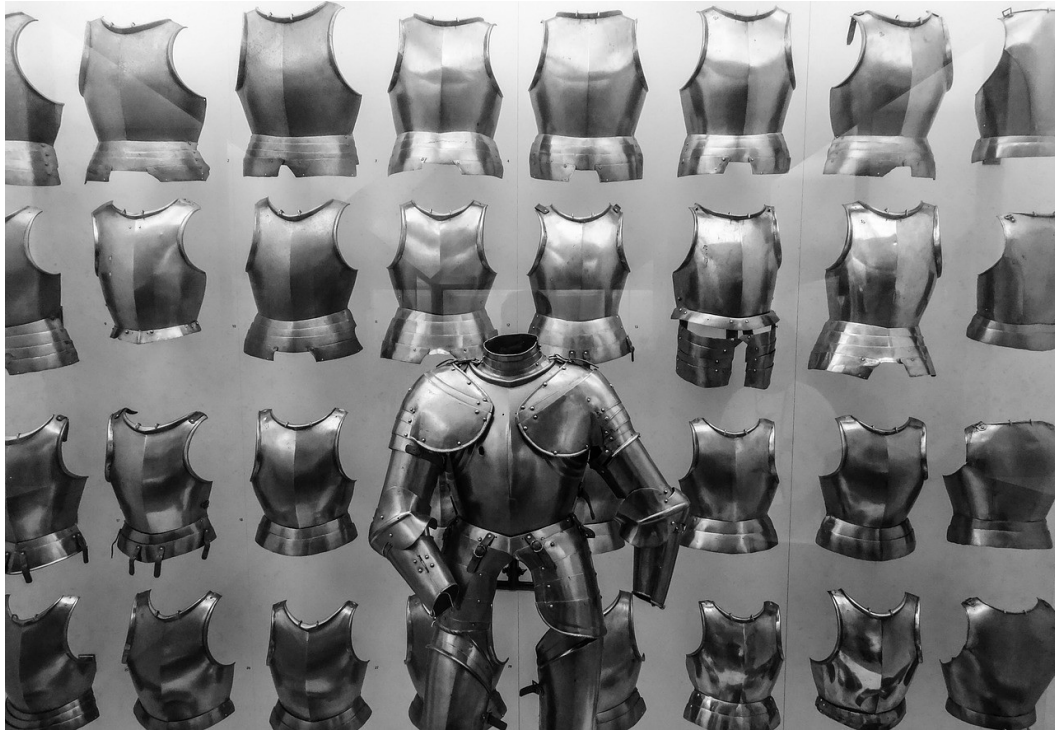


## ‘Couple Armour’

### The Process of Melting Couple Armour through Body Psychotherapy

By Gabriel Shiraz



#### *Sarah and David - The first session*

Sarah and David sit across from me. Their chairs are far apart and turned towards me. They escape eye contact by focusing on me. It's our first session. Tension is evident and felt, in all senses. This is a well-known situation when couples start therapy that stems from normative embarrassment and difficulty seeking help.

During our first conversation, I listen to them while trying to feel the energy and atmosphere in the room. I look inwards, feel my body, my breath. I resonate with myself and with them. The room feels cramped, stiff. There's a sense of heaviness. The atmosphere is remote, and it seems cold. I notice that neither of them is breathing, and it affects my breathing, which also halts. Out of awareness and inner resonance,

despite the tension I breathe deeply. I reflect to the couple: "There's so much tension in the room," and then I take a deep breath again which allows Sarah and David to breathe as well, to release some of the difficulty, and start discussing what's in their hearts.

They have worked with me in the past (the names and identifying details have been changed of course). They met about four years before starting therapy and fell powerfully in love. David was 45, Sarah 36. When they met, David was divorced with two children, and she was single with no children. At the start of the relationship, Sarah wondered whether to enter into a relationship with a divorced man with children from a previous relationship, but their mutual love was strong. After travelling overseas together, she moved in with him and they've been together ever since. Later, they had a baby.

They arrived in my clinic in a state of crisis, after a month of severe quarrels, with a strong sense of tension and remoteness. During the first session, I observed both, each with their personal armour, and listened to their individual narratives. I also observed the ‘third chair’ in the room: their couplehood. I truly felt the couple armour that had grown around their relationship.

