

CEU Application Addendum

Below is background information relevant to the applicability of the Powerful Non-Defensive© (PNDC) developed by Sharon Strand Ellison for training programs for marriage & family therapists, psychologists, school psychologists, and licensed social workers.

The Scientific Data Undergirding the PNDC Process

The *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* process developed by Sharon Strand Ellison is designed to defuse defensiveness, a hardwired response to the human need for self-protection. The ability to achieve a high level of effectiveness in prompting clients to shift out of a defensive posture is key to the ability to also reduce or eliminate power struggle among clients and even with other professionals.

One of the most difficult issues we face at every level of human interaction is rooted in the physiology of defensiveness. As scientists are demonstrating, when any person gets defensive, the physiological impact alters the route the neurons in the brain follow, and dramatically impacts our cognitive ability, as well as our emotional responses.

The following quotations from an article by Dr. Brent Atkinson provide a good summary of foundational information regarding the impact of self-protective defensive responses on the physiology of the brain, and any subsequent interactions when in a defensive state of being.

“Joseph LeDoux, a neuroscientist at the Center for Neural Science at New York University, discovered a pathway that acts as a supersonic express route to the brain’s emotional centers. This neural back alley, which appears to be reserved for emotional emergencies, bypasses the neocortex entirely, routing information from the thalamus directly to the amygdala, a tiny, almond-shaped structure in the limbic system that has recently been identified as the brain’s emotional alarm center. . . which in turn [can] trigger a cascade of physiological responses—from a speeded-up heart rate to jacked-up

blood pressure to mobilized muscles to the release of the ‘fight or fight’ hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline.¹

Sharon Strand Ellison demonstrates how our communication has been shaped over many centuries by the same rules used in combat—defensiveness for self-protection and power struggle to achieve goals. We thus have a centuries old, deeply integrated infrastructure, consisting of intentions, voice tone, body language and phrasing that are all dictated by the tenants of war. Despite the progress we’ve made away from traditional communication methods, Sharon demonstrates how insidiously pervasive this infrastructure is. It even infiltrates into current “best practices” in communication used by therapists, mediators and others working to create effective methods for both trauma recovery and conflict resolution.

Both clients and professionals in the field of therapy can thus be inadvertently prompting others to react defensively, even when attempting to offer encouragement and support. Sharon demonstrates how common ways of, for example asking questions, using empathetic listening, and “I” messages are likely to inadvertently prompt resistance, defense, and power struggle.

Dr. Atkinson addresses the issue of how defensiveness is, as well as the degree to which it damages our ability for complex problem solving and our capacity for accessing compassion. Despite massive efforts to develop more effective communication methods, Dr. Atkinson suggests that the problem is huge and we still have a long way to go.

“This cranial takeover can occur because, neuroanatomically speaking, our thinking brain is simply outmatched by the competition . . . the shorter subterranean pathway transmits signals twice as fast as the more circuitous route involving the neocortex, the thinking brain simply can’t intervene in time . . . To make matters worse, by this time, amygdala triggered emotional information has invaded the neocortex itself, overwhelming its centers for logic and

¹ Networker, July/August 1999, "The Emotional Imperative Psychotherapists Cannot Afford to Ignore, by Brent Atkinson, Ph.D., p. 26 Director of the Family Therapy Program at Northern Illinois University

judgment. As a result, . . . emotion-flooded thoughts about the situation are apt to feel entirely accurate and justifiable.²

Here, Sharon Strand Ellison's theory and practice depart in a significant way from the Atkinson's reference to the amygdala as simply "emotional information" that "overwhelms logic." She does not see the reactions stimulated by the amygdala as purely emotional, she suggests that these involves perception, reasoning and belief, as well as emotion.

In her training programs, Sharon Strand Ellison demonstrates how, as soon as the defensive mechanism is triggered and the person moves into the "flight or fight" state, he/she begins not only to feel like a victim, but to reason like one—literally, physiologically.

In that state, Sharon shows how a defensive person *believes* he/she needs self-protection, and *perceives* the "other(s)" as (a) having more power and (b) being more intentionally hurtful. All of this comes out of a form of reasoning about how to protect ourselves by a means of using power that morphs our thinking into the win-lose realm of a war with the "enemy."

Then, as in war, when two or more people are being defensive and thus engaging in power struggle, *each* person sees the other(s) as at least potentially having more power and definitely as being more intentionally hurtful. This dynamic often sets the stage for the intense, ongoing power struggles we too often experience, even with the people we love most. Sadly, we have had a tendency to describe such continuing human conflict, to various degrees and at every level, as "just human nature."

Dr. Atkinson asks, "If an element of our humanity as unalterable as brain architecture favors blind emotion over rationality, why even bother to try to help clients master their most volatile and disabling reactions?" He answers this question by suggestion that while we can't "reason" a person out of a flooded fight or flight defensive emotional state, we can get it to "relax" by prompting a different emotional response.

