



# Connection with Intention: The Therapeutic Relationship and Eating Disorders



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To identify and describe growth-fostering relationships and how this relates to individuals with eating disorders



How Relational-Cultural Theory can assist in deepening an understanding and engaging clients from diverse populations in treatment.



To discuss strategies of disconnection, and how this relates to individuals with eating disorders.

## Objectives



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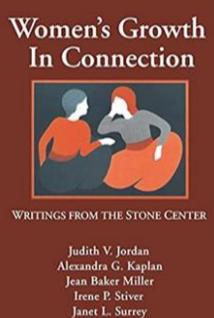
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# Relational Cultural Therapy



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*"The need for connection and community and the desire to be a part of meaningful and responsive relationships is at the heart of human experience."*

– Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

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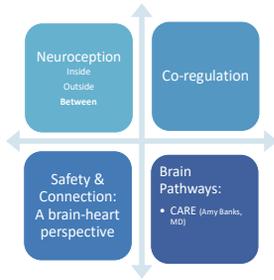
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The science behind relationships:

Wired to Connect



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### Relational-Cultural Theory emphasizes:

Relational Images

Power Dynamics

Mutuality/  
Mutual Empathy

CRP: Central Relational Paradox

Authenticity & Connection

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The tenets of **Relational-Cultural Theory** (Jordan, 1976) that emphasize power dynamics, mutual empathy, connection and the effects of oppression and marginalization on mental health can be the vehicle for navigating difference a culturally competent and sensitive way.

We grow, not by ignoring these things, but by bringing them to light.



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Interdependence over Independence



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TRADITIONAL VIEW OF RELATIONSHIPS (OLD FRAME)	RCT (NEW FRAME)
Growth involves a process of separating from relationships.	Growth involves a process of people being mutually empathic and authentic
Growing "away from" relationships.	Growing with and toward relationships
Overly emotional	Using feelings as information about relationship
Less autonomous	Caring about one's impact on others
Needy	Growth is a process of needing other people and finding those who meet our needs.
Too sensitive	Being empathic with others

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- The relationship=The vehicle of change
- **Interpersonal Neurobiology:** Good relationships increase well-being and help sustain recovery
- *"Interpersonal neurobiology is rooted in the notion that our biology and physiology are interconnected with our personal relationships and social surroundings"*

Siegel, D. (2014)



## The Importance of Relationships

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## Relational Images

- Relational images, defined as internal relational schemas or beliefs about an individual's relationships, are formed from experiences throughout the lifespan (Miller & Stiver, 1997).
- Disconnections are an expected occurrence and are necessary for growth (Jordan, 2006).
- Constant disconnections can damage the client's relational images, possibly leading to counseling as a result of feelings of shame, confusion and decreased self-worth (Napier, 2002).
- Individuals with eating disorders may not have relational images that don't include their eating disorder.



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## Mutual Empathy

In growth-fostering relationships, **mutual empathy is central.**

**RELATIONAL COMPETENCE:** the person feels heard and respected and that they matter.




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**Mutuality**  
Mutual empathy

- **Mutuality:** mutual respect, sharing the feeling, being part of a growing connection together, mutual responsiveness, and initiative.
- Empathy is a way of understanding the other and of feeling understood.
- "I just want to be seen ... heard" (= valued)
- **Mutual empathy** also alters the experience of "condemned isolation." We FEEL less alone when empathically connected.

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**GROWTH-FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS**

Engagement

Empathy & Mutual Empathy

Empowerment and Mutual Empowerment

Mutuality

Authenticity

Difference/Diversity

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**Engagement & Authenticity**

- **Engagement:** Participating in the growth of each person in the interaction. Really being present and caring about the relationship
- **Authenticity:** Allowing others to see the parts of you that you would rather keep hidden

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Jean Baker Miller describes the **5 good things** that occur in growth-fostering relationships:



- Each person feels a greater sense of zest
- Each person feels more able to act and does act
- Each person has a more accurate picture of themselves, the other person and the relationship
- Each person feels a greater sense of worth
- Each person feels more connected to the other person and has a greater motivation for connections with other people beyond those in this specific relationship

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Anger & Conflict, Relationship Repair

*Anger as a resource. Anger is vulnerability.*

*Conflict can strengthen a relationship*

*Can we sit long enough to reconnect?*

*'waging good conflict' is respectfully engaging others while simultaneously holding one's own integrity with confidence and hope. (Miller, 1979).*

Strategies of disconnection can show up here




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Connections & Disconnections

**THE EBB & FLOW**

- Relationships are not static
- Working through a disconnection is how relationships grow & change
- **Growth-fostering Connection** = connection is both an *encounter* and an *active process* and its fundamental quality is *respect*.
- A relationship in which both people are growing and contributing to each other's growth and such connections provide learning for the individuals.




