

Sharon Strand Ellison

Author of "Taking the War Out of Our Words"

Creator of the *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication™ (PNDC™)* Process

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Comments from Therapists — The Science Behind the PNDC Process

Curriculum Vitae

Education:

B.A., Sociology, Willamette University, Salem, OR (June, 1965)

Junior Year Abroad Program, University of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden
(1963-1964)

M.S., Interdisciplinary Studies in Juvenile Corrections, University of Oregon,
Eugene, OR (1973)

My graduate program included independent study with Dr. Martin Acker, Clinical Psychologist, covering Freud, Jung, and others who made major contributions to the field of psychology.

Licenses: License No. 1726, California Board of Behavioral Sciences, LCSW & MFT Training Provider. **I held this license for more than 10 year until 2016 when the State of California stopped doing the licensing.*

Publications Relevant to Collaborative Family Law Coaches, including MFTs and Psychologists:

Book: *Taking the War Out of Our Words:*

The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication

Audio Book: *Taking Power Struggle Out of Parenting*

Paper: *Language and the Law: Beyond Pitfalls in Best ADR Communication Practices*, Texas Bar Association, 8th Annual Collaborative Law Course, (2014)

Article: *Is Your Protective Instinct Backfiring* – for divorcing parents, co-written with Ami Atkinson Combs for the Collaborative Marin Blog, Nov. (2014)

Article: *New Roots for Social and Institutional Change*, Collaborative Law Journal, (2015) (This article is essentially about “new roots for language” and is relevant to all therapeutic practice.)

Current Positions:

Author, Consultant, Workshop Facilitator, and Speaker (1975-present)
Executive Director, The Institute for Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (2005-present)

Past Positions:

Counselor in private practice and consultant to social work agencies, providing training for social workers and psychologists, Eugene, OR (1975-1996)

Scholar-In-Residence, St. John's University, Collegeville, MN (1986-1987)

Co-Director, Title I Social Skill Building Program, Play Therapy, Fern Ridge School District, Veneta, OR (1974-1975)

Title I, Parent Training Instructor and Title VI, Play Therapist, Fern Ridge School District, Veneta, OR (1973-1974)

Intake Counselor, Lane County Juvenile Court, Eugene, OR (1969-1970)

Field Counselor, Marion County Juvenile Court, Salem, OR (1966-1969)

Group Worker, Marion County Juvenile Court, Salem, OR (1965-1966)

Client Organizations in the Field of Therapy:

I have been a conference speaker and workshop facilitator for MFTs, LSWs and Psychologists. I have also facilitated trainings for therapists participating in practice groups for family law professionals. Some of the therapists in the role of coaches for Collaborative Family Professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area participated in monthly, 3-hour sessions for between three and seven years, applying the skills to work with clients.

In addition, I have provided training for organizations such as:

San Francisco Medical School, Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute.

Benton County Children’s Protective Services Division, Corvallis, OR

Play Therapy Training, and workshops on intervention with abusers and other severely resistant adult clients

Juvenile Services Commission, Coos Bay, OR

Center for the Vulnerable Child, Oakland, CA

Family Centered Services of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK

The Child Center, Eugene, OR

Play therapy training and consultations for psychologists and social workers

Rape Crisis Centers and Safe Houses for abused women, OR, MN

Vistacon Valley Youth Center, CA

Carondelet Behavior Health Center, Richmond, WA

(1) Psychiatric Care Center, and (2) Drug and Alcohol Program

Mental Health Resource and Education Network, Ashland, OR

Santa Clara County, Snell Community School, Alternate Education

Serving approximately 330 students who have been expelled from their home schools or are in trouble with the law

Hayward High School Hayward, CA

Training for 450 students after conflict between two groups of students that resulted in the murder of one student

Sonoma County Mental Health Services, Psychiatric Emergency Services, Santa Rosa, CA

Continuing Education Credit for Marriage and Family Therapists and/or Psychologists for the following Organizations and Conferences

The following list indicates the states where licensing boards have authorized credit, for MFTs, and/or psychologists, such as California, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Illinois, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, 2005 Statewide Conference, Sonoma, CA; (2019), International Conference, Toronto, CA

Center for Families, Children and the Courts, 2005 Family Dispute Resolution Statewide Educational Institute: The Changing Concept of Family, San Jose, CA

