

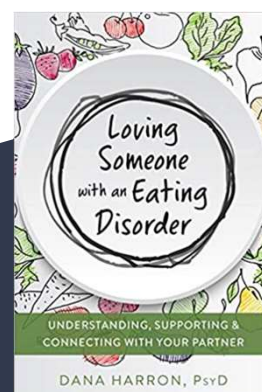
Partnering With Partners

Treating Eating Disorders Through a Couples' Counseling Lens



Dana Harron PsyD

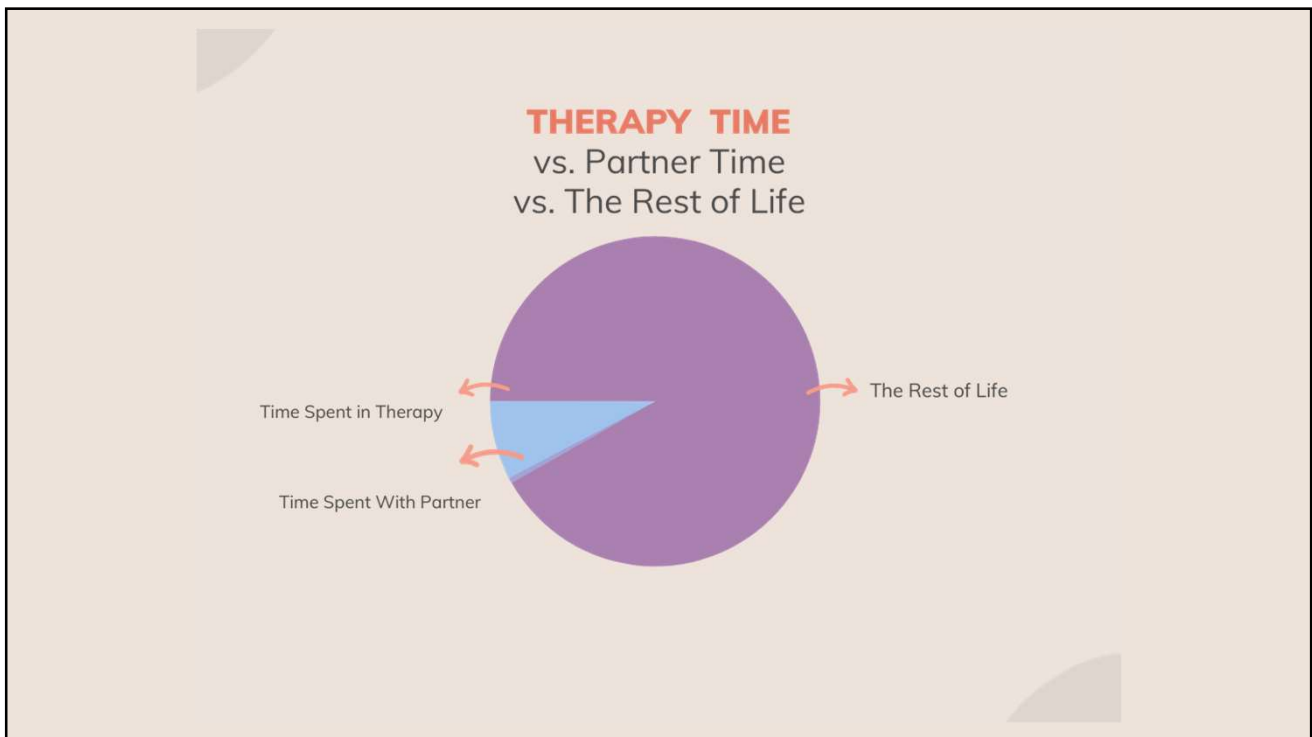
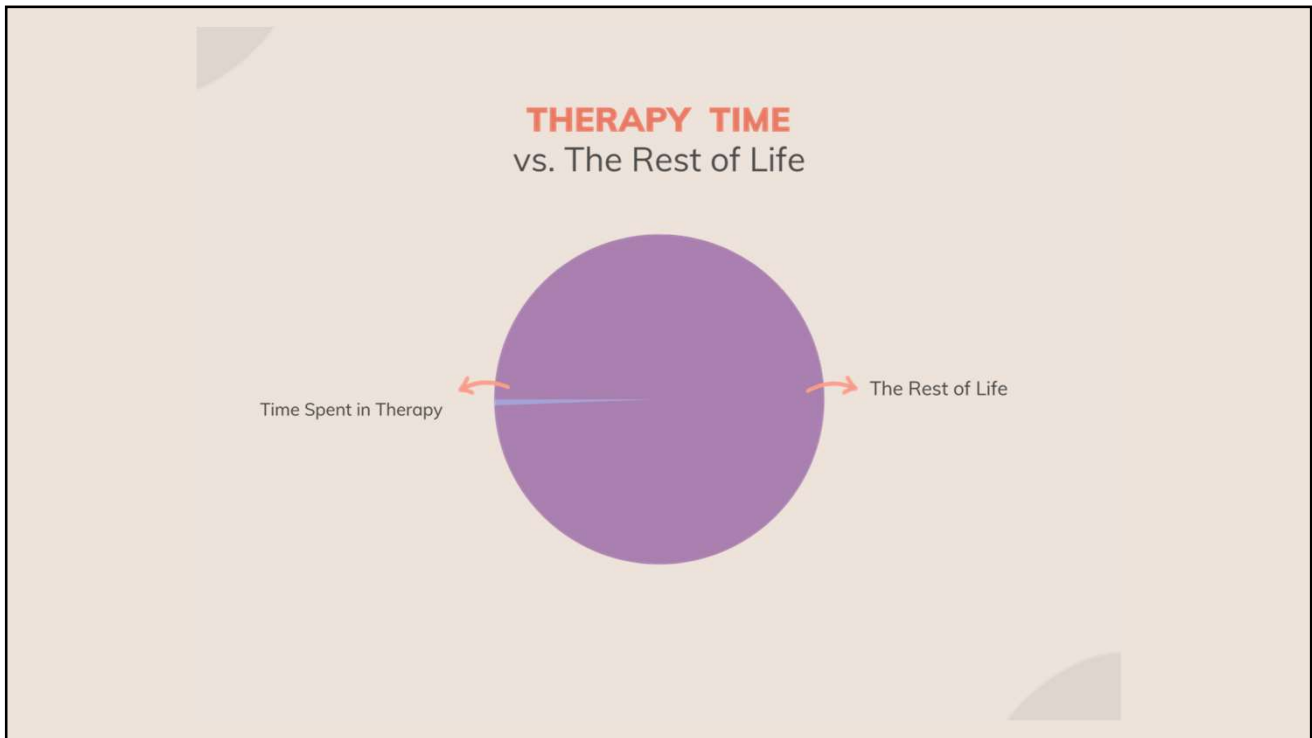
