

TMFRS

LET'S MAKE SENSE OF YER STUPID FUCKING BRAIN

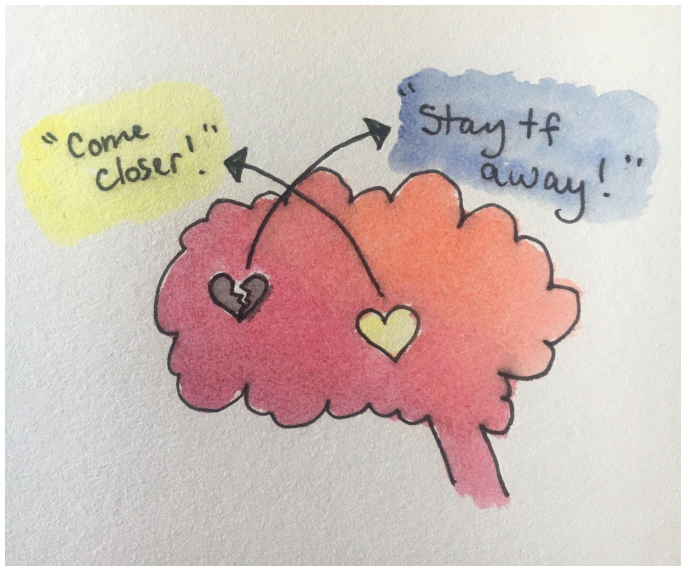
Vulnerability, Intimacy, Trust| Barriers to Connective Relationships

What's standing in your way of healing connections?

Early Spring 2023

Post-traumatic Brains vs. Human Relations

So, we're coming back to keep talking about relationships. This time, a lot of what's *missing*, which prevents us from being able to be successful. Especially long term.



For many of us, we feel lonely and seek connection... only to find that we feel ill-equipped to actually do the thing. To relate openly and honestly. To let people in. To let down our guards and allow folks to scale the walls we've built without launching fireballs and arrows at them.

All while ALSO exclaiming, internally, "please come closer, where are you going, and what's wrong with me?"

We desperately want social lives, but we're also terrified by them. Thoughts go one direction. Five minutes later,

circumstances change and they go another. So do our feelings and behaviors. Leaving us pushing people away or jumping in too hard, sometimes cyclically, to everyone's confusion and dismay. Your Self included.

This month, let's talk about the blockages in finding the deep, lasting, connections that we really need. Issues with vulnerability, intimacy, and trust... between ourselves and the other person. And then within our own systems.

To open the conversation, let's at least define the three terms.

Vulnerability - the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.

Intimacy - close familiarity or friendship; closeness.

Trust - firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.

So, vulnerability is rolling over and showing someone your belly, aware they could stab at any time. Intimacy is allowing them to get close enough to you to do the stabbing. And trust is believing that they, in fact, will *not* stab you, so it's okay to allow this to happen.

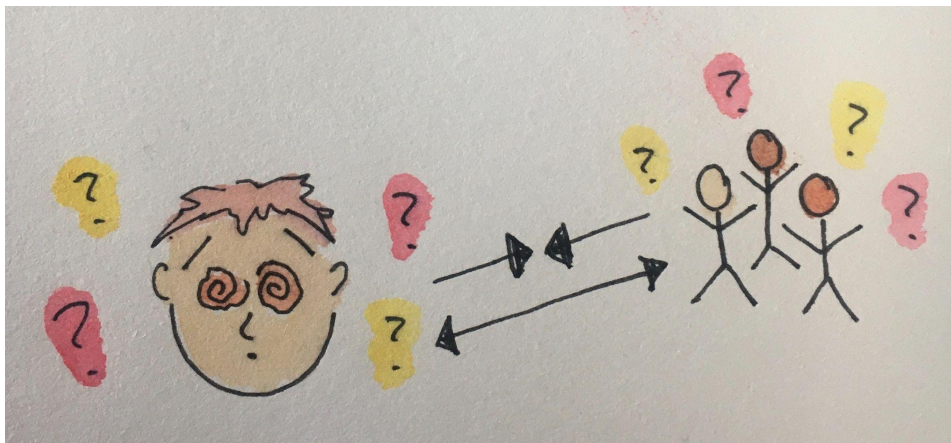
And from my language in that mini metaphor, I'm guessing you can already see how I assess relationships. The first word that comes up is "stab."

But in the context of CPTSD, it all makes a lot of sense, right?

We're raised lacking these things - no healthy presentation or demonstration of vulnerability, intimacy, or trust. Our parents were too busy, too dysregulated, too reactive, too controlling, paranoid, and afraid of authentic human connection. Too emotionally shut down themselves, to offer us anything in that department.

