

# INDIVIDUAL DYNAMICS

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## PORTRAITS OF TWO COLLABORATIVE CLIENTS\*

*Dan came to the Collaborative process traumatized and reeling. Laura, his wife of 15 years, had recently and suddenly announced that she was in love with her employer, Bill. To make matters worse, she admitted she had been secretly channeling marital funds into her lover's start-up business. Dan was understandably furious and devastated. He initially consulted a "gladiator" attorney, who told him that he would likely "win" primary custody and financial restitution if he pursued the matter in court. Still, Dan's greatest concern was the impact of his wife's behavior on his children. Although his trust in Laura had been shaken to the core, Dan was somehow able to hold in mind the fact that he would have to co-parent with her forever. He decided to hire a Collaborative attorney.*

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\*These are two separate clients, not a divorcing couple.

*Dan required extensive emotional support during the Collaborative process. While he understood his children's need for equal time with their mother, he sometimes felt she should be punished for her "amoral" behavior. Most painfully, he struggled with the knowledge that his children would eventually be spending time with the man with whom Laura had betrayed him. Even so, Dan was able to make use of his attorney and coach in keeping his children's needs foremost in his mind. Although he was in terrible emotional pain, Dan had faith in the team. In turn, the team was able to work with the couple to craft an agreement based not on a desire for retribution but on the many needs of the entire family.*

*Tiffany was skeptical and only tentatively engaged in the Collaborative process from the beginning. She declined to hire the first Collaborative attorney she interviewed (an experienced and widely respected practitioner) because, Tiffany claimed, the attorney was not sufficiently "interested and caring." Tiffany's evidence for this was that the attorney "took a telephone call from another client" during their first interview. In fact, the attorney's receptionist had mistakenly put a call through during the meeting, but the attorney had quickly hung up and apologized to Tiffany for the interruption.*

*Tiffany painted a picture of her marriage as one in which she was mentally abused, and of her husband, Joe, as an uncaring philanderer who had abandoned her and was out to "screw her" financially. In fact, while the marriage had been a tumultuous one, it was Tiffany herself who had had multiple affairs. Her husband had made the final decision to end the marriage, but only after years of threats by Tiffany and several unsuccessful rounds of marital counseling.*

*There were few marital assets, but Joe had brought to the marriage considerable wealth and stood to inherit a great deal more. While he did begin a new relationship soon after their separation, he consistently voiced a desire to ensure financial security for Tiffany and their twin daughters. Despite his understanding that he would likely "win" the right to keep the bulk of his money if he were to pursue traditional negotiation, Joe willingly entered the Collaborative process.*

*During meetings Tiffany's demeanor ranged from hypersensitive to enraged. She monopolized the discussion, insisting that team*

*members did not understand the ways in which Joe intimidated and abused her. She accused the team of being “on Joe’s side,” and complained that her needs were being ignored. She frequently telephoned her attorney, coach, and financial neutral (often in the evenings and on the weekends), and became furious when she did not receive an immediate response. When any member of the team attempted to reassure her of their concern for her and their commitment to making sure the process would be fair and open, she would calm down for a time. But she would rev up again whenever she sensed any movement in the team toward compromise and away from her polarized position.*

For now, we invite you to simply hold these portraits in your mind as we talk a bit about how individuals develop some of their strengths and vulnerabilities—in other words, how a Dan becomes a Dan and a Tiffany becomes a Tiffany.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY EXPERIENCE**

We are all born into relationships. We interact first with our closest caregivers (usually our parents), other immediate family members, and babysitters. Then our circles widen to include extended family, friends, authority figures, institutions, and cultures. While the quality of our experience in relationships (and thus our modes of relating) can and does change over the course of our lives, it is our earliest relationships that exert the most influence over how we relate to ourselves and others. When we are young, we absorb the ways that our important people think, feel, and behave—with us and with each other. We take our observations and experiences inside ourselves, where they form the core of our growing identities.