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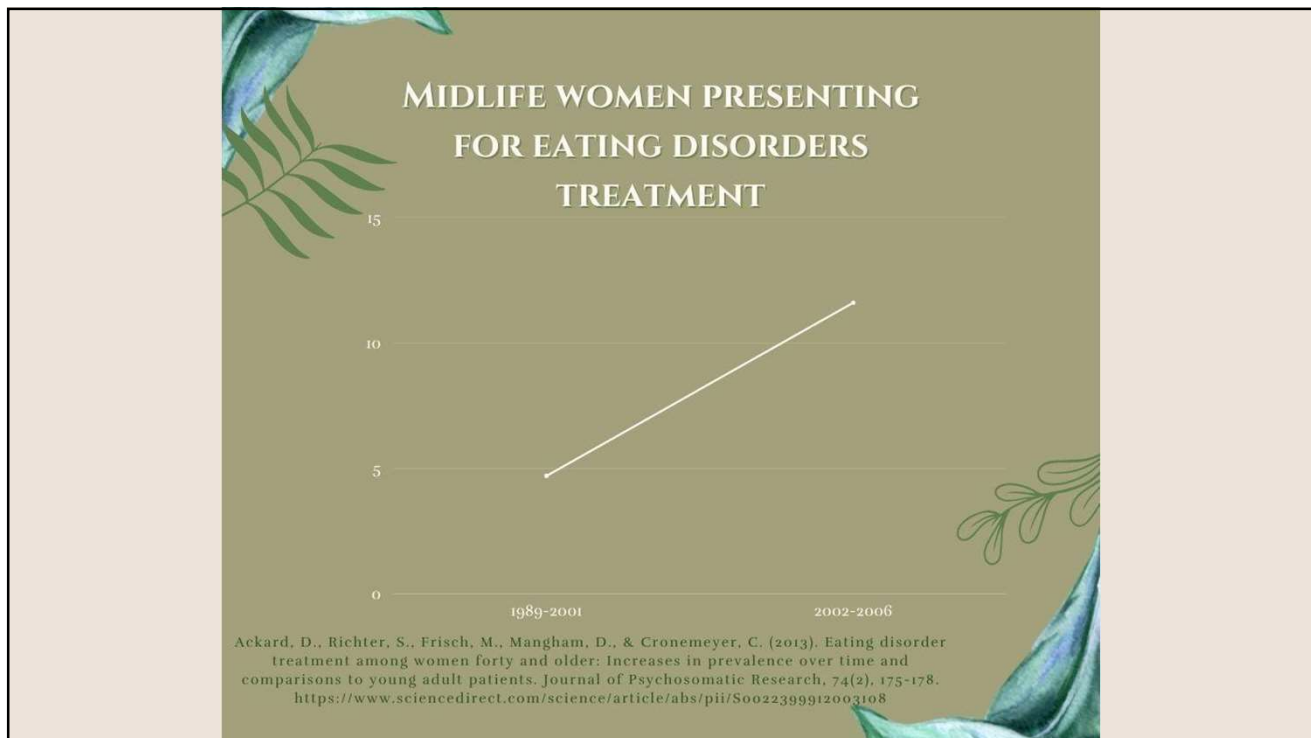