So we develop these scarcity mindsets around relationships and emotional relatability. We're deprived of them, so we desire them. We create big stories about what they mean about us, what they'll feel like if we ever achieve them, and what it implies if we don't.

And then we go into relationships swinging.

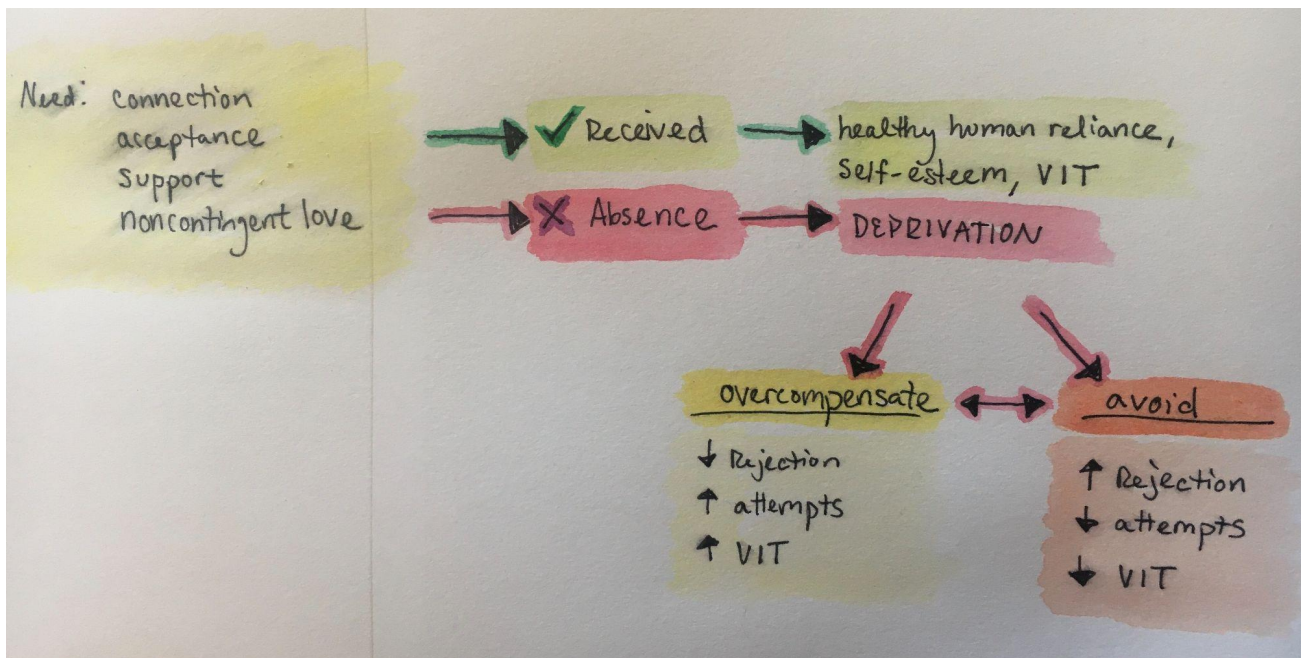


Our development hinges on positive social interactions and emotional support. We innately seem to come pre-programmed, desiring and expecting it as cornerstones of the human experience.

Actually, I heard an interesting theory the other day. They posited that humans evolved to be humans AROUND their emotional needs. To have connection in life is so essential to the human experience that we emerged as organisms with brains developed *for the purpose of* experiencing love, compassion, and acceptance.

When we don't receive those close, intimate, bonds early in life? Our brain is literally missing one of the crucial resources that it developed to operate on.

Hence, no matter which way you originally swung - anxious and boundless attacher or avoidant and relationally shut down attacher... the human think box is going to estimate that something critical is missing. And drive you to fill that need.



