

Disarming Human Defenses with Ann & Sue: Session 2 of 5 (184)

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Ann: Hey, everyone. Welcome to Therapist Uncensored, I'm Ann Kelley.

Sue: And I'm Sue Marriott and we bring you a podcast that brings the latest in the relational sciences to everyone, make it accessible to everybody. So it's a great privilege to do that. And we've just launched a series called disarming human defensiveness.

Ann: How do you know that you're in your own defense, and how do you get out of your own way?

Sue: or if the person you're relating to, you can see that they're in their back of their brain, how do we help them come out?

Ann: Because it's always easier to see that isn't it?

Ann: "You're being so defensive." As you say it, your jaws are coming out, right? Like "you're being so defensive." I've said that, while screaming.

Sue: I wasn't going to say that, but, I'm glad that you told you on yourself.

Ann: We asked you to think about how to even recognize you're having defenses. A few things we did is ask you, like, when do you get really [00:01:00] charged up? When do you get really irritated? And we even suggested you asked a few people in your lives you know, what goes well in relating to me and what doesn't? And likely those things that don't go well have to do with your defenses.

Ann: And so today we want to jump in and talk about some parts of the brain structures that are going to help, why you have your defenses, but also just what to do about it.

Sue: That's right. So this is episode two if you're tracking that. And today, is a continuation of one as far as setting a framework, but we really need to get the difference between what is a defense versus what is an adaptation? Like obviously if it's unconscious, we can't see it. And by the way, therapists, are really good at pointing out other people's unconscious, but we forget we have one too. And that's the tricky part of it.

Sue: And so by talking about this one structure in the brain called the hippocampus. That's the hinge between our wonderful, lovely prefrontal cortex that's right here behind your forehead. That's the best, the oxytocin, the connection, the empathy - all the good stuff happens here. And then [00:02:00] you'll hear a lot about the threat detection system, which is back here with the amygdala.

Sue: That's a very popular thing, a lot of people know about that. But this is the mediator between the two, which is really cool. So we thought if we can expand on this a little bit for the Neuroners of you, we're going to get a little geeky, but for those of you that are just popping in and if neurons make your eyes cross, don't worry because we're going to apply this really directly to how to disarm defenses.

Ann: And sometimes, at least for me, and I find for my clients, knowing why we do what we do is some of the biggest steps to go, "oh, that's why these things are important. People tell me I need to do A, B and C. But yeah, who doesn't"? But we're going to, hopefully by the end of this episode, if not specifically end of the series help you understand what's going on in your brain, so you can go "Oh, that's it."

Sue: It's so non-shaming So non-shaming which we love all for that. But it's very specific. This educational portion is part of the three RS. So [00:03:00] we talked about that in episode one. So it's Recognize, which when we're unconscious and we're doing stuff, and we don't even know it, then we certainly aren't using these parts of our brains that we're wanting to help you get to.

Sue: So by learning a little bit about it and being able to have an observing part of you going " oh my God, look at me doing this." So that's Recognize, Reflect, Rewire. That's the model that we're using. You don't have to know that model. It will just happen. We're just naming the things that happen.

Sue: So it's not like a formula to follow or a linear process, but we have to first become aware. Then, we need to make sense of it. And then, if it's something that we don't want to carry forward with us, then we want to Rewire it and update our model so that we're dealing with accuracy and self-compassion. Something that is actually real and not just go center mind.

Ann: That's a great way to put it. Let's start off with this idea that some of what's going on for us is unconscious defense and some of it is adaptation. You want to talk about the difference between those?

Sue: We all do dysfunctional behavior. Let's just be honest, [00:04:00] like we're not all " I have it all together" and truthfully in any culture or in any community, what is considered adaptive and non-adaptive is going to be different and it should be different and it should work in your system. So there are adaptive behaviors that someone can come in and say, oh, that's just offensive behavior. That's resistance and call it names. I want to say that I think psychoanalysis in particular, at least historically has been really bad at that. Analysts learn what a resistance is and

what a defense is, catch you doing it. And a lot of times there is a missing of context or missing of a way of making sense of it and recognizing it as an adaptation - something that's helped you survive, something that's been a part of you.

Ann: So I think that's what modern analytic, I think they've really use some of the information they're getting to modify that at this point to like really give more attention to that. Would you agree?