Partnering with Partners

Presentation Overview

- ❖ **Rationale**
 - Attachment Lens
 - Relational Perspective
 - Systems Approach
 - Available Research
- ❖ **Psychoeducation**
 - Rationale
 - What partners need to know
 - How partners need to be taught
- ❖ **Systems Perspective**
 - Questions & Considerations
 - Possible Dynamics to Watch For





Eating Disorders as Relational Issues

“Food is the first love.”

- ❖ Food and love and are psychically merged at a primitive level.
- ❖ Disordered eating plays a role in relationships
 - Communication
 - Titrating Distance
 - Power and Control
- ❖ Disordered eating IS a relationship
 - To food, not eating, or behaviors

Eating Disorders as Systems Issues

“All behavior is solving a problem”

–Michael Crichton

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Current Research in ED Couples' Work

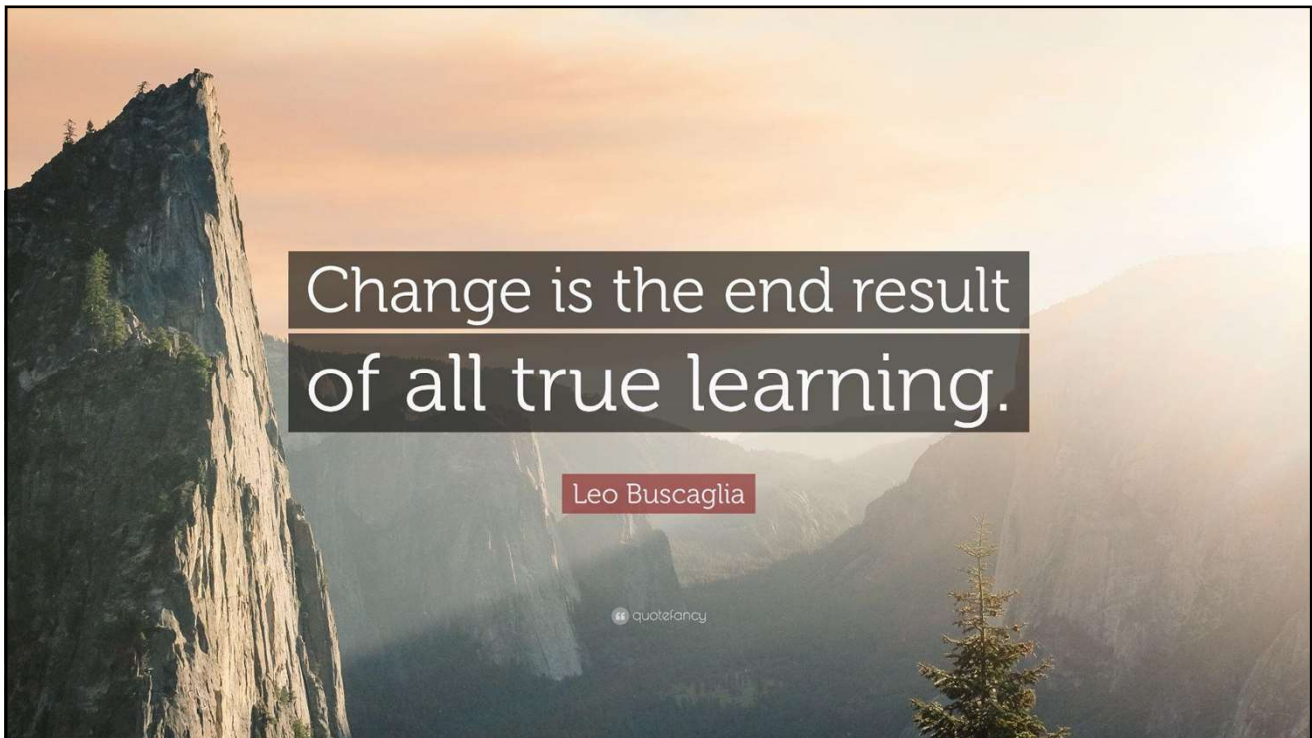
- ❖ UCAN *Uniting couples (in the treatment of) anorexia nervosa (UCAN)*—Bulik—2011—*International Journal of Eating Disorders*—Wiley Online Library. (n.d.). Retrieved January 2, 2021, from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/eat.20790>
- ❖ UNITE Runfola, C. D., Kirby, J. S., Baucom, D. H., Fischer, M. S., Baucom, B. R. W., Matherne, C. E., Pentel, K. Z., & Bulik, C. M. (2018). A pilot open trial of UNITE-BED: A couple-based intervention for binge-eating disorder. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 51(9), 1107–1112. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22919>
- ❖ EFT Maier, C. A. (2015). Feminist-Informed Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy as Treatment for Eating Disorders. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 43(2), 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2014.956620>

Current Research in ED Couples' Work

- ❖ SEFT *Integrated Eating Disorder Treatment for Couples: Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy: Vol 12, No 3.* (n.d.). Retrieved January 2, 2021, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15332691.2013.806709>
- ❖ TASK Pollack, F., & Gerstein, F. (2019). The Third Party: Healing Eating Disorders Through a Task Model of Couples Therapy. *International Journal of Social Work*, 6(2), 69. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijsw.v6i2.16069>



Psychoeducation



Psychoeducation Rationale

- ❖ At the very least, we are preventing partners from unwittingly making things worse
- ❖ We can reasonably expect that teaching some skills such as self-care, communication and boundaries will lessen the burden on the system
- ❖ Done skillfully, psychoeducation is the gift of insight, self-regulation, differentiation and connectedness.

The two basic considerations are **WHAT** partners need to know and **HOW** they need to receive that information.

