

# MANAGING PERINATAL DISTRESS

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Through strengthening the  
couple bond

# Two hormones

- Cortisol: Stress, distress
- Oxytocin: Labour, breastfeeding, mother infant bonding, trust, suspicion, territorialness
- See-saw effect
  - Cortisol inhibits Oxytocin; AND
  - Oxytocin system also inhibits the stress response.
- It depends on the circumstances as to what will override

# Cortisol and the Stress System

- “Mediated by the corticotrophin releasing factor (CRF) that causes hormones from the pituitary adrenal glands, releases cortisol” – Larry Young, Emory
- Postnatal distress:
  - Stress overload – end result of multiple stressors
- “Flooding” – Gottman
  - Heart rate above 100 BPM (80 if athletic)
  - Overwhelmed – physiologically (not just upset)
  - ‘Regrettable incidents’ – say or do
  - Pulse oximeter used in therapy
- Inhibits Oxytocin.

# Stress in the early Postnatal Phase

- Event – Birth complications, negative appraisal
- Early days, first weeks:
  - Breastfeeding
  - Visitors: Oxytocin
- Infant:
  - Fragmented Sleep – Cortisol
  - Settling fatigue
  - Crying baby; alarm system - Cortisol
- Relationship
  - Gridlock with Partner
  - Part of trust radar system

# Oxytocin

- Greek for “swift birth”
- Labour, breastfeeding letdown, mother infant-attachment
- “Trust radar” The serengeti: John Medina
- “Anxiety to unpredictable threat”, “heightens the brain’s ability to make decisions about who is trustworthy and who is not”
  - Appraisal of quality of caregiver support (anecdotal)
  - Research – midwives

# Gottman Method Couples Therapy

- GMCT
  - Behavioural – change way partners interact
  - Cognitive – CPT (affairs), internal working model
  - Narrative
  - Psychodynamic
- 69% couples unhappy first year after having a baby. Females at 4 months, males at 12 months (mostly because females are unhappy).
- Toxic communication pattern
  - Exhaustion, time-poor, fatigue
    - Criticism
    - Defensiveness
    - Contempt
    - Stonewalling
- Attack-defend mode: Gridlock
- Negative sentiment: Primed for conflict
- Flooding: Fight/flight

# Gottman Method Couples Therapy cont...

- Sound relationship house
  - Build love maps
  - Fondness and admiration
  - Turn towards each other rather than away or against
  - Positive perspective Vs negative sentiment override
  - Manage conflict
- Most common solvable reasons for conflict
  - Stress
  - Money
  - In-laws
  - Sex
  - Parenting
  - Housework
    - Solution: Teamwork, fairness and partnership: “we-ness”
- Magic 6 hours a week

# Case Study: Client 'A'

- Client A: 30 year old first time mum, contacted me when Baby "C" 4 mo old. No prior history of mental health concerns. No previous tx. 8 sessions.
- Baby 'C' 6 weeks premature
- "It's my fault because I couldn't keep him in"
- Breastfeeding issues, separated from baby
- Emotional detachment
- Territorialness, in-laws
- Fear of baby C getting sick. Avoidant behaviours.
- CBT sessions 1-5.
- Partner 'G' at session 6: "The stress reducing conversation".



# The Stress Reducing Conversation

- And the 'Daily Debrief'. No interruptions.
- Partner 1: Speaker
  - 3 stressors of the day (single point, external)
- Partner 2: Listener
  - Identifies and validates emotion – empathy
  - Sides with partner
  - No fixing
- Swap
- All stressors approached as a team (in each other's corner)
- Feel supported
- Can give the benefit of the doubt
- Protects against conflict
- Develops awareness of 'subjective reality'

# Daily Debrief continued...

- Partner 1:
  - 3 successes of the day. Important for PND, PNA
- Partner 2:
  - Validates, empathy.
- Fondness & Admiration
  - 3 things that you've loved / admired / respect / appreciate about each other that day (be specific)
  - Builds self esteem and parenting confidence
  - Buffers against conflict

# Daily Debrief continued...

- Promotes stress reduction (cortisol)
- Increases partner attachment (oxytocin)
  
- Contraindications
  - Domestic Violence
  - High conflict couples requiring more structured communication skills (or couples therapy)

# Client “A”

- Session 6 – With Partner “G”
  - “So focused on the baby, we haven’t even watched TV together for 5 months”, “I feel helpless with what to to to help ‘A’”.
- Compliant with daily debrief for 7 days
- Session 7 – With Partner “G’”
  - Client ‘A’ reported greatest reduction yet in symptoms of anxiety
  - “Feeling a lot better”
  - Sharing stressors, finding out that some are the same
  - Enjoy hearing about partner – not a burden but the opposite
- Session 8
  - Will continue DD. Better management of anxiety, utilizing CBT techniques, feel supported by partner.
  - Choice to terminate

# Follow up

- Follow up / update email 2.5 months after termination
  - Doing well, got through first cold.
  - Still doing daily debriefs. Feeling more able to apply CBT strategies with partner's support

# Thank you!

References attached and also available on request

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