

Transforming Sexual Narratives, A Relational Approach to Sex Therapy (2020).

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also explores infidelity in consensual non-monogamy and her process of addressing broken agreements and the rebuilding of trust. Kauppi breaks with traditional relational models of clinical intervention with infidelity, offering the reader a fresh opportunity to think systemically while holding themselves in the tension of growth, rather than advocating for pseudo-intimacy which may actually heighten the likelihood of another relational breach.


The closing section, *Part IV: Professional considerations*, focuses on the foundations of what it means to be a clinician working with polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous relationships. Specific topics include ethical considerations and managing dual relationships. Kauppi reminds her audience that many of these populations often occupy similar spaces and form tight-knit communities amongst themselves. As a result, the likelihood that a clinician will encounter someone who is, or was, involved with a current client, or former partner, is a very real possibility. The author provides well-reasoned and ethically sensitive suggestions to inform one's clinical practices and policies.

Kauppi ends her book with a chapter related to the process of what it may mean to become a poly-friendly clinician. The author provides useful business and marketing advice, as well as suggestions as to where to target advertising in order to reach the clients you want to serve. One of the many gems of *Polyamory: A clinical toolkit for therapists (and their clients)*, is the appendixes section which is composed of six specific relationally focused series of questions for clients. These appendixes are structured along the following topics, A. Relationship Concept Worksheets, B. Emotional Balance Worksheets, C. Preparation for Communication Worksheets, D. Relational Enrichment Handouts, E. Creating Change Worksheet Set, and, finally, F. Crafting Your Unique Open Relationship Handout Set.

I enjoyed this book and found myself nodding in agreement with much of what the author was offering. Designed to orient readers to the expansion of relational therapy, while also empowering client systems investigating consensual non-monogamy, Kauppi has created a work with a warm and welcoming tone destined to re-shape clinical practice with those who love, and find pleasure, with multiple intimate partners.

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Transforming Sexual Narratives, A Relational Approach to Sex Therapy, by *Suzanne Iasenza*, New York, Routledge, 2020, 180 pages, \$26.00 (paperback).

The practice of sex therapy has evolved substantially in the past 60 years, an evolution that is in evidence in Suzanne Iasenza's book *Transforming Sexual Narratives, A Relational Approach to Sex Therapy*. In her book, Iasenza challenges the mainstream narrative of sex as an act that starts with desire and ends with orgasm and she does so by invoking Basson's model of sexual response (Basson, 2001) and Loulan's willingness continuum (Loulan, 1984). Rosemary Basson's

circular model of the sexual response cycle, now well known, liberated the sex therapy field from the confined stance that all sexual behavior must start with desire. Over a decade earlier, JoAnn Loulan introduced the willingness continuum which challenged sex therapy to focus on the subjective experience of pleasure. Iasenza notes: “by starting with *willingness*, not desire, and ending with *pleasure* instead of orgasm..., Loulan’s model expands sexuality beyond a physical response into an experience that focuses on one’s subjective experience and agency in creating a fulfilling sexual experience.” (p. 40). Subjective experience and agency form the backbone of Iasenza’s approach to sex therapy.

Transforming Sexual Narratives is divided into two parts. Part one lays out the foundations of narrative relational sex therapy (NRST). Iasenza presents the reader with a scaffolded treatment model starting with an extensive relational sexual history that includes uncovering both conscious and unconscious sexual narratives. This history is a collaborative process that opens the door for two interventions integral to NRST: crafting a sexual menu and a narrative approach to mindful touch. While variations of the sexual menu have been present in sex therapy for years, Iasenza integrates a variation of this task into NRST: “I ask each partner to sit down at home with a pad and a pencil and, in a very broad and open way, write down whatever they associate with the words sexual, sensual, and erotic.”(p. 70). Iasenza uses the menu to help her clients change “false and damaging sexual narratives” (p. 69) while at the same time facilitating communication between partners and exploring opportunities for sexual connection. Mindful narrative touch is an integration of mindful meditation within a narrative approach, in Iasenza’s words, helping “retrain people’s bodies in how to be physically intimate without assumptions, preconditions, or goals” (p. 84).

Part two of Iasenza’s book, is aptly titled *Applying NRST to Challenging Sexual Issues*, and illustrates how this model of practice can be used with complex cases that involve non-monogamy, polyamory, kink, and complex trauma. In each of four chapters, Iasenza describes her clinical approach and illustrates her points with clinical case material. The last chapter of the book is aimed at single people, with the proviso that relationships are, after all, are made up of individuals.

Iasenza’s illustration of how to conduct a comprehensive sexual history is the heart and soul of NRST and her thorough explanation of how she crafts her assessment questions is masterful. Citing Stoller (1985), Iasenza states: “all sex is, in some form, an attempt to master childhood wounds ..., a theme I’ll refer to throughout this book.”(p 47), which true to her word, she does. This insight regarding childhood wounds is obvious in her description of her assessment process, a departure from the traditional sex therapy model of the four session assessment. (Typically the first session is with the couple together, the next two sessions are with each person individually and the fourth session is with the couple together and then couple’s therapy commences.) In NSRT the assessment period can last anywhere from one to five treatment sessions. Iasenza conducts her sexual assessments individually– if she is working with a couple, she may spend several sessions getting a thorough history from each partner before couple’s therapy begins. Her questions are designed to help individuals understand their personal narratives such as: “my fantasies are perverted, or I don’t like penetrative sex” (p. 48). Using Wincze and Carey’s assessment model (1991) as inspiration Iasenza divides her sexual assessment into five sections: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, societal influences, and current sexual functioning. Iasenza begins all of her assessments with the question: “What is your earliest memory of sexuality?”

Not only has Suzanne Iasenza created an inspirational model for assessment and practice; she is also a wise and thoughtful clinician as her case examples illustrate. Iasenza maintains a keen eye on attachment, trauma, and therapeutic weaving. Her flexibility with how much time to give to any content illuminates her awareness of the therapeutic pacing. Iasenza’s questions incorporate early attachment science and bonding. Her case examples bring alive the sexual narrative approach that enlightens client/couple.

In this reviewer’s opinion, it is important to assess two clinical factors when determining if NRST is the right model of practice. NRST practice, as applied to couple’s therapy, requires that the couple in therapy has the capacity for differentiation and self-regulation. NRST may need


to be modified if a couple cannot tolerate the extensive individual assessments before couple's treatment begins. Additionally, if one or both people in the couple do not have sufficient ways to comfort and soothe themselves the extensive assessment period could be emotionally de-stabilizing. Individual assessments that last for up to five sessions require the capacity to trust the process and allow for each person having extensive privacy with the NRST clinician.

The art of sex therapy goes beyond behavioral interventions. Sex therapists are trained in understanding the complex intersections of the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of sexuality. In their consulting rooms, sex therapists are continuously assessing meaning in the lives and sexual experiences of the people who consult with them. NRST gives sex therapists a toolkit for mining the delicate and nuanced meaning people ascribe to their sexual personae and importantly illustrates the profound impact a sexual history has on understanding a person's unique identity as a sexual person; their sexual narrative.

In *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran (1993) writes, "Your soul is oftentimes a battlefield, upon which your reason and your judgment wage war against your passion and appetite. Would that I could be a peacemaker in your soul, that I might turn the discord and rivalry of your elements into oneness and melody." (p. 55). Iasenza's narrative relational sex therapy model of practice offers practitioners a guide to bringing people's sexual elements into oneness and melody. I would recommend this book to beginning and advanced practitioners.

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