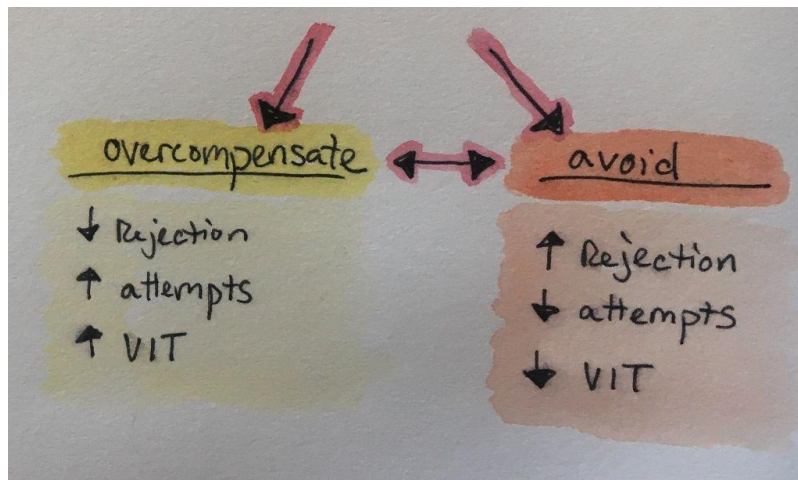
The disaster we run into, time after time, being... we don't *know how* to meet that need for ourselves, after it was never fulfilled by the folks who were tasked with providing it. Our core understanding of relationships doesn't involve vulnerability, intimacy, or trust. And we have no experience accepting or giving it.

Eventually, with intimacy, vulnerability, and trust becoming both heroes and villains to us.

Or, deciding it's easier and safer not to try at all. With intimacy, vulnerability, and trust remaining numbed out, unfulfilled needs that we have extreme avoidant responses to.

Either way, the necessity for them doesn't go away. Our need for connection doesn't disappear. Our sense of loneliness doesn't truly dissipate, we just learn to shield ourselves from it.

Because of our cognitive worlds and status as meaning-making creatures with survival programs at the forefront of our concerns will continue the fight against the biological battle we're stuck in. A brain that screams out for closeness, and rejects it just as quickly.



So this is from a paper called...

Themes in experiences of PTSD symptoms and relationships among male veterans with risky sexual behavior.

This paper focuses on "intimacy" in relationship to sex, in particular. But notice that intimacy is separate from sex. We can have very un-intimate intimate encounters, and that's one way of meeting some of our social and biological needs without dipping into the risk known as "actually caring." High Risk Sexual Behavior (HRSB) being one way that we do this.

So, keep "intimacy" and "sex" as two separate events in your brain as we read through this. When we're talking about VIT this month, we're not referring only to romantic relationships or bodily encounters. Intimacy can happen with clothes involved. Just wanted to make that point clear.

Now, they say:

In addition to speaking about sex as a distraction, comfort, or ego boost, participants also spoke about how sex outside a committed, intimate relationship avoided the risk of getting close to another person. "Risky" sex of this type allowed participants to feel connected without the vulnerability that comes with intimacy, and specifically the risk of being misunderstood. They also shared that sex without intimacy could be frustrating given the lack of connection.

While almost all participants were sexually active with more than one person, many talked about their efforts to avoid intimacy with those people. In some cases, this took the form of a mutual agreement to stick to companionship and sex without long-term commitment.

Participant 3 described his relationship with one of his sexual partners: . . . She knows I'm busy right now and she probably feels something else. It's always been two-sided; we know what we want from each other.

(Hear a Manager in there?)

"We're busy, there's no time for more. And I think they agree, since they haven't said otherwise." We see a protective response, in which addressing the issue isn't a priority.

Instead, they choose to keep that conversation off the table and lean on "I'm busy, she knows, and I presume I know what she feels and vice versa." A manager tactic, probably at the expense of some exiles, who miiiiight actually crave an intimate connection.

And, obviously, poor communication, being justified as "well it's been working, I assume, so why rock the boat?" Might accidentally get closer if you did that, even if the conversation was about remaining distant. Apparently to this participant that's a "yikes."

Participant 3 described his discomfort with a second partner, who was interested in greater commitment: "I was probably over at her house and talking about [holiday] plans and her wanting to meet my family and vice versa. I keep telling her no it's okay, we're just friendly, we're not on that level yet, we're not girlfriend/boyfriend. You don't need to meet my family right now, things like that . . . I don't want to put a label on the relationship. I don't think that I'm boyfriend material just yet."

(What do we hear here? Putting up blocks to keep someone safely at a distance? Avoiding the fear of intimacy? Keeping family and interpersonal relationships separate... perhaps to keep the relationship within certain bounds - which, sure, no problem. If that's being communicated the way he describes and the partner agrees, there's no issue there.

But don't you think this is perhaps, also, to keep this partner from *knowing* his family, and therefore *knowing* him better.