How does this happen? As an example, let’s think of a typical daily interaction between a newborn and his mother. The baby has no awareness of where he ends and his mother begins. The baby is a stranger to his mother, yet completely dependent on her. They are getting to know each other. So when the baby cries the mother becomes concerned; she wants to make sense of her

baby's distress. In this scenario let's imagine the mother is emotionally healthy. She rocks her baby, her whole self (body and mind) attuned to him, trying to make sense of his communication. "Are you hungry?" she coos. But she offers the breast and the baby turns away. "Maybe you're wet," she says. Gently, she lays the baby down and changes him. The baby relaxes, his discomfort relieved. "Ah, that's it," she sighs, and the baby allows her to lay him in his bassinet for a nap.

In this simple set of interactions, many important things have happened. The baby has had an overwhelming experience. The mother has registered it and, because she is a loving parent, has become somewhat anxious. But she has not become overwhelmed by her anxiety. She has maintained a calm, loving stance toward the baby, offering one possible solution, then another. Once she has reflected on and found the root of the baby's discomfort, the baby is soothed and the mother relieved and proud. Though he doesn't know it, the baby has been given the message that pain, physical and emotional, can be borne and thought about without

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causing damage. Over time and thousands of such interactions, the baby will internalize not only a trust in those around him but a trust in his own capacity to bear frustration and distress and to make meaning out of them. This feeling of basic trust in oth-

ers, as well as in one's own capacity to tolerate, reflect on, and make sense of experience, builds self-esteem and is essential to a child's growing capacity to form loving relationships.

Now, let's consider a baby born with a similar disposition, but with a less emotionally healthy mother. The baby cries, and the mother tenses. "What's wrong?" she asks, her anxiety evident in her voice and body language. She offers the baby her breast, and, when the baby turns away, she tries to push her nipple into the baby's mouth. When that doesn't work, the mother's anxiety mounts. She paces nervously, bouncing the baby and attempting awkwardly to soothe her. The baby's cries grow louder and both

baby and mother feel more tension and urgency. By the time the mother finally changes the baby's diaper, the baby's distress has risen to a point where she is difficult to soothe and the mother feels frustrated, inept, and perhaps even angry at the baby and at herself. Over years and thousands of such interactions, this baby internalizes a quite different set of messages than the baby described previously. For this baby, painful thoughts and feelings will represent intolerable states that cannot be thought about or named, let alone borne, understood, and satisfied. This baby may develop a sense of herself as greedy and insatiable, and a belief that her own needs are unacceptable and capable of causing damage. The baby with an inadequate mother will fail to develop a sense of basic trust in others; her self-esteem, her capacity for self-reflection, and her capacity to form loving relationships will be compromised.

In ensuing years, the implications of these early experiences will have a cascading effect. The sense of well-being and trust that the first baby experienced in his early relationships will be carried over into subsequent ones. His childhood experience of the world as a safe place where his needs are reflected on, understood, and met, and his experience of his own mind as one that can tolerate, make sense of, and find ways to satisfy itself, will allow him to go on to form other positive relationships. Other people with whom he comes in contact will see him as someone who offers and expects a satisfactory mutuality in relating, and they will be likely to respond in kind. Even when he experiences loss and betrayal, he will be able to call on his own internal resources to get him through.

Now think of Dan: in the face of betrayal by his wife he felt the normal, expectable range of emotions—anger, sadness, fear, even the passing desire for retribution. Still, overall, he was able to hold on to the idea that his wife was not *all* bad—his children needed her in the way they needed him. His lack of trust in his wife did not shake his trust in the Collaborative team. He was able to lean on team members to support him in weathering the vicissitudes of his own emotions and to aid him in accessing his better nature. The result was that he was able to behave in ways consistent with his core values.