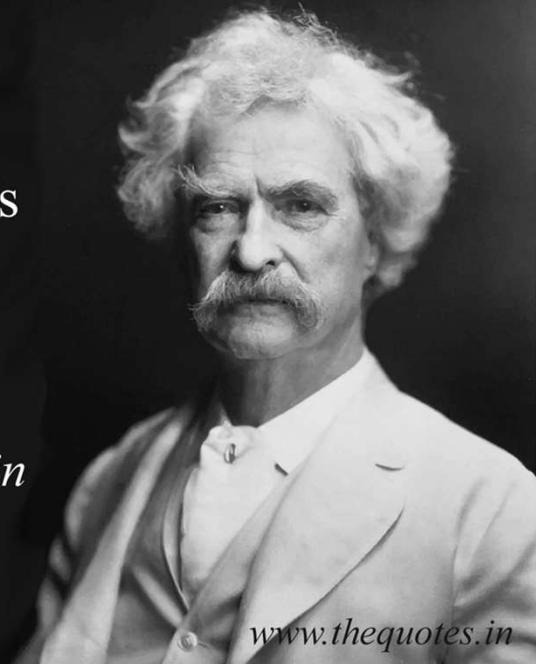


Psychoeducation: What Do Partners Need to Know?

- ❖ Clearing up Misconceptions
- ❖ Importance of Self-Care
- ❖ Understanding Diagnoses
- ❖ Understanding Triggers
- ❖ Setting Expectations for Treatment & Recovery

It ain't what you don't know
that gets you into trouble. It's
what you know for sure that
just ain't so.

Mark Twain



www.thequotes.in

Common Partner Misconceptions

- ❖ Eating disorders are about food
- ❖ Eating disorders are a young white girl's disorder
- ❖ The ED is about me and/or our relationship
- ❖ I can fix this
- ❖ My partner needs me to be "strong"
- ❖ This will be quickly or easily fixed
- ❖ I shouldn't have feelings about this
- ❖ This doesn't affect me
- ❖ I should focus all my energy on caring for my partner
- ❖ I have to stay in this relationship no matter what
- ❖ Eating disorders are not dangerous
- ❖ Only the person with the eating disorder needs support

Psychoeducation: How do Partners Need to Be Taught?

- ❖ Trauma-Informed
- ❖ Shame-Conscious
- ❖ Normalizing
- ❖ Universalizing
- ❖ Collaborative
- ❖ Proactive
- ❖ Outlining the Negative Space
- ❖ Couple-specific concerns
- ❖ Cultural and group identity concerns

Drawing the Negative Space

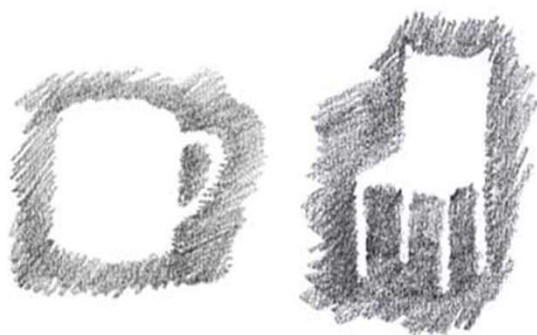


Photo Credit: Mike Sibley, artinstructionblog.com

- ❖ Illuminates strategies that are not helpful in a non-pejorative, non-shaming matter
- ❖ Getting ahead of the partner if possible. It is easier to recognize oneself in a story than to identify maladaptive patterns
- ❖ Speak to the emotional experience
- ❖ Offers a way to work in the displacement, guessing ahead about possible dynamics and assuring that you will not shame before the vulnerability is presented

Drawing the Negative Space: Story-Telling

Tom and Anna's Story: Body Comments

I once worked with a couple where the husband, as anyone would, tried to make his wife feel better by constantly telling her that she is beautiful.

What Tom didn't realize, which of course nobody would if they weren't specifically told, it this made Anna more self-conscious. It reaffirmed that physical appearance is very important. Once Tom saw this and re-focused on other things he appreciated about Anna, like her humor and intelligence, the dynamic improved.

Ben & Adam: Convincing & Strong-Arming

When Ben talked about his food and body anxieties, Adam tried to "fight" these ideas. At first he explained to Adam why his concerns were baseless, but that didn't seem to work. He was bewildered - Ben was being so irrational!