And another thing we hear from participant three in that statement... Self-doubt that they're ready for a relationship yet? Distrust in themselves to be a good partner, on who knows how many

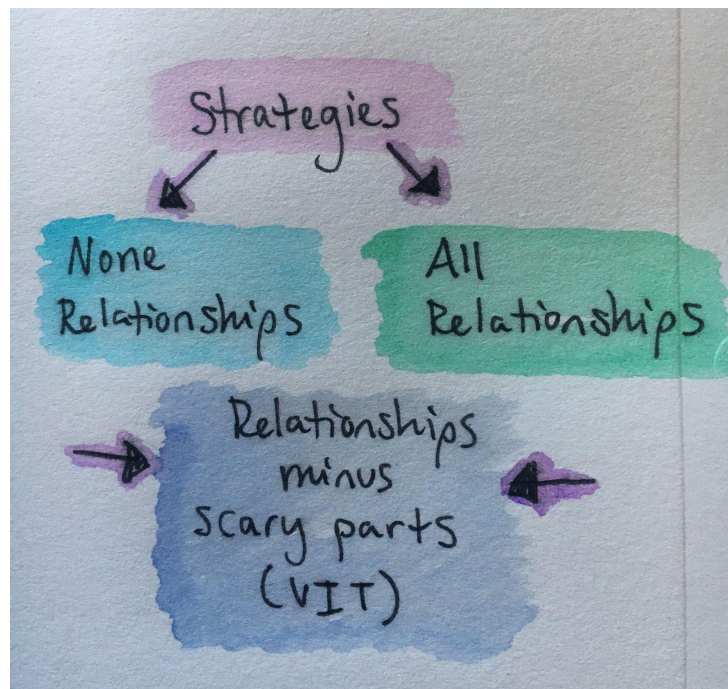
levels? Uncertainty that they're worthy or capable of supporting someone else in the ways they need?

The authors continue with another individual:)

Participant 46 differentiated an intimate partner from other partners he sought for sex alone. As he explained: "Some of the other people I would seek out would be on the basis of, "this is what it is and that's it, and there's nothing and never going to be anything else."

(So, here we have a nice demonstration of choosing people you don't consider viable options on purpose. Picking from the "unavailable" pile so everyone is on the same page. Or choosing folks in relationships who obviously aren't going to work out... so that there's no danger of things working out.

If it's short term because you actually feel nothing for the person and the same is returned in your direction, there's no fear! There are boundaries automatically instilled around the relationship, because your brain simply can't comprehend anything else happening with them. No dangerous attachment problems to worry about - because you're NOT attached, THEY'RE not attached, and that's the foundation of everything.



There's no mystery. There's nothing to obsess over. There's nothing to strive for. It just is what it is, a low-risk, low-cost, low-interest, (low-reward) relationship to pass the time.

It also sounds to me like the common self-protective penchant for choosing people who are in other relationships. Or people who aren't OVER other relationships. Or people who are married to their jobs. Or, those who are obviously emotionally unavailable.

Why do we do it? So we have no expectations, we assume they have no expectations, and there's less potential trouble in our relational trauma neurons.

But let's hear what else Participant 46 has to say, about one relationship that DOESN'T fall into this category of protective strategies. He says:)

Then there's one who can make me upset . . . I really wouldn't seek her out all the time but she's very . . . I've known her for years and it's that intimate connection."

(And now we hear about having chosen ONE PERSON who offers a real, deep connection... who they seem to be very conflicted about. Of course.)

Hesitant to even speak of. They seem like they don't desire to explore the connection themselves, let alone allowing others to know about it.)

While Participant 3 described emotional detachment from his sexual partners, he also expressed frustration that those partners were not available for support: (idiot. My word.) "I don't have any emotional attachments to these women at all.

We're friends, but like right now they weren't all there for me . . . because that [holiday] weekend was pretty stressful for me and I tried to call them up and they were with their own families doing [holiday] stuff, so they weren't there, and then after that, they called me right after, like pretty much that week to see if I was okay, if I wanted to hangout, if I wanted to have sex. And I was like no, I don't want to. You guys weren't there for me during that time. . . I don't need them for the most part, because they aren't doing anything for me."

(So, Jesus fuck.

This asshole won't offer people true connection. But then expects them to be there for him, connection abound, when he needs them. He broke the usual relationship dynamic and attempted to receive support in his time of need... and then was surprised and hurt to find out that his casual partners didn't jump when he needed more.

He doesn't get what he wants - what some exiles were probably screaming about - so he does the "opposite logical" thing. Overcompensating, as we do.

He cuts them out of his life. Shows them who's boss with stonewalling and rapid dissolution of the relationships.

I'd assume this is being mediated through a manager part who assesses "this has been painful, let's go back to being alone and spiteful about it. Safer than wanting and not receiving."

So that's fun. And, again, so familiar. Anyone else have folks who keep themselves at a purposeful distance... until they need something?