On the other hand, the baby with the inadequate mother in the latter example is likely to enter new situations from a place of

paranoia. Her early experiences will drive her to meet new people with anxiety and mistrust, and new people will respond to these expectations in such a way that she is likely to get what she expects. Now consider Tiffany. To her, every situation and every new person represented a threat. While her husband and her Collaborative team were steadfastly committed to supporting her in getting a fair outcome, she remained distrustful, angry, and dissatisfied. While she was able to emerge from the process with a favorable Agreement, she remained stuck in a position of entitled rage, forever pursuing an unattainable retribution that she was convinced would eventually satisfy her need for justice.

So does this mean that unless we are fortunate enough to have a mother as easily responsive to our needs as the mother in the first example, we are doomed to be a “Tiffany,” ever angry, pushing away those who might otherwise care about us? No. The good news is that we internalize not one pattern of relating, but several. All parents have strengths *and* vulnerabilities. The anxious mother who has difficulty coping with her baby’s distress might also be an energetic, expressive person who cultivates in her child a sense of wonder and creativity. Also, all of us have early relationships with not one, but several important figures. The effects of difficult interactions with one person can be mitigated by positive interactions with others. Even the baby in the second example, the one with the anxious mother, can become more trusting, and therefore more capable of meeting new experiences with optimism. Say, for example, she has a father who can more easily bear and respond to her needs. The baby will internalize aspects of this more positive relationship as well.

And even though our earliest relationships are the most formative, our development is ongoing (and therapists and Collaborative practitioners count on that idea!). Let’s say our troubled baby has a wonderful kindergarten teacher who is able to identify her difficulties, talk about them, and offer support and new ways of relating. What if, for example, the teacher repeatedly says things like, “Tiffany, I know you’re worried that the other children are going to make fun of you when you have trouble saying good-bye to your mommy. Lots of children miss their parents. Why don’t you sit with me for a while and listen to a story, then, when you’re ready, you

can join the others who are building with blocks?" Here the teacher will have done what Tiffany's mother failed to do. She will have identified the child's discomfort and named the resultant anxiety without rushing in too quickly to alleviate it, communicated her faith in little Tiffany's ability to manage her feelings, normalized her experience, and offered strategies for coping. Tiffany's mother will continue to behave in familiar ways, but over time those ways may affect Tiffany less intensely. She will internalize the new and better experiences she has with her empathic teacher, and will begin to develop an improved sense of herself and the world. Newly satisfying experiences will beget more of the same, thus creating a feedback loop with the power to modify, or at least to mitigate, Tiffany's established negative patterns of relating. The resultant strengthened sense of self-esteem may also mean that Tiffany is less susceptible to feeling bad or falling into old behaviors when she relates to her mother or to someone who reminds her of her mother.

In the case of little Tiffany, negative experience is modified by good when the kindergarten teacher steps in. Unfortunately, it can also work the other way. We already talked about how the lucky baby in our first example would likely grow into a constitutionally optimistic adult. But let's say this baby experiences a traumatic event during toddlerhood, childhood, adolescence, or even adulthood. Say he suffers a serious injury, loses a loved one, or is physically or sexually assaulted. Even ordinary reasoning tells us that his sense of the world as a safe place, of other people and himself as reliable, and his openness to new relationships will be negatively impacted. The question is, in what ways and to what extent? The answer to that question is essential for us to think about because it offers us some important ways of understanding our Collaborative clients and how to work with them most effectively.

## **THE SHOWDOWN BETWEEN GOOD AND BAD EXPERIENCE**

Since all of our lives are made up of good and bad experiences, how is it that some of us grow up to be fundamentally happy and

successful while others of us become fundamentally unhappy and unsuccessful? What determines which experiences (and which people in our lives) are going to exert the most influence?

