ongoing Problems

- What matters--not that the conflict isn't resolved, but that the affect around the conflict is not resolved
- Identify triggers that escalate the conflict (often emotional injuries)



Chain analysis



Thought Triggers: Fears

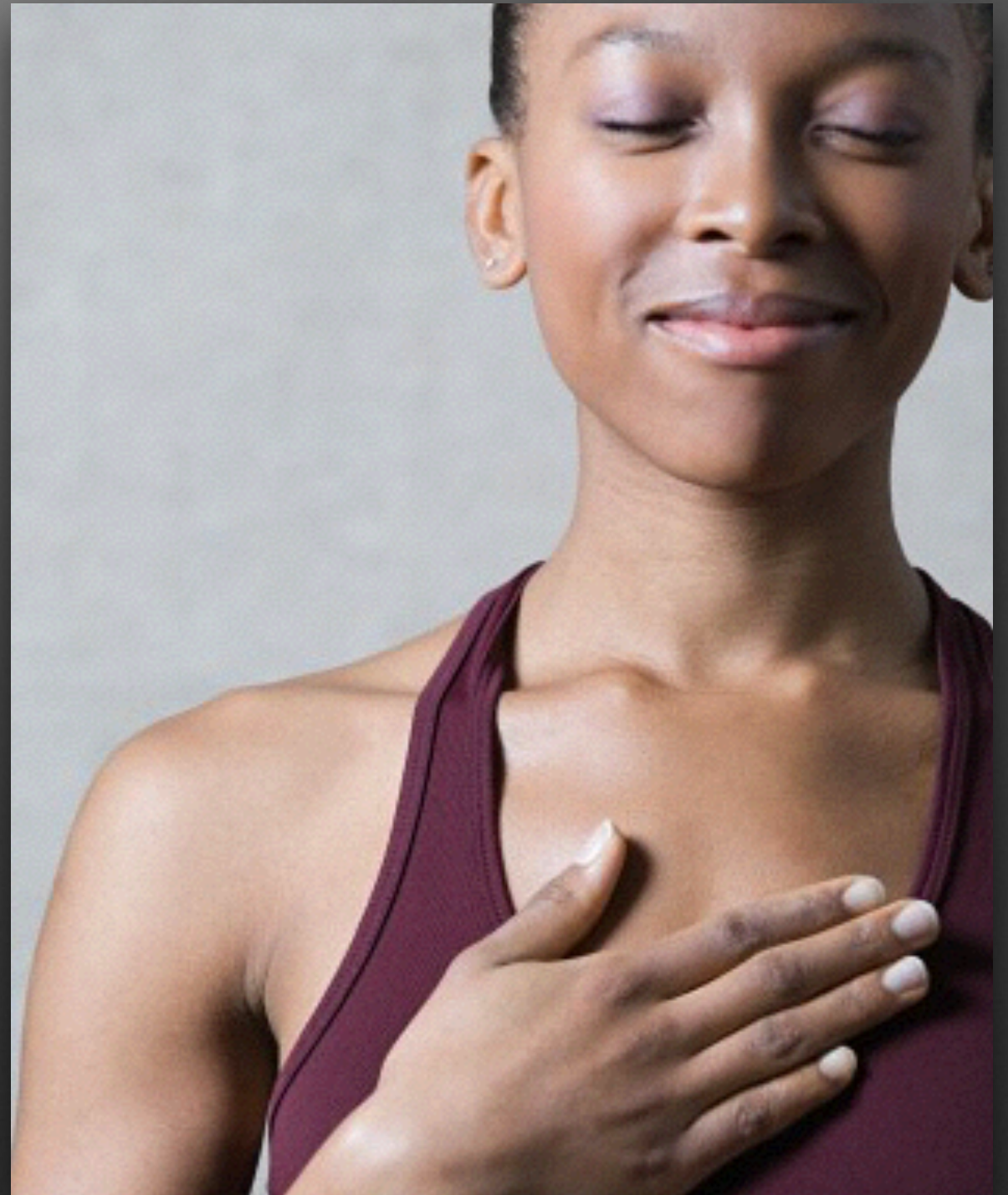
- **Borderline:** an unconscious and extreme fear of abandonment
- **Narcissistic:** an unconscious and extreme fear of being inferior or helpless. This drives extreme efforts to be seen as superior and to insult and demean others (which tend to push people to insult them and see them as inferior).
- **Histrionic:** an unconscious and extreme fear of being ignored. This drives them to be constantly dramatic and intense (which tends to push people to try to ignore them).
- **Antisocial:** an unconscious and extreme fear of being dominated by others. This drives extreme efforts to dominate, manipulate, deceive and harm others (which tends to get them in legal trouble and often locked up).
- **Paranoid:** an unconscious and extreme fear of be betrayed by those close to them. This drives them to assume plots and conspiracies, so they hold unwarranted grudges and attack others first to protect themselves (which pushes people to be afraid to be direct with them and therefore they make secret efforts to get rid of them).