Mental Health Resources and Education Network, Medford, OR

Therapists in Educational Settings, Statewide Conference, Eugene, OR

Center for Families, Children & the Courts, Central Valley Regional Training

Center for Families, Children & the Courts, Santa Barbara Regional Training

CP Cal, Collaborative Family Professionals Statewide Conference, (2006),
Sonoma, CA; Pasadena; San Francisco; Austin, TX, 2015; Tampa, Florida, (2017);
San Diego, (2019)

International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, San Diego, CA, (2007);
Toronto, CA, (2008); New Orleans, LA; Minneapolis, MN; Washington D.C.; San
Antonio, TX, (2013)

Texas Bar Association, Annual Collaborative Family Law Course, Austin, TX,
(2016)

Comments from Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Marriage & Family Therapists

The sophistication and depth of the *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* paradigm Sharon Strand Ellison has developed can be of immense value to psychologists. The theory transforms our concepts of power in human interactions. Both Sharon's theory and practice challenge psychologists to expand their own awareness and knowledge and enhance their capacity to pass skills learned on to the patients.

—*Dr. Gisela Bergman, Licensed Psychologist, Eugene, OR*

I believe this is the most powerful structure I've learned in my training as a marriage and family therapist. It has tremendous implications for most human interactions.

—*Bette Acuff, Ph.D., M.A., San Francisco, CA*

Sharon has continued to advance and perfect her concepts of the nature of emotional maladaptation and has developed her method of working with disturbed persons toward an ever-increasing level of refinement. She has shown a special aptitude in coping with people showing problems of extreme dependency and self-destructiveness and has succeeded where many psychotherapists would have given up. She has conducted many workshops that

are of her own unique style based on ideas and theory coming out of her inventiveness and creativity.

—*Dr. Reid Kimball, Psychiatrist, Eugene, OR*

I just finished your book, *Taking the War Out of Our Words*. It is chock-full of smarts. I just want to congratulate you on producing a tour de force, which I pray I could influence all my clients to read. It is a reference book that keeps on giving. It picks up where the Murray Bowen (family systems) thinkers leave off. You provide tools to understand what it means to create boundaries, to differentiate and grow up, becoming one's own agent of authority, able to express self in a manner that is honest, appreciative, respectful, and dignifying.

—*Shel J. Miller, Ph.D. Psychologist, Boston, MA*

Thanks so much for your clarity, commitment, compassion, and sensitivity. I appreciate the way you walk your talk and your warmth—a great coach and role model.

—*Sandra Lewis, Psychologist, Berkeley, CA*

Ms. Ellison provided on-going training in play therapy for the psychologists and other staff at the Child Center. She is a skilled therapist who is able to combine interpretive feedback with skill training, role-playing, and limit setting. She is intuitive, insightful, and supportive and is well liked by children and staff alike. Besides being a highly competent therapist, she is also an excellent trainer and teacher.

—*Dr. Susan Richter, Psychologist, The Child Center, Eugene, OR*

Being aware of one's feelings and reactions to clients is one of the cornerstones of a therapist's training. Newer paradigms of countertransference also distinguish between feelings that arise from the therapist's own history versus those that may be evoked by the client. Through metabolizing or working through their own feelings, therapists can use this understanding to help the clients. Sharon Ellison's analysis of defensive communications can be a key to helping therapists understand the feelings the client invokes in both ourselves and others. Her methods of non-defensive communications allow the therapist to quickly work through countertransference feelings and more importantly, provide the tools for communicating to the patient in ways that are most likely to be heard. Ms. Ellison's workshop provides techniques and experience in changing countertransference feelings into helpful interventions for the client.

While techniques are frequently discussed in theoretical terms, this workshop provides not only a theoretical paradigm but also a valuable experience and practice—something that is all too frequently missing in post-graduate workshops.

—*Mary Krentz, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist in Private Practice in Oakland, CA; Assistant Professor at the Wright Institute, Berkeley, CA, 1989-2001*

I found Sharon's presentation fascinating and extremely relevant to my work not only as a divorce mediator but also as a coach in collaborative divorce. I was able to apply her non-defensive communication techniques immediately in the next four-way meeting between coaches and clients and the clients responded very positively—it was very exciting!! I look forward to taking more of Sharon's workshops.