We all know people who have lived privileged lives and still manage to be miserable. They grew up loved and supported but not overindulged, were afforded great educational opportunities, and never suffered significant trauma. Still, they are professional underachievers, don't have satisfactory personal lives, or simply find baseless reasons to complain. We all also know people who seem to defy reasoning in the opposite way. They grow up in atmospheres of emotional and financial deprivation, suffer terrible trauma, yet they succeed professionally and personally and seem eternally optimistic. Some people seem hardwired for unhappiness and failure, while others seem to flourish even under the harshest circumstances. It's the old nature versus nurture puzzle. Why do some people make excuses while others make hay?

The truth is that people who defy the odds are rare. Most people display attitudes and behaviors that follow logically from their early lives. Important personality traits—the capacity or incapacity to form loving relationships or to find and maintain satisfying work—can be directly linked to formative experiences. To some extent, there is a simple mathematical way of thinking about this: the more our early experience is good the happier we will be and vice versa.

But this simplistic formula breaks down when we consider that personality is neither linear nor static. We are not simply happy or not, successful or not. We are three-dimensional dynamic beings. So, for example, a person with a domineering, critical father may struggle professionally because of conflict with authority figures. At the same time, this person may have had a nurturing mother and may enjoy success as a confident, successful parent. Also, as we've already described, our personalities evolve over time. Even though our childhood experiences exert the most powerful influence over us, even entrenched thoughts, feelings, and ways of relating can be modified by powerful new experiences (including a good Collaborative divorce).

It turns out that bad experiences, whether ongoing (such as being raised by the critical father in the above example or suffer-



ing from a chronic debilitating illness) or represented by a single traumatic event (such as the death of a loved one), exert more influence over the formation of our characters than positive ones. The worse an experience, the more influential. Why? Because it takes more emotional energy, more of our *selves*, to manage the feelings associated with bad experiences than good ones. We'll explain.

## EMOTIONAL DEFENSES

All of us protect ourselves against (in other words, manage to go on *in spite of*) negative or traumatic experiences through various unconscious psychological strategies known in the mental health field as “defenses.” We might push feelings or memories out of our awareness (“repression”), insist to ourselves and to others that our feelings are mild when they are actually intense (“minimization”), deny that an event affected us or even occurred (“denial”), or distract ourselves from an emotional situation by focusing on other issues or tasks (“avoidance”). There are other emotional defenses we could describe, and we'll get to some of them later. But we hope we've given you enough of the flavor of the phenomena that we can turn our attention to the larger impact of defenses on us and our clients.

### THE IMPACT OF DEFENSES ON OUR CAPACITY TO FUNCTION

Defenses are not always problematic; in fact, we couldn't make it through a day without them. We couldn't be productive workers (or parents or spouses) if we were steadily preoccupied with global crises or the ordinary dangers of everyday life. It is the extent of our reliance on defenses—how often we move into protective mode, how long we linger there, and how entrenched our defensive postures become—that shape the way we cope, both in our ordinary lives and during times of stress (such as divorce).

Here's why: Think of your emotional energy as money in your psychic bank. You have a finite amount. Choosing *not* to think about or remember something (to defend against it) doesn't come

free; in fact, it's very costly. Once you force a painful memory out of your conscious awareness, it's not really buried. It's just exiled to your unconscious, where it lurks and threatens to break

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back through. You will have to continue to spend emotional money in order to keep it there. Defenses are mentally expensive; trying to feel less or not feel at all costs a lot of emotional currency. That's currency that is then not available to spend on other,

more productive pursuits, such as the two pillars of a productive life—work and love.