### ***Encountering the couple armour***

Sarah's and David's couple armour was so strong that in my imagination I saw it surrounding them. I sensed the armour in the therapeutic space and in the dynamic between them: the distance between the chairs, lack of eye contact, the pent-up blocked energy, tension in the room, stiffness, and the breathing difficulty. At the end of the first session, I reflected on the dynamic and the crisis affecting them, feeling their difficulty with the partner, their personal armour, and their couple armour.

From that point, their couple therapy began. As a therapist, it's my task to get to know the couple in depth (each one and their own primary personality and armour), to hear each one's story (the narrative), to look at their relationship, their dynamics, and most importantly to help them slowly and gradually melt the couple armour created around them.

The conversation about the situation, the recognition that they were seeking help, the shared breathing and the first release of the heaviness in the room helped me see and reflect on their potential, their ‘primary personality’, each one's qualities and their relationship, and to talk about their ongoing process.

Before delving into Sarah and David's couple armour, why it took shape, and how it would be melted through therapy, I want to return for a moment to key concepts in body psychotherapy that are also present in couple psychotherapy, as I will explain now.

### ***What is armour? A few words about the concept of ‘armour’***

Armour is a well-rooted, central concept in the world of body psychotherapy. It concerns the fact that some of the mental defences we create are focused and manifested in our body and breathing. Each of us is born with a primary personality – a flowing, soft, and open essence with many qualities. Slowly and gradually, armour builds up around it, defences are

formed, and a structure is created that results from our childhood experiences.

When we experience an unpleasant or difficult emotional state in childhood - verbal, physical or sexual violence, some loss, complex and difficult emotional situations at home, as well as various kinds of trauma - the body and respiratory system start contracting due to feelings and emotions like fear, shame, anger, sadness, and guilt. As the complex emotional state continues, and unpleasant experiences recur, a chronic contraction becomes a body armour – parts of the body grow stronger, hardened, and sealed. At the same time, our breathing also contracts and tightens, becoming flatter, and less flowing around our body.

Part of a significant and profound therapeutic process in body psychotherapy is identifying the armour at all levels: mental (defence mechanisms), bodily, and respiratory. Then we can understand the origins and find appropriate and unique healthy ways for each patient to release and regain equilibrium at all levels - mental, physical, energetic, respiratory. The return to equilibrium is also a return to the patient's primary personality and essence, so it's vital for us to reconnect him to his inner life force, strengths, and unique qualities.

### ***The primary couple personality***

In a previous article on the ‘Primary Couple Personality’ (Shiraz, 2015), I explained that each of us has an inner essence and a ‘primary personality’ that is so important for us to connect with in order to grow and develop; in the same way every couple has a primary personality. The couple primary personality is formed from the encounter between the two partners. A meeting of qualities, emotions, thought patterns and behaviour, an encounter between shared life stories which create couplehood.

In much of a couple's early relationship there is a place of authentic connection, without words and without thoughts, a spiritual encounter between two people – the meeting of a primary personality with another one. That meeting has the potential for deep connection and love; it can strengthen and intensify as the relationship deepens at all levels, and of course, as the family grows. But naturally, because there can also be difficulties, crises, poor communication, and growing remoteness, without investing in the couple system there can be a shift away from the primary personal and couple personality, and couple armour can form.



### ***Working with ‘couple armour’ in couple therapy using body psychotherapy***

From my work in the clinic over the past 25 years, in individual and couple body psychotherapy, I have seen more and more that the process of personal armour is expanding and is also found in couples, where it is more complex.

Just as each of us has armoured, rigid, and sealed places, so every deep encounter between two people creates difficulties between them at all levels: poor communication, insecurity, lack of intimacy and/or difficulty in sexuality, an encounter between wounds that create complexity, pain, and difficulties. All these create ‘couple armour’, which is found in every relationship. Usually the interaction between partners at the start of their relationship is more flowing and open; in the period of falling in love and idealizing, the dynamic is open, flowing, and free, the opposite of armour: this is the couple primary personality.

As the burdens of life and personal difficulties increase naturally and normally in every couple, their difficulties are felt at all levels - energetically, emotionally, bodily, and in respiratory terms in each partner and together – creating the couple armour.