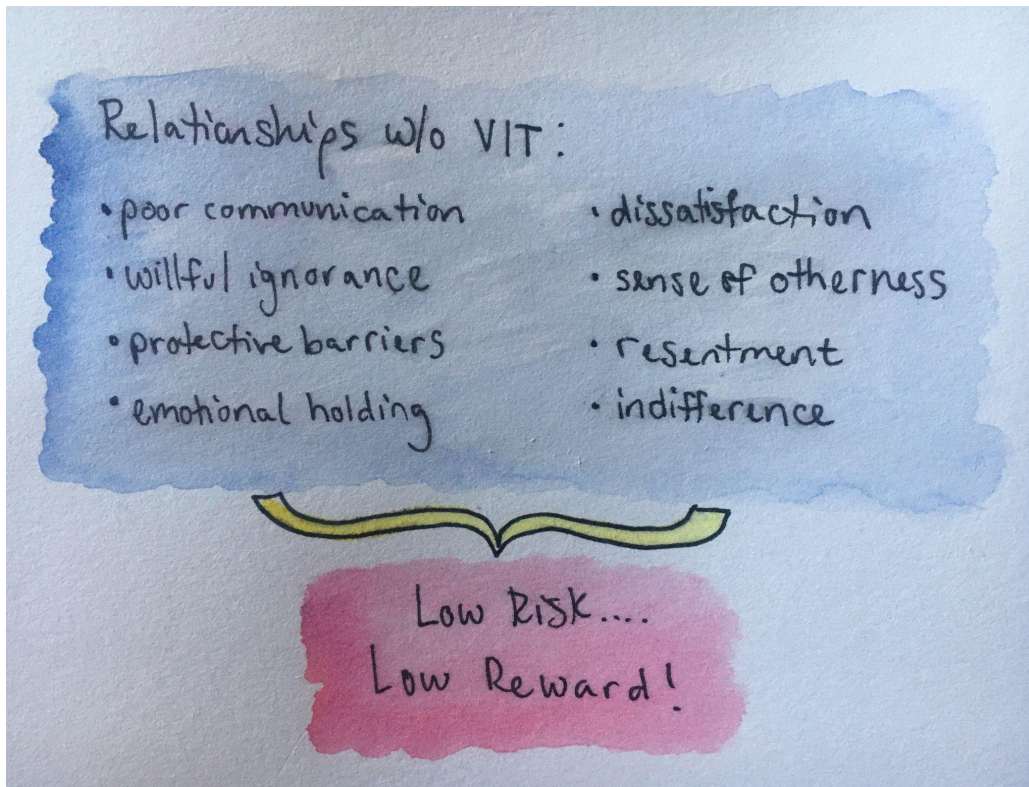
Participant 46 is a piece of unaccountable and self-unaware work. BUT, can't say that I don't understand it or identify with it, myself, in younger forms.

But let's keep going:)

Participant 32 explained how his inability to be emotionally engaged prevented his relationships from developing: "the girl I was seeing completely broke it off and accused me (well, it's true) I was emotionless and didn't seem to care about anything and it's true."

(Hey, self awareness. That's nice to read.

But also, more evidence of using a cold, emotionally shut-down approach to save one's own ass... only to find that ass is going down, because of being cold and emotionally shut down. Manager parts, if you ask me.



So he knows what he wants and knows what he did wrong. But that doesn't mean he knows how to move forward. Something that I think many of us experience. True needs, eclipsed by the instinct to hunker down and the realization that we're not acting in the way that benefits us.

And I've got one more for you:)

Participant 20 explained that while some sexual encounters included an emotional attachment which he found positive, other encounters were quickly followed by "bad thoughts": "...if I have any sort of feelings toward the person then [after sex] it's still relatively on a high. If I just have sex with them to have sex, I want them away from me and it sometimes brings me lower, all that desire and thought is out of my head and it leaves room for bad thoughts thinking about overseas stuff."

(Hmmm. Complicated.

And here, we tag someone's obvious distractor parts at work. "I don't want to be left alone with my thoughts, I use sex to silence them. Once it's over, if I don't feel emotionally connected to the person, (AKA if the exiles start riling again, because they aren't being supported emotionally) then I'm back to thinking unwanted thoughts again.

Obviously, some parts feel that it's wrong to have emotionless sex. But some parts feel like it's the path of least resistance... until the deed is done. Then the shame sets in and the individual starts revisiting traumatic events.

COULD emotionless sex and social distance be a trailhead to these traumatized parts? Seems like it.)

Now, if that didn't all sound like a lot of the same trauma bullshit as lots of us go through, I don't know what to tell you.