—*Debbie Katz MFT, Collaborative Practice Group of Contra Costa County*

I signed up for Sharon Ellison's PNDC Level One Training ... What I came away with is the foundation for a new way of communication, which I believe, has the potential to be transformational in any relational context, professional or personal. Sharon's style is warm, engaging, humorous, and inclusive. She has a wonderful way of tailoring the workshop to address the needs of those present. She is a gifted story teller, and uses stories to demonstrate the incredible difference that can occur when a person uses PNDC. She was patient and kind in guiding us through our first bumbling attempts at using PNDC skills. I would love for all of my collaborative divorce colleagues to be trained by Sharon in PNDC, as I believe it would be enormously useful in our work with families. PNDC provides a structure to have difficult conversations without engaging in posturing and increased hostility. Couples can learn to reach peaceful resolutions and relax their vigilance about winning and losing.

—*Emily Weaver, MFT, Oakland, CA*

Many clients come to see me dealing with life situations and transitions that are extremely stressful. Helping clients deal both with their stress and the concomitant anxiety that results from these life situations is critically important. Since one major antidote to anxiety is information, I find that in informing clients about non-defensive vs. defensive communication adds an effective communication skill set that helps to reduce their anxiety. For clients to feel more *effective* and empowered to confront their challenges leads to them feeling more competent and confident.

Being able to offer both the information as well as the practice skills of non-defensive communication has increased my success in couple and family therapy. Learning this skill has also improved my therapy practice. I am noticing that, in some cases, behaviors I may have interpreted as client resistance, I am now seeing as defensive reactions resulting from how I have communicated to the client. With non-defensive communication I find my clients better able to respond to my interventions and interpretations. I highly recommend Sharon's training for psychologists as well as other mental health professionals.

—*Marc Berke, Ph.D., Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist; Collaborative Divorce Mental Health Professional; Director, Diablo Counseling Associates, Danville, CA.*

CEU Application Addendum

Below is background information relevant to the applicability of the Powerful Non-Defensive© (PNDC) developed by Sharon Strand Ellison for training programs for marriage & family therapists, psychologists, school psychologists, and licensed social workers.

The Scientific Data Undergirding the PNDC Process

The *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* process developed by Sharon Strand Ellison is designed to defuse defensiveness, a hardwired response to the human need for self-protection. The ability to achieve a high level of effectiveness in prompting clients to shift out of a defensive posture is key to the ability to also reduce or eliminate power struggle among clients and even with other professionals.

One of the most difficult issues we face at every level of human interaction is rooted in the physiology of defensiveness. As scientists are demonstrating, when any person gets defensive, the physiological impact alters the route the neurons in the brain follow, and dramatically impacts our cognitive ability, as well as our emotional responses.

The following quotations from an article by Dr. Brent Atkinson provide a good summary of foundational information regarding the impact of self-protective defensive responses on the physiology of the brain, and any subsequent interactions when in a defensive state of being.

Joseph LeDoux, a neuroscientist at the Center for Neural Science

at New York University, discovered a pathway that acts as a supersonic express route to the brain's emotional centers. This neural back alley, which appears to be reserved for emotional emergencies, bypasses the neocortex entirely, routing information from the thalamus directly to the amygdala, a tiny, almond-shaped structure in the limbic system that has recently been identified as the brain's emotional alarm center. . . which in turn [can] trigger a cascade of physiological responses—from a speeded-up heart rate to jacked-up blood pressure to mobilized muscles to the release of the 'fight or flight' hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline.¹

Sharon Strand Ellison demonstrates how our communication has been shaped over many centuries by the same rules used in combat—defensiveness for self-protection and power struggle to achieve goals. We thus have a centuries old, deeply integrated infrastructure, consisting of intentions, voice tone, body language and phrasing that are all dictated by the tenants of war. Despite the progress we've made away from traditional communication methods, Sharon demonstrates how insidiously pervasive this infrastructure is. It even infiltrates into current "best practices" in communication used by therapists, mediators and others working to create effective methods for both trauma recovery and conflict resolution.

Both clients and professionals in the field of therapy can thus be inadvertently prompting others to react defensively, even when attempting to offer encouragement and support. Sharon demonstrates how common ways of, for example asking questions, using empathetic listening, and "I" messages are likely to inadvertently prompt resistance, defense, and power struggle.

Dr. Atkinson addresses the issue of how defensiveness is, as well as the degree to which it damages our ability for complex problem solving and our capacity for accessing compassion. Despite massive efforts to develop more effective communication methods, Dr. Atkinson suggests that the problem is huge and we still have a long way to go.