Sue: You mean seeing it more as an adaptation? Yeah. It's really just depends on what thread you [00:05:00] get in. But I know certainly a lot of the therapists that are listening are on board with that for sure. But even though we protect people a lot by talking about this is an adaptation, this saved your life. It can be, again, still working for you. If it's still working for you, then that's a healthy adaptation. No problem. But if it's getting in your way of growing, your self-compassion, of your connections and close relationships, then that's where we're going to want to come in and begin to help you not put it away necessarily, but grow your capacity to use other options, grow your flexibility about, your tools. So that you're not just, hammer and nail just doing the same thing and not even being aware of it.

Ann: That's a great point. And I think "Is it working for me?" can be a tough answer. Some of us would say it's working for us because it's comfortable, it's familiar and people are used to it. And so it's "oh, it's working for us". That's why we wanted you to ask other people. If one of your adaptations is to deemphasize your emotions and really attend to your rational thinking, that may feel really good so it feels like it's working for you, right? [00:06:00] Yeah, it works for me. I walk around feeling pretty good and feeling like I know what I'm talking about.

Sue: That's a good example of not even having the recognition Being aware.

Ann: Because it feels so good, that would be an example of an implicit defense. We don't even recognize it as a defense. It's just who we are. And a lot of people will describe that as "that's just who I am, but we don't really recognize that who we are is also an integration of our defenses that might not be serving us. So if you're, for example, the one that kind of needs to be right, you might not recognize that defense feels familiar and good to you, but is actually cutting off your ability to attend your own vulnerability, your own unknown states and to connect other people. If you're right, other people are wrong, so it's not enhancing your relationality. So that's an example maybe we could continue to use as we talk about these things.

Sue: I think about when I did some evaluation and I was really high on the scale of mania. And I'm like, that is not a problem for me. Highly productive. Go fast [00:07:00] fast. And when does that kind of energy and productivity turn into a defense? Now, that becomes interesting. Am I going fast on my bike? Am I running from something like, can I slow down? Like that's, again, one of those ways to tease it apart.

Ann: We learn so much over the years. What are the things that you feel really relevant to our defense system?

Sue: That's a great question. So the idea here is that. Something happens. And we have implicit memory. If I were to say to you an explicit memory being what you can hold in mind, that's the hippocampus. That's why we love it.

Ann: And you're aware that you're recalling it.

Sue: Like what did you have for breakfast? So your little hippocampus is going to light up and it might take you a second, but then you'll remember it. And not only will you remember it, you might remember even where you were when you were eating breakfast, the tone of the breakfast. Were you in a warm environment or, you know what I'm saying? That that is the hippocampus. It gives us context and associations. It can time travel. The amygdala can't time travel. Everything is right now. In the hippocampus, you can go into the past and you can even if I were to say, Hey, Ann what are [00:08:00] you going to have for breakfast tomorrow? Or where would you like to go to breakfast tomorrow? And who would you like to have breakfast with? I could even say picture yourself having breakfast in the morning.

Ann: And so I'm going to picture things that I've eaten before, but I'm going to imagine, or a place I've been before, and I'm going to think about my favorite place, and I'm going to think about it in the future. So I can think about it from the past, the present, and the future, and I can integrate all of that to have an experience like I can even imagine having - now I'm really getting hungry -but I can imagine having the huevos rancheros sometimes.

Sue: Exactly and that's, what's so cool about it is that it is the associative memory. So now you can think in terms of "oh when I have that, I have this too." And so one of the things about the hippocampus is that it's very contextual. You get basically mental time travel. It's where your imagination can come in, where you could even imagine a place you've never been to before, and you can visualize it. You could create a vision of it. And so if we go back to, why are we saying, oh, this is such a great thing is if you think about the [00:09:00] Ideal Parent Protocol and things like that, this notion of integration and pulling things together, and then being able to visualize things we've never seen before, - this beautiful structure is part of what makes that possible.

Ann: That's so cool. because we don't even realize how much we're integrating all these senses all the time.