Eventually he took the tack of "not indulging" in the eating disorder. This meant he just expected Ben to just eat normally and got angry when he didn't. But Ben had trouble eating normally and, as time went on, he felt like he couldn't talk to Adam about it.


Common Maladaptive Strategies

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| ❖ Body comments | ❖ Convincing |
| ❖ Taking it personally | ❖ Strong-arming |
| ❖ Pretending it doesn't affect you | ❖ Nagging |
| ❖ Making light of it | ❖ Guilt-Tripping |
| ❖ Oversimplifying | ❖ Enabling |

Partner-Specific Considerations in Psychoeducational Delivery

- ❖ Learning style
- ❖ Shame resilience
- ❖ Self-care skills
- ❖ Boundaries
- ❖ Emotional function of the therapist within the couple
- ❖ Function of the eating disorder within the couple





You can no more separate one life from
another than you can a breeze from the wind

-Mitch Albom

Considerations for Systems Thinking:

- ❖ What are the functions of the eating disorder for this couple?
- ❖ How clued in to the eating disorder was the partner when the couple met, as they increased commitment,, and now?
- ❖ What would the couple be fighting about if they weren't fighting about the eating disorder?
- ❖ What happens directly before disordered eating behaviors?
- ❖ What happens after?
- ❖ How does the eating disorder benefit each member of the couple?
- ❖ What sorts of issues does the partner struggle with, and how are they related to the ED?
- ❖ How does the eating disorder affect the emotional closeness or distance of the couple?
- ❖ How does each member of the couple regulate affect?
- ❖ What is the partner's relationship to food and body?
- ❖ How does each member of the couple experience self-worth?

Dynamics of Eating Disorders in Couples:

Splitting of Self and Others

- ❖ We are both whole, integrated human people with flawed parts and strengths
- ❖ I am good when I do ED behavior and bad when I don't
- ❖ I am bad when I do ED behavior and good when I don't
- ❖ When I am good, you are bad
- ❖ When you are bad, I am good
- ❖ We are bad together
- ❖ We are good together

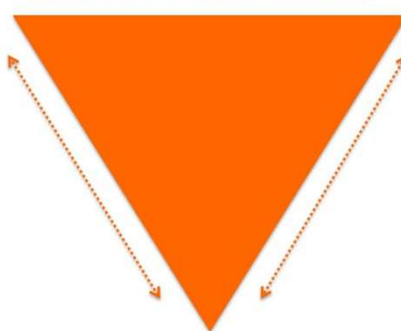
DRAMA TRIANGLE

(Steven Karpman)

RESCUER
'saves' people he sees as vulnerable. Works hard, offers "help" unasked for.

PERSECUTOR
unaware of his own power and therefore discounting it. Power used is negative and often destructive.

VICTIM
overwhelmed by own vulnerability, doesn't take responsibility for own situation



Dynamics of Eating Disorders in Couples:

Meeting Self/Relational Needs

- ❖ Many of the functions of the eating disorder turn out to parallel needs that the affected person may also attempt to get met through the primary romantic attachment
- ❖ These may be healthily interdependent “adult” needs, or vestiges from unmet childhood longings.

Self/Relational Needs

- ❖ Felt sense of safety
- ❖ Experience of self as both separate and connected
- ❖ Understanding that other people value both your separateness and your connectedness
- ❖ Feeling acceptable and worthy
- ❖ Feeling real
- ❖ Feeling whole
- ❖ Knowing that you make sense
- ❖ Seeing that other people understand you
- ❖ Experiencing belonging
- ❖ Feeling that you are good enough as you are
- ❖ Knowing that you are special
- ❖ Understanding that what you do in the world makes a difference
- ❖ Feeling capable and competent
- ❖ Trusting yourself and others

Dynamics of Eating Disorders in Couples:

Need, Needing & Being Needed

- ❖ Denial of dependency needs
- ❖ White knight complex
- ❖ Primary relationship is with food or not eating
- ❖ Perfection of the self/intolerance of vulnerability
- ❖ Difficulty titrating food boundary may be analog to difficulty titrating interpersonal boundaries