Treatment: Thoughts

- CBT: Cognitive restructuring and automatic thoughts
- Schema Therapy: Help with maladaptive schemas from childhood creating thought triggers
- ACT: Encourage positive thoughts and behaviors while experiencing distressful ones; recognize distressing thought and feeling, but detach emotion from them- stay present minded and control the uncomfortable experience.

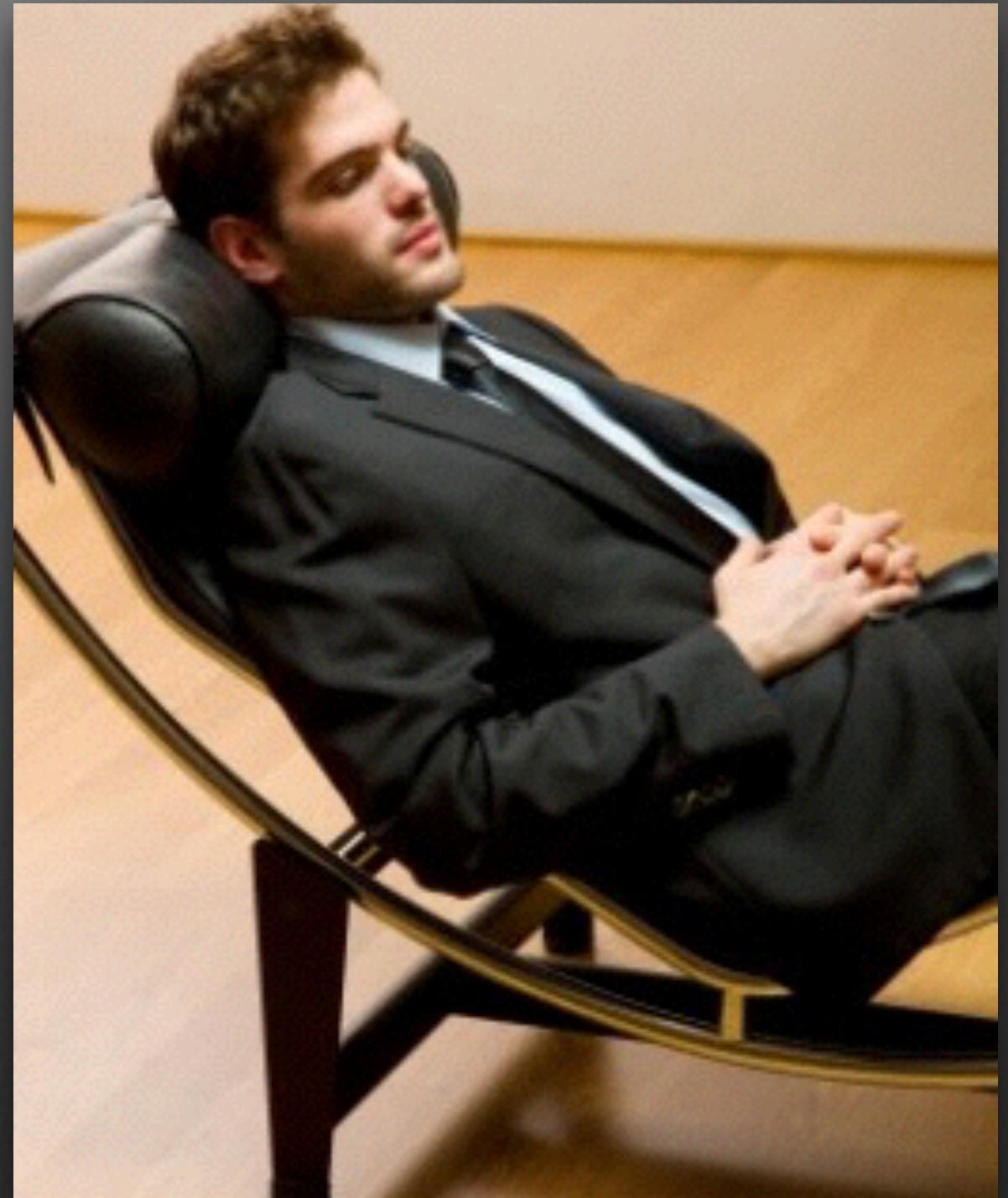
Predicts Improvement

- Catharsis theory of anger doesn't work. Expressing anger leads to more anger.
- Physiological soothing for arousal
- Teach calming down techniques



Physiological Soothing

- Use to down regulate the conflict
- Muscle relaxation, deep breathing, time out with distraction, biofeedback, etc.
- Less than 100 beats per minute to keep from flooding
- Flooding—re-engage the cortex



Treatment Goals

- Tolerate distress
- Don't trust your perceptions
- Regulate emotions and control anger
- Exercise forgiveness
- Learn empathy