In couple therapy with body psychotherapy, the therapist sees three entities in front of him: each

member of the couple, and the couple itself. In deep awareness and resonance to the couple we can see and sense the ‘couple armour’ energetically – energetic armour. Couple armour is similar to personal armour, but is broader, in that it includes both partners and their mutual dynamic. Our ability as therapists to sense and see couple armour, together with the primary personality, helps immensely in the process of being present in the couple's relationship and dynamics. The ultimate goal is seeing, reflecting, and helping to create a restorative process for the couple's dynamics and joint relationship, and the very essence of this article: the process of ‘melting couple armour’.

### ***Some causes of couple armour formation***

The process of couple armour formation is a normative one, occurring in every relationship. Awareness to this process and normalizing it – recognizing that it ‘happens in the best families’ – is an essential part of couple therapy.

The causes are natural, human, and diverse:

- (1). Encountering the other partner's weaknesses.
- (2). Life burdens: the stresses and pressures of life.
- (3). Each partner's individual emotional difficulties.

- (4). Encountering the partner's personal wounds.
- (5). Couple burnout, insufficient investment in relationships.
- (6). Difficulties with intimacy and sexuality.
- (7). Involvement and impact of external factors: good friends, family, parents, children.
- (8). Difficulties with work and finances.
- (9). Crises of betrayal and distrust to different degrees.
- (10). Other crises: spiritual, mental, emotional, health and medical crisis etc.

### **Summary**

The encounter between someone's personal armour and their partner's personal armour creates a complex couple armour. Each partner comes with their own narrative and as the relationship begins, a double narrative is created – a primary and secondary personality. Every relationship has many qualities, good and wonderful things, along with weaknesses, complexities, and sometimes traumatic encounters. In every relationship, couple armour is created at one point; it is a normal and natural process.

### ***Sarah and David's couple armour and why it formed***

I return to Sarah and David's couple therapy process. Before I elaborate on the melting of their couple armour, I'd like to provide more details about them – each one's personal story (the narrative and personal armour), the reasons and circumstances for the dynamics and couple armour created.

### **David**

Age 45. Divorced with two children ages 12 and 8. Was married from age 26 to 38. In relationship with Sarah for four years. They have a shared daughter, 18 months old. David is a tall guy, 1.85 meters, looks athletic but is clenched and introverted. Sometimes he seems grim, but when he opens up and laughs it's a joy to see. He's a senior manager in a public company and says his work is demanding and busy. At the first session it was already obvious that he loves Sarah deeply. Something opened up emotionally through their relationship, and his emotional ability intensified with the birth of their daughter. David divorced his first wife after cheating on her with a number of women. He carries guilty feelings about the relationship falling apart and the hurt it caused the children. David tries to atone for it with the children: they visit twice a week and every second weekend, and when they come to Sarah and David's home, he is actively involved with them. This creates jealousy, complexity and great difficulty. While his relationship with his ex-wife is functional regarding basic child rearing concerns, educating the children often leads to more conflicts and tensions between them.

David's childhood home had little emotional expression. His parents divorced when he was 12, and in his parents' separate homes there was also no close emotional communication. He has a high internal sensitivity that fails to manifest. When I ask him if he loves Sarah, he says "very, very much" and is close to tears. But when I ask her when she last heard that, she tries to remember, and says it was long ago. Becoming a father to his two older children, and later the baby, opened him up to deep feelings, in parallel with his relationship with Sarah.



## **Sarah**

Age 36. She was 32 when she met David. She is self-employed in project management and is studying a therapeutic profession. She is feminine, lively, and charming. She's a perfectionist, emotional, impressive, can become overwhelmed during a therapy session; it amazes David when she cries, but can also irritate him at other times. She's an amazing mother, devoted to their little girl and his children. I should note as a therapist that it's unusual to meet a situation where a new partner establishes such a warm and deep relationship with the partner's children.

Sarah comes from a conservative home and is the oldest of four sisters. From an early age, she took responsibility for her mother and sisters. Today she is responsible for them, alongside her responsibilities to David, his children, and their own daughter. Sarah's father died while she was pregnant, which added enormous difficulty to her dealing with life and her relationship with David.