Dynamics of Eating Disorders in Couples:

Managing Closeness & Distance

- ❖ Karen Horney's 3 Orientations:
 - Moving Toward
 - Moving Away
 - Moving Against
- ❖ Collusion in distance or enmeshment
- ❖ Pursuer/distancer
- ❖ Disorganized

Dynamics of Eating Disorders in Couples:

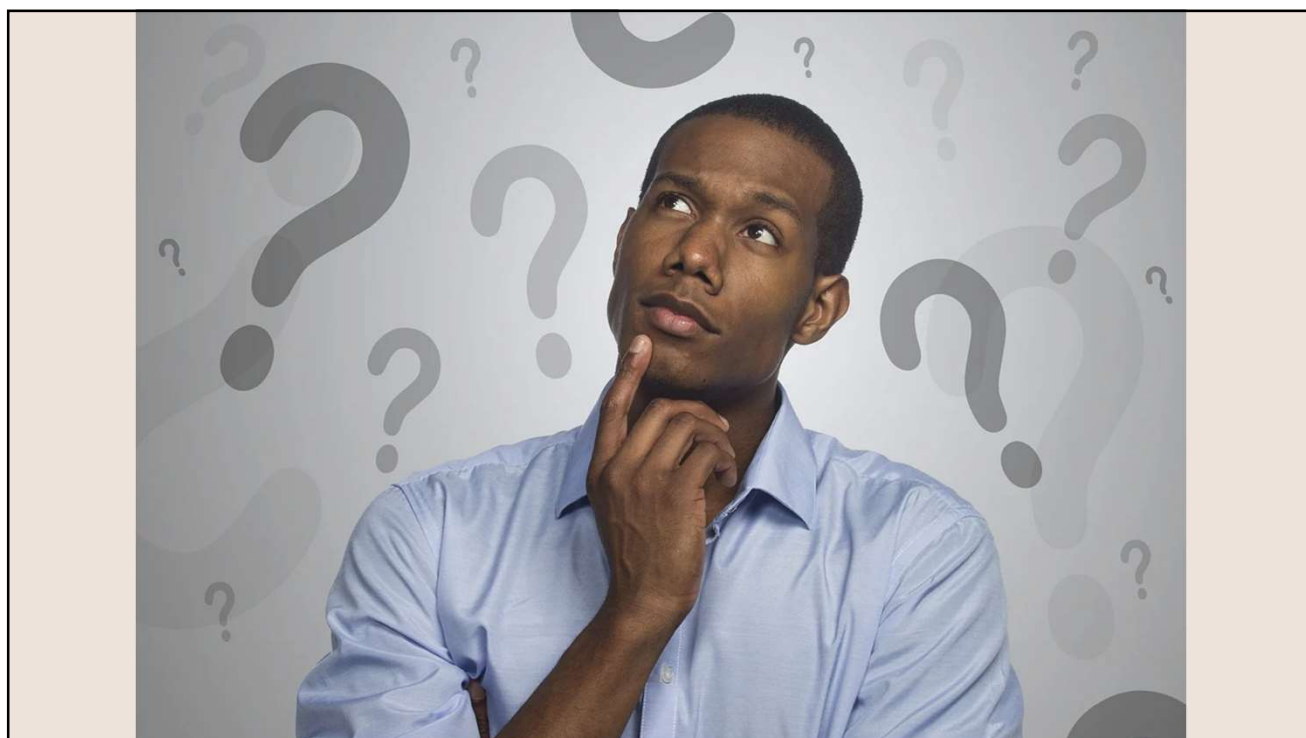
Power and Control

- ❖ Power-with
- ❖ I am in charge
- ❖ You are in charge
- ❖ Neither of us has agency
- ❖ We battle for control and only one person has it at a time
- ❖ Punishment

Dynamics of Eating Disorders in Couples:

Communication

- ❖ Eating disorders symptoms serve as communicative tools when people do not have the skills to communicate more directly.
- ❖ Giving the couple tools for clear and direct communication is the most important factor for healing: Bulik,



Please Be in Touch!

PT

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