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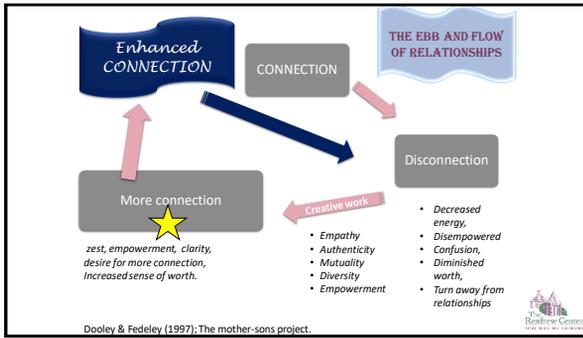
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**DISCONNECTION**  
All growth-fostering relationships will go through disconnection.

- Disconnections are an expected occurrence and are necessary for growth (Jordan, 2008).
- Helps to motivate people to deal with rather than ignore daily disconnections in life & relationships
- Disconnections become *signals* that *something in the relationship needs attention.*

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**CHRONIC Disconnection**

- Chronic disconnections leave people feeling isolated and excluded (Miller, 1988).
- This results in: depression, confusion, lost productivity, low self-worth, and withdrawal from relationships
- Disconnections = absence of mutuality and growth fostering relationships
  - Leads to eating disorders, depression, anxiety, aggression

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## The Central Relational Paradox

- ❖ disconnecting in spite of yearning for relationship
- ❖ Our fear of not having fulfilling relationships keeps us from having those fulfilling relationships.
- ❖ Person desperately tries to connect in the only relationships available, but does so in unhelpful ways.
- ❖ We'd rather be accepted on false pretenses than risk not being chosen or loved for being ourselves



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## Mutuality & Non-Mutuality and Growth

- If in a relationship both people aren't growing, neither person is growing.
- **Not all relationships are mutual.**
- It is important in power-differential relationships (like the therapeutic relationship) is navigated with openness and authenticity and mutual respect.
  - We want to move towards power-with instead of power-over.
  - Acknowledging family and the difficulty navigating disconnection in a non-mutual relationships

*How might we move through this as providers?*

- Let your "humanness" show
- Patients can practice connection/disconnection within therapeutic relationships and relationships with other group members.



Relational connection



ED behaviors!



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## Empathy as a vehicle for intervention

Without empathy, clinician & client start at a disadvantage

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If I feel seen, heard and understood this helps me take in new information

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Builds trust in the person who is trying to walk me through my distress, difficult emotions and experiences.

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Corrective emotional & relational experience

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Consistency in responding is key ... we are looking to change relational lens, images and expectations



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RCT:  
The C is for  
Culture

Because the therapy relationship exists in a cultural context where power is stratified and sinuously layered along multiple dimensions, the therapist and client must pay close attention to the enactments of power between them. (Rosen & Walker, 2004).



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“To embrace the power of relationship will change society as well as psychology”

Jean Baker Miller



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Power redefined

“THE CAPACITY TO PRODUCE CHANGE...TO FACILITATE MOVEMENT.....TO INDUCE RESPONSIVENESS...  
...TO MOVE AND BE MOVED BY ANOTHER.”



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# Impact of Stigma

- Rejection of Self
- Identity Crisis
- Yearning for Connection
- Feeling of being 'other' & desire to belong
- Eating disorders thrive in isolation (chronic disconnection).



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# Culture and Eating Disorders

Understanding the impact of ethnic, gender & sexual diversity on development, diagnosis and treatment of EDs will help improve rates of detection and effectiveness of treatment.



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# INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersecting of stigma experienced by individuals from multiple marginalized groups




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## Privilege & Marginalization



- ❖ Effects of privilege, marginalization and cultural forces are seen as central to psychological development
- ❖ Issues of power imbalance and oppression are central to any therapeutic understanding and intervention
- ❖ Racism, homophobia, class prejudice and sexism all lead to chronic disconnection that create psychic pain

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## The Power of Culture



Maureen Walker, PhD  
Jean Baker Miller  
Training Institute

- Culture sits at the heart of all psychologies, shaping perceptions of health, healing and relationship.
- Failure to acknowledge culture results in reflexive mirroring of ingrained distortions.
- The resulting relational images fail to reflect the complexity of anyone's experience.
- Unacknowledged privilege and the subtle or blatant use of power over others create division, anger, disempowerment, depression, shame and disconnection

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## YOUR IMPACT IN THE "ROOM": CLINICIAN AUTHENTICITY

- 🔗 In order for client to see the impact on the other, it is important that the therapist be authentic
- 🔗 Important considerations: Power-Over dynamics, important to name these dynamics; non-mutual relationships
- 🔗 **Not** total honesty or spontaneity.
- 🔗 Allow the client to see that they have "moved" you. Thus empower the relationship.
- 🔗 This involves **some** vulnerability on part of therapist.