Sue: Exactly. Because it happens just below our conscious level. And here's the thing though about the hippocampus. So again, imagine the little seahorse, this is what we want to fluff up. This is a really wonderful area that can be plumped, can be, created. We want a fat, fluffy hippocampus, as some neuroscientists say, and it is a place where neurogenesis can happen, where neuroplasticity happens. But even though it has all those good things, because of the nature of it, it comes online a little bit later than the amygdala, which means that if we have been under tremendous stress- so this is the piece about trauma and the hippocampus. If, when you're very young and this isn't on board yet, and you're full of cortisol and you're [00:10:00] unregulated and your body is in stress, that poor hippocampus is not yet developed. So it ends up impairing the hippocampus. This is some of why, for example, when you're in therapy and you get an insight and then you forget the insight. And then you get it and you forget it. That's a very common thing that happens because, we can know something and then lose it. But people that have had these very stressful early lives often literally have an impaired hippocampus. But again, I want to say that in the same breath is say and there's neurogenesis there's neuro-plasticity and there are things that we can do to grow it. So that's the nerd part, right? That it's this beautiful structure that - oh, one other quick nerdy thing is that. Long-term memory isn't stored in the hippocampus. What ends up happening- this is really interesting, I think if I can geek out for a second.

Ann: Please keep going. I love it.

Sue: A million things are happening at any given moment, right? Zillions of bazillions. That's the scientific term for that, bazillion. But we only have this storage cabinet in our brains that is [00:11:00] limited, so how does the hippocampus know "oh, I'm going to hold that one?"

Ann: What am I going to put into long-term memory? What am I going to hold? What am I going to hold on to? I don't need to remember what I had for breakfast and I'm not going to remember what I had for breakfast yesterday in a month unless it was amazing.

Sue: Unless it was amazing or if it's been repeated, that's another way that the hippocampus will say, oh, this must be important because it keeps happening. But if you get a shot of norepinephrine, epinephrin, cortisol. If you get that adrenaline shot, that tells the hippocampus, oh, this is important. So it might be a surprise, like when everybody surprised you that day, that might go into longterm storage. But if you think about most of your memories and everybody that's listening, you can do a quick review of some of your early memories. A lot of times you'll be able to even see why that it got stored because there was some little pop. We used to think of it as just any pop of emotion, but it's specifically adrenaline that will signal [00:12:00] the storage. And so then it will hang out in your hippocampus for a little while as that long-term memory. And then eventually, if it continues to stay important, it will get transferred and it's stored actually in another part of your brain, that's a little nerdy. I thought it was interesting.

Ann: But it's important because it's stored, right, the hippocampus is helping you store it. You need to remember this it's super relevant for your survival. It's super relevant to you, whether it's really intensely positive excitement or intensely sad, threatening. That's why you can recall those memories.

Sue: And this is why last episode, we talked about asking someone else to give you feedback. Because a lot of times in close relationships, we operate as a hippocampus of each other. And certainly in therapy, we operate- if we're doing well, if we're in a good space as a therapist and if it's working well- then we're operating as the hippocampus, meaning we're letting details that don't matter go, but we're really holding and making sense of. The big thing about the hippocampus is it's about making sense of what you're experiencing and what you're remembering[00:13:00] So it gives you a sense of continuity and a sense of self. Why we're emphasizing that in this idea about defense, is that we need that on board. Again, it goes back to recognize and it goes back to reflect.

Sue: We can't do those things without the structure. And so it's almost like imagining this little seahorse in your mind that is this really fantastic therapist, or it's a fantastic self partner, or however you want to think of it. That's going to hold you in time and space and make the associations and honestly, creativity and things like that can come from that because you can imagine new things. You can visualize things through your hippocampus

Ann: I love it because part of the importance of it is you can visualize and then re-encode new experiences. And that's, what's really relevant, right? Not only are you visualizing it, but you're visualizing it with a safe therapist, bringing in information that your body has experienced as very intensely threatening, maybe, but now the hippocampus gets a chance to hold it in [00:14:00] present time and re-code it in a way.

Sue: Exactly. Exactly. So that's the mediator that can then get our sense of ourselves and our narrative. You hear about coherent narrative. This is all about coherent narrative, where we make sense of our life story. And then it can store in this higher part of our brain where that we can reflect on ourselves and all the good stuff about that. So that's the gist of that. Again, why this is important is that when we are just in our unconscious selves and we're just doing the defense and we're not that interested, or we just haven't yet been able to admit it to ourselves that we do these

things, we're wanting to move it up the brainstem into this middle section where that we can work on it, reflect on it, make sense of it. And now we have consciousness, right? With consciousness, then we can sort out what do we want to keep? What do we not want to keep? That goes back to that three RS: recognize, reflect, and then rewire

Ann: That's a great way to describe it.