### ***Sarah and David's couple armour***

Sarah's and David's couple armour gradually emerged following the encounter of their narratives and personalities, plus the natural load of daily life. During our sessions, a sense of security and trust was created between us, allowing the three of us to identify the main causes of the tension between them:

**A complex situation** -a divorced man, a single woman, previous children, and a divorced wife.

**Crisis and loss** - Sarah's father's death two years ago, which resulted in a long mourning period.

**Economic disparity** – David came from an affluent home, and Sarah from a place of deprivation. The meeting was not easy for them. They signed a prenuptial agreement which caused difficulties.

**David's narrative and his childhood home** – a home where emotions weren't expressed, no close emotional relationships; divorced parents, a sensitive personality structure that fails to come to fruition.

**Sarah's narrative and her childhood home** – a conservative home: from a young age she took responsibility for her sisters and mother, and after the father's death this continues.

**Fear of abandonment and betrayal** -because of

David's narrative and the way his previous marriage ended, she fears he will betray her too. That fear occasionally arose during their therapy; David looked at her and said he would not do it again.

### **Expressions of Sarah and David's couple dynamics and armour in the clinic**

#### ***Dynamic of frustration and anger that leads to emotional remoteness***

It was noticeable in therapy that Sarah was exhausted by all the responsibility on her shoulders: her grieving process, pregnancy, the baby's arrival, her home, and her continuing responsibilities to all her sisters. The couple relationship they created is connected to the fact that she wants far more communication and warmth, more intimate time, wants him to be at home more. She feels she is taking care of the children much more than he does (his children, too). David tries to be close and containing, but he is invested in his work in many respects, and the stress of his work naturally enters the home.

There is powerful love between Sarah and David, but also substantial anger. Whenever Sarah bursts out and 'explodes' with frustration, unable to contain everything, David is hurt, contracts, cannot contain it. He closes, seals himself up. Sometimes he responds with a passive-aggressive mechanism—he speaks angrily or pushes her away – and then Sarah is instantly hurt to the depths of her soul, weeps, and steps away. All this has created a pattern of devastating dynamics between them in recent months, bringing them to crisis. After she brings out her frustration, he is defensive or aggressive, doesn't understand her distress, she gets hurt and walks away, creating long-lasting distance.

Towards the end of the first session, I reflected to the couple the dynamics and the crisis they were experiencing, feeling together with them their personal difficulties and armour. I made sure to stress the importance of attending therapy. Along with the breathing exercises we did, there was an initial release of the congestion and heaviness, and I could reflect their couple potential and talk about continuing the couple process.

Later in the therapy, we increasingly felt their 'couple primary personality', the qualities of each one, and their relationship, as we worked on melting the couple armour.



the discourse between them, not to judge or be a mediator, but to help them express diverse emotions, which can create closeness and melt the armour. Indeed, as communication improved and they started to express their emotions, the atmosphere in the room improved, the sense of suffocation disappeared, and we all breathed more freely and deeply.

## Reflection

A significant feature of the process is to reflect, now and then, the process of melting and moving closer. The therapist must be a role model, who performs modelling for the couple. For example, I said, "Sarah and David, I'm thrilled to see and feel the connection between you, the empathy and love you have for each other, together with the tensions and complexities of life." This is an actual sentence that I've spoken with various variations during therapy that validates the noticeable process that the couple have undergone.

## Movement and breathing work

During therapy, we used tools from the world of body psychotherapy. For example, working with movement: standing facing one another, holding hands, intense eye contact, and sharing emotions, back-to-back exercises, finding the personal and couple spine, and being empowered by the experience.).

An important goal was achieved by working with awareness to breathing and to body sensations: under my guidance, Sarah and David practiced deep and regular breathing, allowing them to connect to themselves, reduce personal tension, and to communicate from a more relaxed place.

The therapeutic task for David was to teach him that when he closes himself off and feels his deep wounds to stop, to breathe deeply and see Sarah's distress, and then to realize she was reacting to her distress rather than wanting to harm him. When she grew agitated and aggressive, I stop and 'freeze' her, saying, "Look what's happening to you, feel your shoulders, feel your breath." From there we move to his narrative. I ask, "Does it remind you of something in your life?" And David replied: "Yes it reminds when I was a child, my Dad's anger." I asked him to take a few breaths, and say, "This is my partner Sarah, this isn't my father, and I can see my inner child." This results in therapeutic work with both our adult and childish parts.