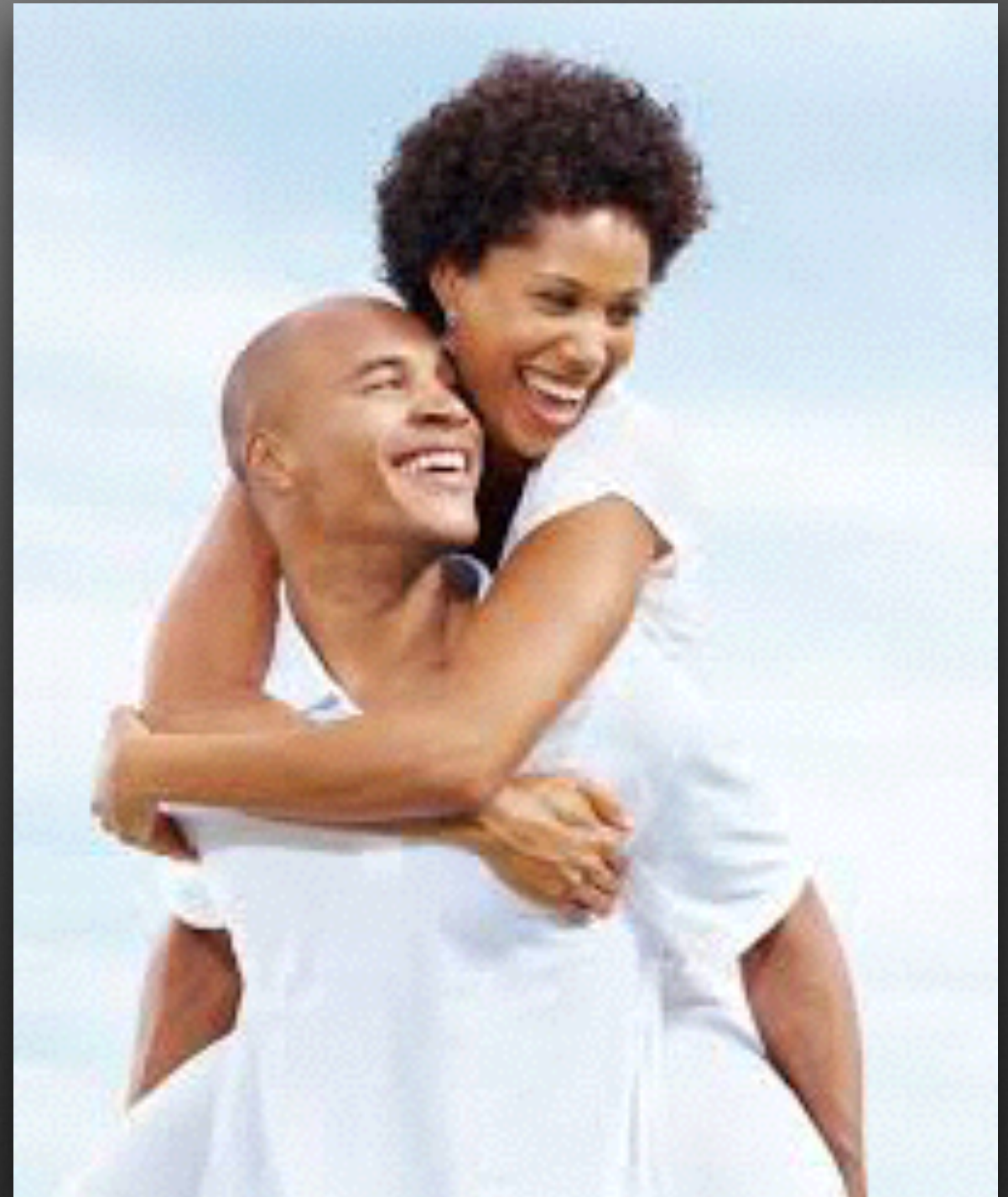


Goal: Build Positive Affect During Non-Conflict

- Turn towards- recognize the bids for emotional connection
- Build the friendship in non conflict times
- Express fondness and admiration for small things
- Increasing mindfulness of positives
- Willing to meet needs and wants

Positive Affect

- Build affection, passion, romance and good sex
- Emotional attachment in the mundane--attention, interest, support, shared humor, etc.



Treatment: Skill Modules



**KEEP
CALM**

AND

**USE YOUR
DBT SKILLS**

Skill Modules

- Core mindfulness—observe, define and participate without judging or trying to change (Wise Mind, Pros and Cons, Radical acceptance, etc.)
- Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills—effective ways of meeting goals with other people (Assertiveness and problem solving)

Skill Modules

- Emotional regulation skills—changing distressed emotional states, tolerating emotions (identify and label emotions); 4 skills
- Distress tolerance skills—acceptance of pain and ways to self-soothe (prayer). Pain cannot be avoided; 5 specific skills



- Helps for the partner who turns away and is dismissing and for the partner who is abandoned

Spiritual Help

- Learn to put trust in God, not people. This means looking to God for esteem and identity and developing a healthy view of God.
- Seek healing in places of hurt
- Be patient as God continues to do a good work in you
- Practice, practice practice new ways to respond!

Countertransference

- Dealing with rage, boundary violations, neediness, threats, demands, attention seeking behaviors, etc.
- Demands on your time
- Emotional exhaustion

Countertransference

- What is learned can be unlearned: Philippians 1:6—the good work that God began in us will be completed
- Defensive and self-protective vs. bad; coming from a place of pain
- Don't get pulled into the drama, stay focused on the issue and process

Countertransference

- Keep a systems view: The couple, family is your client, don't align with "victim" —change the patterns, learn new skills
- If the person becomes hostile or verbally abusive, confront calmly and be specific about the behavior. **Emotion is overruling logic, so bring the person back to logic**—stop yelling and we can talk. Time out

The Challenge of Love

LOVE
YOUR ENEMIES
DO GOOD
TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU
BLESS
THOSE WHO CURSE YOU
PRAY FOR
THOSE WHO MISTREAT YOU.

JESUS



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Resources

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