

Module 1: Explaining the Model (Copyright by Eckhard Roediger)

As a basis for explaining the model, we recommend watching [Edward Tronick's "Still Face" experiment](#) with the couple. It illustrates all the essential elements of our simplified model (see fig. below). We call it the **"Two-Legs Model."** The coding of the two "legs" with the colors RED and BLUE is immediately evident to most couples. Reference can also be made to litmus paper (red = acidic). Couples also directly grasp what is meant by a child mode, i.e., the vulnerable and angry side. The compensatory shift from primary fear to secondary anger is also clearly visible, meaning that behind an apparent behavior another basic emotion may be hidden. This can later help in gaining access to the vulnerable side of dominant partners, since we all were once small and remain vulnerable at our core.

➔ A video with a [model explanation](#) based on the Still Face experiment.

Intervention:

"Now I would like to introduce you to the model we work with. It has three main elements: three basic needs, four basic emotions, and three interaction patterns.

*The three basic needs that every human being has are safety, attachment, and self-assertion. In the background, everything is about **safety** and remaining stable. When the world seems hostile, we withdraw to protect ourselves and avoid injury. But since humans are social beings, this way of finding safety through withdrawal ultimately makes us ill. To avoid suffering, we must also satisfy the other two needs for attachment and self-assertion. These are the two legs on which we stand as we face the world and which we must repeatedly balance as we move through life.*

Attachment means relaxed, loving, trusting relationships with others, where one is even willing to cooperate and sometimes give more than one receives. In such relationships, we find safety in a group of trusted people. The nervous system then rests in the parasympathetic mode (the BLUE leg). The risk is that we sacrifice ourselves too much, give too much space to other people and finally feel exploited, thereby losing ourselves.

Self-assertion means the tendency to be autonomous, to shape situations, even to dominate them – something that is associated with tension and effort (stress; sympathetic mode, the RED leg). We feel safe in trusting our own strength and abilities. The danger is that we take too much space. Others may respect us but neither like nor love us, which can lead to loneliness.

The four (negative) basic emotions are fear, sadness, annoyance, and anger. They are the "red warning lights" on our "psychological dashboard," signaling that a basic need is not being met. When attachment is threatened, we primarily react with fear and then perhaps with sad withdrawal. When our self-assertion is threatened, we react with annoyance or anger. As seen in the Still Face video, primary fear can also shift into secondary anger if we have learned that this is more likely to gain attention and contact. But such a "forced" contact does not have the same quality as a loving one. In addition, there is a fifth basic emotion: joy. It arises when both basic needs are well balanced. This is our goal. We can see this at the beginning and end of the Still Face video.

The three fundamental social roles are familiar from the dog park: there are top dogs, who try to dominate and control others (fighters). There are underdogs, who are willing to yield, even to the point of submission, in order to remain in the group. And there are "no-dogs", who avoid and withdraw (avoiders). To varying degrees, we all tend to move in one of these directions. Anger leads us to fight, fear makes us compliant (or at least cooperative), sadness makes us withdraw, but so does annoyance (annoyed or even angry withdrawal). The goal of therapy is to find, in the so-called Adult mode, a flexible balance between these poles appropriate to the situation. That means cooperating

instead of submitting or sacrificing, calmly standing one's ground without fighting, and internally stepping back from one's impulses without shutting down or closing off."

The goal of therapy is to soften behavioral excesses and compensate for behavioral deficits (i.e., strengthen the weaker leg) so that clients can meet each other at eye level, achieve a flexible inner balance, and behave as functionally as possible in terms of fulfilling their basic needs.

We aim to introduce the couple to the model in the first session (or the first two sessions) so that all processes in therapy can be repeatedly related back to it. This allows us to shift away from content and toward the interaction pattern (i.e., the mode cycle) and the underlying basic needs (or to identify on which "leg" the clients are currently standing). This gives direction to our work, as we always strive for the best possible *balance*. For illustration, it is best to connect everyday examples reported by the couple to the model, checking whether the couple understands and accepts it. Illustrative metaphors are also very helpful.

Possible Homework Assignment:

Perceive one's own currently activated emotions and impulses. On which leg am I right now? People may try to see themselves through an observation camera.

Exercise: Each time you touch the doorknob of a bathroom (at home or at work) or leave/enter the house, pause briefly and switch on your "inner observation camera." Then quickly sense within yourself which leg you are standing on and how strong your inner tension is at that moment. If necessary, take a few short breaths in and out, letting off a bit of "steam" or tension to return more easily to your inner center (the so-called doorknob exercise). Younger clients may use the alarm settings of their smartphone to remind them doing this exercise.