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**NEURONS  
THAT FIRE  
TOGETHER,  
WIRE  
TOGETHER**



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**Strategies of  
Disconnection**

- The factors that influence people's efforts to formulate connections and the strategies employed when disconnecting with others are influenced by a host of factors.
- converging background
- familial patterns
- identity markers and history of trauma
- History of oppression and marginalization



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**Pandemic Challenges:**

Did going virtual increase disconnection?

How can we go back into connection?



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Avoidance & RCT

Avoidance works in the short term, but is not sustainable in the long term

In RCT, isolation is viewed as one of the fundamental sources of suffering in people's lives and movement toward mutuality lies at the heart of relational development and ushers us out of isolation.



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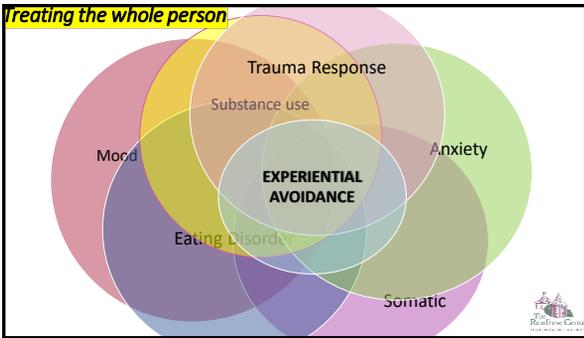
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How do people disconnect?

Exploring strategies of disconnection

- They leave the relationship all together
- "minor ways"- look at phone/distract
- Eating Disorder Behaviors
- Self-harm
- Substance Use
- Never arguing, standing up for ourselves, being agreeable
- Searching for the silver lining "well at least..."
- Keep conversations surface level
- What else?



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**The Relational quality of the treatment is as important as the treatment itself**

- Treatment is anchored within a **mutually collaborative, empathic relational context**.
- Clients restore physical and emotional health and heal relational disconnection by **understanding and dealing with the emotions** that drive their disorders and learning to experience emotions without symptoms.
- Healing within the relationship
- ED behaviors = strategies of disconnection



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RCT in practice

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Unearned advantages & disadvantages



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**Unearned Advantages & Disadvantages**

Name what you have experienced as **unearned disadvantage** (define "unearned" as something you had no control over, something you were innately born with, something happened to you, not something you earned or made happen) in your life. These could be big issues, like race, abilities, poverty, etc. or smaller issues like freckles, being the oldest in the family, being short, etc. Please write these down.

- Now, name ways which you experience **unearned advantage** (can be race, class, sexual orientation, health, or "smaller issues").

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**What do you do when....**

- A patient in a larger body begins session very quietly with a therapist who is in a smaller body. After some questions and sitting with silence, the patient asks "we're different. There's no way you know what it's like to be me. how can I trust that you aren't thinking I'm disgusting for being large?"
- You are running a group and a client pulls you aside and says "I don't feel comfortable in group. It seems clique-y and that they don't like me"
- You have someone who is a different race/cultural background than you and you are the dominant culture
- A client you've been seeing for a while, who has a hard time connecting, trusting, and securely attaching with others began to trust you and you double booked and had to cancel their session. They don't bring it up the next session but there's an obvious disconnect in the room by their body language, and they came late for the Zoom session for the first time in your therapeutic relationship.

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**Adapt, adapt, adapt**



Be flexible. Make adjustments to mode & pace of delivery. Focus on building relationship first BEFORE moving forward with intervention



Method of delivery: writing manuals/ scripts in conversational/ non-clinical manner



Representation Matters: creation of vignettes that are inclusive and do not default to stereotypical or antiquated representation of those with EDs



"Up"-ing the engagement factor: metaphor, pictures, memes & visual aids. Representation very much matters here!



Reducing the experience of being "other." Attention to diversity issues when treatment planning and when understanding emotional & behavioral responses.

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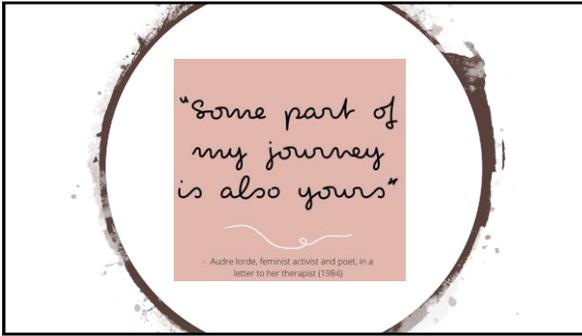
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Thank you!!!

**Resources:**

- How connections heal – Maureen Walker
- Wired to Connect by Amy Banks
- International Center for Growth in Connection
  - Maureen Walker
  - Amy Banks
  - Judith Jordan
  - Irene Stiver
  - And many more!

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**Contact Information**



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