Ann: I think both for the neuronerds out there [00:15:00] and those that are just, oh, this is why when we talk about having a fluffy hippocampus. Why? Because the ability to hold things in there for instance, if you're bringing back memories from the past that are hard, but let's say you don't have a conscious awareness of it.

Ann: So somebody starts to do something and your body, your amygdala, through the experience of repetition and through the experience of implicit memory, those that we don't have, our body still is responding. We don't have to have this explicit memory of our childhood. And most of the time we don't, we just feel the threat.

Ann: That was one of the reasons we said in our first episode on this series was think about when people really piss you off. Why are those the things? What's the thing that irritates you the most? This is the reason why we're asking you that, because if something really irritates you, your body is feeling the sense of threat, and it's repetitive and it's known, and you're responding to it without actually being able to, what you're talking about, let your hippocampus [00:16:00] have awareness of it and reflect on it and see it and think about it in the future and the past integration that can happen there. So if we don't, we're not aware, we just feel that tension, then what we do is we go into our defense and we shut it down or we move it away, or we criticize, or we judge that person for being too emotional or for being too intellectual. And if they would stop being that, we would feel much better. That's the core of that- stop being who you are because it's triggering the hell out of me..

Sue: I love you coming in with this, because again, I think that I can get too esoteric and you like ground us around, like, why does this matter? So I really appreciate that.

Ann: Yeah. We were a little reflective last time. Maybe we could use ourselves as an example in this about what to do about it, right?

Sue: Yeah, no, totally. And here's the thing is that if you think even about an interpretation- just for a second for the therapists out there- a really good interpretation. Remember, if we learn something intellectually, it's not going to stick. This is also about memory. So we can memorize something, but [00:17:00] where it matters is, you know how sometimes clients will say, "God, I can't believe you remember that". At least the way that my memory works is the reason I remember it. Isn't because I wrote down the name of your spouse and memorized it. It's either, because you've said the name of the spouse so much, and I can associate, and I even maybe have a picture of them in my mind.

Sue: That's an example. So in interpretation, a lot of times what you want to do to have a good interpretation, like they're in the middle of it and you have an idea that would might make sense. You want it to be like where they're almost there. If you're too far out, then it's just going to bounce off.

Sue: And if it's already obvious it's not going to be that helpful, but it's where people are like just about there. And by, by the words that you use, by the way that you put it together maybe a little differently, it helps move them. And another thing that I thought of when you were talking is the scaffolding.

Sue: Like we're building scaffolding to understand ourselves, where we can move around inside of our sense of self around okay, know this about me. And I know this about me. And [00:18:00] this connects these two things. And so again, that's coherent narrative where we want to have some sense of who we are back then, who we are in adolescence, how we got to be where we are now, and how we chose the people around us, and then an image of where we want to go in the future.

Ann: I love that. when you say coherent narrative, for some people that have never heard that description, it's what is your story, and does it integrate? Is your story integrated? Is your story, " I had the best parents ever.

Ann: I know what you're talking about, that's why I'm so smart." If we go to your vigilance, "I move really fast because I just am really fast. I'm just faster and smarter than anybody. And I'm sorry, people can't keep up. That's their problem. So that would be a not coherent narrative, right?

Sue: Okay, so an example for myself, if you don't mind.

Ann: Yeah. Jump in.

Sue: So that speed that I talked about earlier, the mania- when I thought about it as a defense, like beginning to try to make sense of it. I could be in that place of get out of my you're just slowing me down. My metronome goes faster.

Sue: But when I thought about it, I was thinking being little and [00:19:00] walking with my mother and my mother being in this hurry. And even at the grocery store or whatever, like I wouldn't say I was dragged along, but definitely, we were not wandering. We were moving.

Sue: And I think just that little image in and of itself was a way she related in the world: harried, busy, not a single mother exactly but basically back then, you're a single mom, three kids, lots to do, working, high stress. And so her metronome was really fast like that.