Possible difference being? These were folks who WERE engaged in relationships - just, opting for shallow and unfulfilling ones. They didn't talk to the folks who avoided others at all costs... and I think some of us fall into that cravase, as well. I know I do.

But let's dip even further into the crossover with CPTSD.

Just replace the word “veteran” with “traumatized motherfuckers” in your head and see if it tracks. Here we go:

An underlying theme connecting many of the participants’ experiences was feeling profoundly different after returning from service. This often meant feeling misunderstood by people they had existing relationships with, by new acquaintances, or, indeed, by society in general.

This is consistent with prior qualitative analyses of treatment-seeking veterans who described feeling misunderstood (Desai et al., 2016 ; Fischer et al., 2015). Prior studies of OEF/OIF veterans have reported veterans’ feeling that the only people who could understand them were other veterans (Rozanova et al., 2016), feeling isolated from their civilian family and friends, and feeling isolated from the military social support networks they had relied on during deployment (Koenig, Maquen, Monroy, Mayott, & Seal, 2014).

Another prominent theme was the effort participants engaged in to manage themselves. Adjusting to the new sense of self required intense self-management.

Many veterans in this sample had participated in mental health treatment. Some had tried many different types of treatment. In addition to engaging in treatment, participants described deliberately using coping strategies like music, exercise, spending time with loved ones or children, and using sex as a coping tool, consistent with prior studies indicating that coping behaviors used for PTSD symptoms are likely to vary considerably (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

(So, a lot of things that get in the way of forming intimate relationships, wouldn’t you say? The effort to correct our brains comes with a lot of occupation that detracts from having energy or interest in building close connection with others.

It can be exhausting, it can be time consuming, and it can be more important to us than relationship creation... because we fear those relationships and see them as counteractive to our other goals. Not realizing that relationships need to be a big part of those recovery goals.

Not to mention, we also have to adjust our sense of self after trauma, which requires a lot of focus through self-management techniques. When we’re intensively self-managing, we’re also likely to be intensively picky about who we let in. Not a bad thing, theoretically, but when we take it into black and white territory, we end up isolated.

Trying to refind that sense of Self is maybe half the battle of trauma recovery... or a lot more. Coming to terms with who we really are NOW, and also allowing others to see that transformation is not an easy feat.

Partially, because we find that we revert to old versions of self when we’re in their presence. Too many emotional trailheads to bargain with.

Next up, this is a paper called:

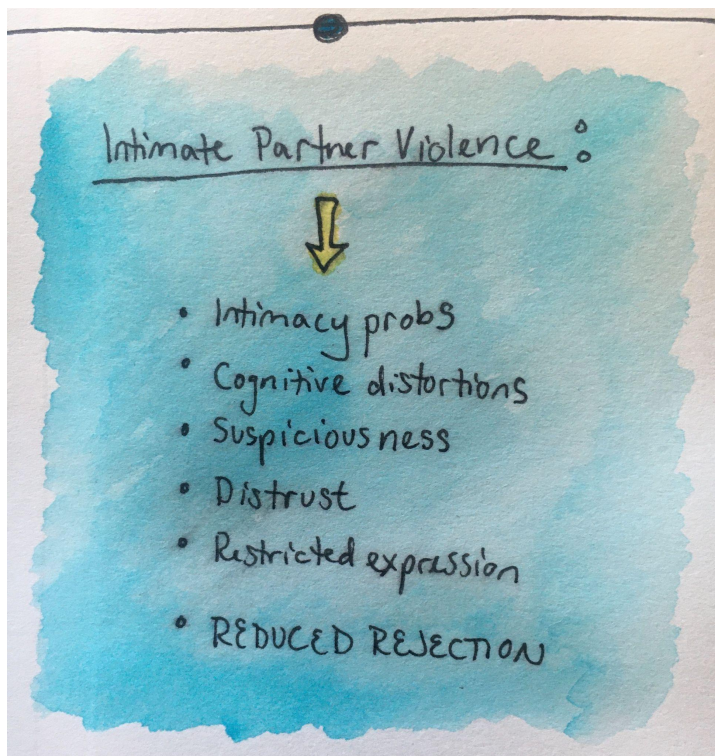
Relationship Between Intimate Partner Violence, Depressive Symptomatology, and Personality Traits

Where they tell us:

Higher scores in Intimacy Problems personality traits and lower scores in Rejection were highly associated in women with IPV after controlling for depressive symptoms in a case-control study.

The severity of IPV of women was a predictor factor for Intimacy Problems, Cognitive Distortion, Suspiciousness, and Restricted Expression personality traits.

Interestingly, the length of IPV was associated with lower Rejection.