So when a client behaves in perplexing or provocative ways, ask yourself, "Is this someone whose defenses are getting in the way of effective functioning?" For example, consider a client who appears upset at the end of a meeting but insists that he is "fine," only to send an enraged e-mail to his spouse that evening. This client is likely utilizing the defense of denial to protect him from uncomfortable feelings at the meeting, and experiencing a later breakdown of his defense. Take another client who repeatedly forgets to complete homework assignments in preparation for financial meetings. This client may be employing avoidance as protection from her anxiety about finances. Similarly, parents who smile through the

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first coaching four-way meeting and assure you and each other that they "agree about everything and should be able to get through this in an hour or so" might be a fabulously healthy and cooperative pair, or they might share the emotional defenses of denial and minimization. As we explained in the Introduction,

the point here is not to turn all Collaborative practitioners into therapists who can expertly and confidently analyze their

clients. Rather, we want to stress the importance of remembering that difficult behaviors in our clients often reflect attempts to stave off painful states of mind. If you can stay tuned in to the existence of these *latent* feelings (the rocks that lurk beneath the surface of the Collaborative river) and try to make sense of them, you will have taken the first step in learning to help your clients more efficiently, compassionately, and productively.



### Examples of the Healthy Use of Defenses

**Sally's** mother dies. Friends comment that she seems eerily cheerful and disconnected from her grief. On the other hand, Sally is able to complete a complicated legal brief at work, a task on which her job depends. With the task completed, Sally no longer needs to repress her feelings about her mother's death. During the months that follow, she is able to face and work through her grief.

**Steven's** only son, Mark, is deployed to a combat unit in Iraq. Steven daily reassures his wife and his two other children that Mark's training and competence will keep him out of harm's way. Only when Mark returns safely many months later is his father able to relinquish his denial and feel the full impact of the anxiety he had been carrying.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND ILL-HEALTH

Mental health can be measured, in large part, by an individual's capacity to relate to a range of people and situations in a range of ways. The broader the range, the healthier the person. A healthy individual is capable of seeing the world in shades of gray, capable of seeing him- or herself in a realistically nuanced way, capable of recognizing others' points of view, and perhaps most importantly

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for our work, capable of ownership of his or her own feelings and behaviors and of course correction.

Think of a colleague who seems to meet every new situation in the same way. Say, for example, he seems always to feel that people are ready to

exploit or take advantage of him, even when there is no evidence to support that idea. Or think of a friend who seems always to experience you as disinterested or not listening, when, in fact, you are exhausted from her constant need for a sympathetic ear. What’s going on?

Highly traumatized individuals behave in stereotypical ways. Why? Because the fact that they have to work so hard to keep painful thoughts and feelings outside of their conscious awareness means that there is not much of their psychic energy (their “selves”) left over for spontaneous, realistic relating in the here and now. They must resort to living according to a set of preset templates, modes of relating that are narrow in scope and number. They become caricatures.

Of course none of us escapes trauma. Each of us has both good and bad experiences. To some extent, we have all repressed, minimized, or otherwise defended against painful memories and the feelings and ideas associated with them. In other words, we all have characterological vulnerabilities, pesky hot spots in our personalities that cause us to behave in predictably difficult ways and compromise our abilities to see the world as it is.

For example, if, as a child, you felt you could do no right in your mother’s eyes, you might, as an adult, be hypersensitive to feed-

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back from others, even when it is well-intended or potentially helpful. Similarly, if one of your parents was unfaithful to the other during your childhood, you might find that you too quickly judge clients who

stray, rather than holding back until you can see the behavior in its full context within their marriage.

As Collaborative practitioners, the question we should ask ourselves is not *whether or not* our clients sometimes adopt irrational positions, develop distorted ideas, or overreact. They are human, and they will. The important questions are *How often will they do these things? Under what conditions?* and *Are they capable of recovery when they do?* In other words, how much emotional energy is available in their psychic banks? How much flexibility do they have in the ways they meet and relate to the world, to others in it, and, most importantly for us, to each other? Are they restricted to one rigid template, or do they have a wide range of feeling, being, and perceiving?

## REVIEW

In this chapter, we took a close look at how our earliest relationships form the core of our characters. We explored the formative power of positive and negative experiences. We discussed emotional defenses, and the ways they can distort our view of the world. Finally, we linked the concepts of mental health and ill-health to an individual's range of modes of relating to others. Now that we've looked at the development of an individual personality, let's turn our attention to the development of a couple's personality.