Sue: And so then it makes more sense. It's "oh, okay. It's not just that I'm so fast and quick. It's actually that it makes sense in my history". So there's some autobiography in that. It didn't feel great as a kid being dragged along, so I don't want to then repeat that with my kids and be going so fast where I can't sit down and just be. So then, "Ah, okay", now I can begin to make sense of it and look in the future of I want to sit on the floor and play with my kids. I don't want to just be rushing them from place to place.

Ann: [00:20:00] That's such a great example. It really is because what you're also doing, and if we can bring it back to coherent narrative, if you didn't slow down and recognize that you would just continue to tell the story, which you don't, you're really aware of this, that it's just because you're faster and everybody's slower, but you slowing that down and that part of that coherent narrative, if I can bring it back to our defense and threat dialogue, It's actually the threat you felt as a child, and it's not only the discomfort of being dragged along. If you slowed down and you pissed your mom off, it was threatening to your nervous system. So you have that encoded and that is part of what's happening with your hippocampus, with your amygdala, and the relationship. If you start to slow down and you really aren't in a hurry, you might actually feel the anxiety, the anticipation, right? you're not aware that, you're just always irritated with other people being in a hurry, but becoming aware and bringing that in and telling a coherent narrative and story- this is because of this -it doesn't mean that you all of a sudden have a slower metronome. You're [00:21:00] still going to rush us off this podcast cause you're in a hurry, but it's more of a coherent narrative. That's part of your defense and your anxiety rather than my slowness or others. And that is part of why we're doing this whole series on why you want to reflect, have some insight and then rewire. Not because we don't want you to be, we count on you. I count on your fastness. It's so positive in so many ways,

Sue: That's exactly right. So it gives me the option where that I can even, like you're saying, even be aware of it, remember the three RS I'm like, okay, now I'm in the game. And because I want to add capacity and add the choice where that I can slow down.. And even where I can make my schedule where that it's not as tight or whatever it is. And I feel like that was really some of the beginning of a lot of work that I did. And it helped me then give me a direction of okay, what happens when I do slow down, which brings us to mindfulness.

Sue: And we teased a little bit about the fluffy hippocampus, but just real quickly on that as [00:22:00] far as from a neuro perspective, anything that's good for your brain? All the stuff from a diet perspective, all the stuff that is good for your brain is good for your hippocampus and it's not a cop out. It really is true. And that's one of the reasons we love our sponsor and that we chose the sponsor that we have is because of the nutrients it provides to your brain. And that is a complete aside. We hadn't put this episode together with that sponsor, Athletic Greens before, just this thought that I just had the second But so anything really good for your brain? All the eating and the no sugar and all those things. But the other big one, I guess there's three. So sleep is really good for your hippocampus, believe it or not. Getting sunlight, getting outdoors, there's something about that, and the dopamine and all the good stuff that it does. And then the last one is exercise. I'm so sorry that we can't say that it's something like some trick, but it really is like these all around health things, including potentially supplements to be sure that you're getting all of your greens and all [00:23:00] of your omega threes and your gut health. The stuff that's good for gut health is good for your hippocampus,

Ann: And what's good for your hippocampus is good for your relationships. That's a bumper sticker, but I also want to mention that we've done a few episodes really recently on mindfulness and mindfulness training.

Ann: And just as we wrap, I want to mention how you could understand that in the context of this episode, and that is bringing the presence, to be in the present. We were talking about the need of the hippocampus to be able to take in past and future and to integrate it to decide what to store and what to change and what connections to make. The more present we are with one another and ourselves, the more, then we can recognize our defenses, rewire. We have to slow down. So that's why mindfulness has been a real emphasis for us in the last couple of episodes.

Sue: It's going to be woven through everything that we do, I think, because it is very much having the breath or having the pause. So even like right now, I'm going to take my pause, know that [00:24:00] I'm going to get there. I love doing this podcast. I love doing this with you. And I really mean that like it is, this has been so meaningful to us. So stay tuned. We're going to continue to talk about defenses, but we're going to get even more specific.

Ann: About specific types of defenses. We're going to talk about the manifestation of some of the predictable defenses that we have that we might not recognize and what to do about it.

Sue: The next one will probably be about healthy aggression and working with aggression. That's one we're excited about. And we've got a lineup, so that'll be fun.

Ann: Alright.. Thanks for joining us. And we'll see you around the bend.