(All those barriers in between the two parties will make true intimacy impossible. Or, regrettable, in the moments that they accidentally allow it.

Then, restricted expression rolls in to make sure that no one is even discussing what's happening for them. WHY they're feeling, thinking, and behaving this way won't be laid out on the table. Instead, those protector parts withdraw. They silence the rest of the brain. They endlessly monitor and self-edit to steer clear of danger.

And pretty soon no one is talking. Not honestly. The opposite of intimacy, vulnerability, and trust has taken over the dynamic.

Also, lastly, "to" mention... another very important point. The lower rates of rejection detected by IPV victims in the aftermath.

Which means, being more accepting of people following abuse. Being less likely to push others away or make highly discretionary choices when it comes to relationship partners. Which, to me, says "I don't think I'm worth enough to be discerning and I'll accept what other people are willing to give me with a very low bar."

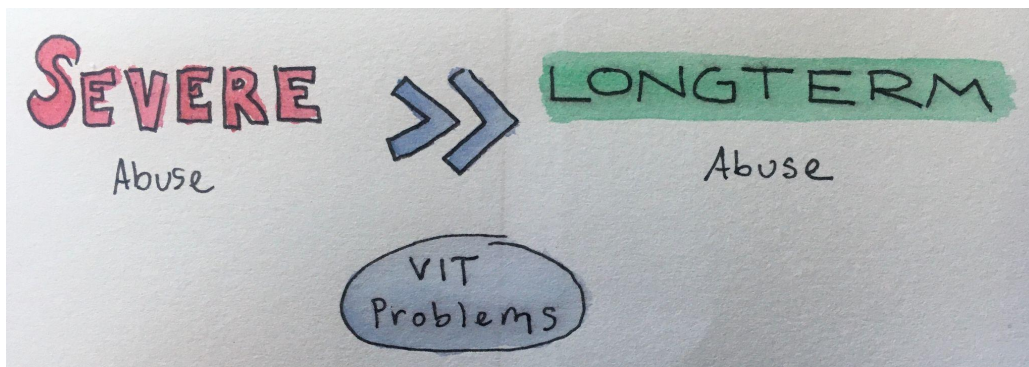
With a side of “I’ll take what I can get.”

Feel that you can’t reject others? You’re giving everyone an open pass to the theme park that is your own brain. And suffering the consequences while still blaming yourself.

So, all in all... No intimacy, cognitive distortions, high suspiciousness, and no self expression? This is what we experience after intimate partner violence.

Does that sound like a perfect storm for a continued life of abusive and distant relationships? Fearing intimacy, yet letting people in whether they deserve it or not?

But here are some additional words from the paper on the aftermath of intimate partner violence:)



Severity and length of IPV were predictors for different personality traits (the ones just previously described), supporting a dose-response effect that suggests that the personality disturbance was reactive to violence (Khan et al. 1993; Rollstin and Kern 1998).