I did the same with Sarah: when she was about to erupt, I drew her awareness to her body, asking her:

"What does this remind you of?" Her self-control intensifies and becomes locked: "What's happening to you? Were you that way once?" Sarah replied yes, she had always been in control from an early age with her family where she had to be the mature one. It took her to a responsible place, where she had to be perfect in everything.

At a more advanced stage of therapy, we moved on to the healing and growth process of the couple's encounter with their personal wounds.

## Deep listening and bodily internalization

Another thing that encouraged a deep understanding of the encounter between the different narratives and the formation of Sarah and David's couple armour, while seeing the partner's injuries, was enabled by a chair-swapping exercise: they changed places, showing David what it was like to be Sarah and vice versa. Here they could feel and internalize it deeply, making us all feel that the couple armour had softened, and the relationship was growing closer and more intimate.



## Resonance

In couple therapy with body psychotherapy, the therapist teaches the subject of resonance. In our process, Sarah and David learned to resonate with one another at all levels: physical, breathing, energetic, emotional, even spiritual resonance. It led to a deep internalization of what was happening within each one's partner.

From the partner's resonance, we moved to the awareness of taking responsibility, each one in an individual process. In the difficult 'moments of truth' in the relationship, of overload, with the potential for

explosive situations, Sarah and David were asked to take responsibility, look at themselves and think: what can I do right now to calm down? What can I do so as not to burst out and then grow distant?

### **Normalization**

Another therapeutic tool is normalizing the situation. In any relationship, and certainly a complex relationship like Sarah and David's with children from a previous marriage, there is much tension, burdens, changing situations, and many factors involved. This causes more complexity and difficulty at home, and in the couple. The reflection and normalization of the situation by the therapist is helpful and gives the feeling they are not alone, that what's happening is natural, that there are other couples like them, and that in the process of awareness and treatment they can regain equilibrium and a stronger relationship. For Sarah and David, normalization was comforting and encouraging - an important part of the process.

### **Working with my personal armour as a person and as a therapist**

Another key part of couple therapy with body psychotherapy is for therapists to be aware of their personal and couple armour and see how it is activated and sensed within the therapeutic process.

Working with Sarah and David brought me together with my personal armour and expressed my identification with each partner, in different aspects. Their couple dynamics and couple armour was familiar to me: it recalled the parental armour of my late parents. As soon as I realized that my parental armour was becoming present, I directed my attention and intention to using separation techniques: for example, deep breathing, strong awareness, and a return to bodily presence. I did this during our sessions, whenever it rose to the surface, to whatever degree, inspired by the similarities with the couple and their relationship.

### ***Summary - Melting the couple armour of Sarah and David***

Sarah and David underwent therapy for about nine months. In the process there were ups and downs, and always a strong desire on their part (and mine as the third party), to improve and strengthen the relationship. They experienced and sensed their

personal and couple armour, the points of intersection between their inner emotional wounds and the destructive dynamics created. They learned to connect with their primary couple personality, to see the qualities of their relationship, what linked them, and their powerful love; they learned to listen and internalize each other at a profound level; and they also learned to recognize when they entered their child's place and to take responsibility.

Sarah and David learned to breathe, to engage in an individual and couple discourse simultaneously - a close emotional discourse. They learned to respond in a mature manner. Both learned to internalize the partner, and to decrease the tensions and quarrels, which previously lasted for long periods, into short periods.

For me, as a couple therapist, the experience of joining the couplehood, the tensions, the emotions and their couple armour is an exciting experience each time, never taken for granted. With the process of melting couple armour and moving towards more pleasant, softer, and better communication, intimacy was created between all of us: between Sarah and I, between David and I, and of course between myself and their relationship. Their process touched me in many personal places: my late parents' couple armour, and my own couple armour with my dear wife. Every process of couple therapy which I accompany in the clinic helps me continue developing as a person, parent, partner, and therapist.

Just as personal armour melts in the process of personal development and we can tap into our personal places, grow, develop and realize our potential. In the same way, couples like Sarah and David, through couple therapy, and personal and couple growth, can melt their couple armour, connect to their personal and couple qualities, and rebuild their couple relationship.







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## Reference

Shiraz, G. (2015). Connecting to the primary couple personality: Couples therapy with body psychotherapy. *Somatic Psychotherapy Today* 5(4), Fall, pp. 68-73.

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