² *ibid*, 26

“This neural ‘relaxation response’ is possible because it turns out that our brains are wired not only for defense, but also for connection. . . . while circuits for fear and rage have been most thoroughly mapped thus far, the neurological terrain of intimacy-arousing emotions—most notably sorrow and nurture—have recently been identified.

“Richard Davidson . . . suggested that the left prefrontal lobes . . . played a critical role in moderating emotional reactivity. While it appeared that this sector of the brain could not keep the amygdala from spazzing out in the first place, . . . it seemed able to reduce the longevity and intensity . . .”³

The anecdotal evidence that comes from people using the PNDC process demonstrates that while the “root pathways” in the brain that utilize defensiveness for self-protection are much stronger than the pathways for connection, we can develop and use communication tools that have the power to disarm defensive reactions, often instantly. This requires shifts in intention, voice tone, and body language, along with key aspects in our wording. When we make such changes in a way designed to create a sense of safety in the other person, we can do much to stimulate the strength of the pathways for constructive complex problem solving and for our capacity for connection and compassion. Communication skills build on such changes have the power to completely and instantly eliminate defensiveness from an interaction. Also, to offer skills so the person has options that offer an alternative to the autonomic defensive reaction in the first place at times when the person has the urge for needing some kind of protection.

Anecdotal Example

The following anecdotal example demonstrates how using these non-defensive tools can have the power to shift a person out of an alarm state, back into a state of openness and trust, without having to wait for the adrenal flooding to dissipate more slowly, usually taking a minimum of 20 minutes to at least an hour.

³ *ibid*, 29

This written description about shifting out of defensive flooding was written by a woman who had never previously met Sharon and focuses on a role-play they did together at a conference in front of about 600 people. The role play was focused on demonstrating that even when we are trying to encourage someone who is feeling discouraged about learning a new skill, we can inadvertently prompt the person to become defensive.

In the first phase of the role-play when Sharon simply encouraged her using traditional methods, she describes the following reactions:

My reaction to Sharon's first response was physiologically and intellectually congruent—I thought she had no right or business to make the assumption "I could learn it" and I felt aggravated, angry and my body tightened, my face (lips especially) got rigid and my vocal cords clamped down.

In the alternate role-play, using non-defensive methods to give her feedback, she describes the following reactions:

When Sharon gave her non-defensive response I had a totally uncontrolled physiological response—unconnected to intellect. I knew it was a role-play, and it was a role-play that didn't push any personal buttons. That awareness was not enough to stop the physical and emotional response. My body relaxed—I could feel a wave of tension release, moving from my head to toes; my throat and jaws opened and I was powerless to stop tears from coming to my eyes. I truly felt validated (and that I had someone's belief in me) not for the example of the role-play (that I continued to recognize as fantasy) but for all the times I had felt unable to move forward on something myself.

I felt the physical urges to react defensively had been switched off and my body was free to react naturally to the love and caring in Sharon's words. The defensive reaction was what now felt unnatural.

The person doing the role-play actually referred to "the love and caring in Sharon's words," which seems to support the research that suggests that

when people have the capacity to shift quickly from defensive reactions to feeling connected and nurtured. It also suggests that the PNDC skill sets Sharon has developed can prompt this shift in a consistently measurable way. It demonstrates that a very defended person can instantly to move out of an alarm state and into one that is trusting and open.

In this case, beyond moving out of a defensive posture to an open one, the workshop participant seemed to take some steps toward healing a past wound/trauma having something to do with needing someone to have faith in her at times when she felt defeated. In the process, she felt more empowered.

Later, the organizers informed me that some audience members had at first thought the role-play scripted because the woman's responses were so out of character for the people who knew her. They told me she had a reputation for being a "hard nut."

Summary

Combining the changes in tone, body language and technique in the *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* process can enable one person to respond to another in a way that can prompt the person to feel calmer and secure enough to revert almost instantly to a constructive thinking mode. In essence, the PNDC process may thus actually help strengthen the pathways in "neurological terrain" related to connection and nurturing as opposed to further entrenching those that stimulate fight and flight. This information reinforces anecdotal data from many people who say that when practicing these skills, they are more able to access their compassion.

This process certainly still allows for people to feel genuine emotion as well, because it offers methods for non-defensive expression of a wide range of emotions, including anger. Many licensed therapists are finding that having PNDC tools are valuable in a number of specific ways, including:

- Helping to facilitate their clients' ability to process and heal from past trauma,
- Facilitating an individual's ability to shift out of emotionally reactive states, even when others (i.e. co-workers, couples and/or parents and

children) are being reactive, thus providing a foundation for shifting from power struggle to resolving conflict in more constructive ways,

- Teaching the skill sets to both adults and children so they can generalize successful interactions that occur in the therapy or mediation session more easily to other environments, (such as in intimate couple relationships, working with co-workers, and dealing with bullying on the playground).
- For the increasing number of therapists working in collaborative family law, using these skills can (1) enhance the ability to work with professionals from non-therapeutic backgrounds and (2) to help parents develop skills needed to guide children and teens in making the difficult transitions inherent for them when their parents divorce.