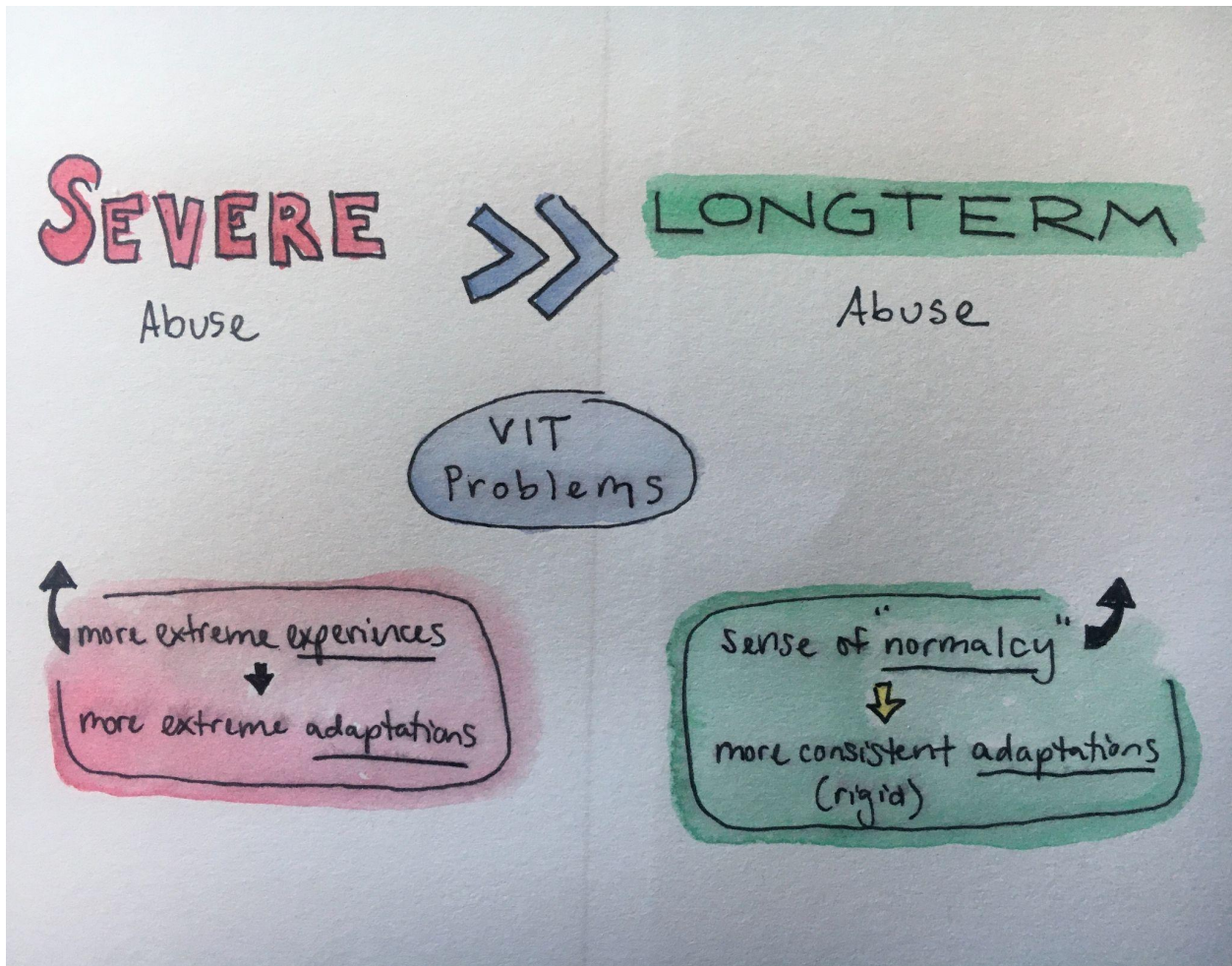
However, our results indicated that the severity of IPV was more predictive of psychological disturbance than the length of IPV, consistent with previous studies that also found an association between severity of IPV and the average clinical MMPI-II scores (Khan et al. 1993).

(MMPI-II is a “self-report inventory with 567 true-false questions about yourself. Your answers help mental health professionals determine whether you have symptoms of a mental illness or personality disorder”

So, the severity of abuse may be more significant for promoting these personality traits than the duration of the abuse... because it messes with our programming more.

Perhaps because it creates more extreme defenses in the individual, I’m guessing, than time alone would produce. Over time you might get used to the abuse, so it becomes “normalized,” but extreme bouts of acute abuse would change a brain fast and develop intense counter-programs.

Then, in the aftermath... you're left with those extreme patterns, minus the relationship where they were somehow adaptive. Leaving you with maladaptive relational programming.



Extremity of abuse is more significant than duration of abuse when it comes to intimacy... at least, according to this study.

We'll pick up with that point next time as we continue talking about VIT. Including... finding the research on why it's worth continuing to try to do the thing we're most terrified of, for fear of being misunderstood.

Reflection Q's

Do you struggle with forming close relationships? Maintaining them? Caring about them?

Which strategy do you most often choose - Complete human avoidance? Avoidance of CLOSE relationships? Or, avoidance of being alone (with your damn Self)?

Do you share your thoughts and feelings with others? Is there system backlash when you do?

Do you communicate openly and honestly about your wants/needs/capacities in relationships?

For both prior questions - what stops you? What is the underlying fear?

Do you ever *presume* everyone is on the same relational page, sometimes despite counterevidence of the opposite?

Do you engage in high-risk social behaviors? Jumping into relationship or bonership with others, before they've earned your trust?

When folks get "too close" what is your response? Or is "too close" N/A in your life?

Have you experienced intimate partner violence? How did it change your approach to relationships?

Do you struggle with cognitive distortions? Suspiciousness? Restricted self-expression? In what circumstances? What "self-protecting Manager part" might be holding the reins?

Is it difficult for you to "reject" people? Do you offer unconditional relationships, even when they're not good for you?

Why is it difficult (or way too easy) for you to reject others? What are the underlying thoughts, feelings, and fears?

How have severe abuse experiences altered your relationship approach?

What strategies do you use to keep yourself protected? Are they working? Do they meet your long-term needs? Is there a better strategy?