¹ Networker, July/August 1999, "The Emotional Imperative Psychotherapists Cannot Afford to Ignore, by Brent Atkinson, Ph.D., p. 26 Director of the Family Therapy Program at Northern Illinois University

This cranial takeover can occur because, neuroanatomically speaking, our thinking brain is simply outmatched by the competition . . . the shorter subterranean pathway transmits signals twice as fast as the more circuitous route involving the neocortex, the thinking brain simply can't intervene in time . . . To make matters worse, by this time, amygdala triggered emotional information has invaded the neocortex itself, overwhelming its centers for logic and judgment. As a result, . . . emotion-flooded thoughts about the situation are apt to feel entirely accurate and justifiable.²

Here, Sharon Strand Ellison's theory and practice depart in a significant way from the Atkinson's reference to the amygdala as simply "emotional information" that "overwhelms logic." She does not see the reactions stimulated by the amygdala as purely emotional, she suggests that these involves perception, reasoning and belief, as well as emotion.

In her training programs, Sharon Strand Ellison demonstrates how, as soon as the defensive mechanism is triggered and the person moves into the "flight or fight" state, he/she begins not only to feel like a victim, but to reason like one—literally, physiologically.

In that state, Sharon shows how a defensive person *believes* he/she needs self-protection and *perceives* the "other(s)" as (a) having more power and (b) being more intentionally hurtful. All of this comes out of a form of reasoning about how to protect ourselves by a means of using power that morphs our thinking into the win-lose realm of a war with the "enemy."

Then, as in war, when two or more people are being defensive and thus engaging in power struggle, *each* person sees the other(s) as at least potentially having more power and definitely as being more intentionally hurtful. This dynamic often sets the stage for the intense, ongoing power struggles we too often experience, even with the people we love most. Sadly, we have had a tendency to describe such continuing human conflict, to various degrees and at every level, as "just human nature."

Dr. Atkinson asks, "If an element of our humanity as unalterable as brain architecture favors blind emotion over rationality, why even bother to try to help clients master their most volatile and disabling reactions?" He answers this question by suggestion

² *ibid*, 26

that while we can't "reason" a person out of a flooded fight or flight defensive emotional state, we can get it to "relax" by prompting a different emotional response.

This neural 'relaxation response' is possible because it turns out that our brains are wired not only for defense, but also for connection. . . while circuits for fear and rage have been most thoroughly mapped thus far, the neurological terrain of intimacy-arousing emotions — most notably sorrow and nurture—have recently been identified.

Richard Davidson . . . suggested that the left prefrontal lobes . . . played a critical role in moderating emotional reactivity. While it appeared that this sector of the brain could not keep the amygdala from spazzing out in the first place, . . . it seemed able to reduce the longevity and intensity . . .³

The anecdotal evidence that comes from people using the PNDC process demonstrates that while the "root pathways" in the brain that utilize defensiveness for self-protection are much stronger than the pathways for connection, we can develop and use communication tools that have the power to disarm defensive reactions, often instantly. This requires shifts in intention, voice tone, and body language, along with key aspects in our wording. When we make such changes in a way designed to create a sense of safety in the other person, we can do much to stimulate the strength of the pathways for constructive complex problem solving and for our capacity for connection and compassion. Communication skills built on such changes have the power to completely and instantly eliminate defensiveness from an interaction. Also, to offer skills so the person has options that offer an alternative to the autonomic defensive reaction in the first place at times when the person has the urge for needing some kind of protection.

Current scientific data collected by Dr. Joseph Le Deux and others also suggests that while we can't talk someone out of being defensive, if we can communicate in any way so that the other person feels safe enough to shift from defensive posture to any other *feeling* state the shift back from an activated amygdala to the complex problem solving cortex can be as instant as the shift to the amygdala when a person's defensive mechanism is triggered. This offers us great potential for learning to quickly defuse

³ *ibid*, 29

defensive responses and open the door to much more efficient and effective conflict resolution and have the potential to greatly enhance the effectiveness of the therapeutic process.

Anecdotal Example

The following anecdotal example demonstrates how using these non-defensive tools can have the power to shift a person out of an alarm state, back into a state of openness and trust, without having to wait for the adrenal flooding to dissipate more slowly, usually taking a minimum of 20 minutes to at least an hour.

This written description about shifting out of defensive flooding was written by a woman who had never previously met Sharon and focuses on a role-play they did together at a conference in front of about 600 people. The role play was focused on demonstrating that even when we are trying to encourage someone who is feeling discouraged about learning a new skill, we can inadvertently prompt the person to become defensive.

In the first phase of the role-play when Sharon simply encouraged her using traditional methods, she describes the following reactions:

My reaction to Sharon's first response was physiologically and intellectually congruent—I thought she had no right or business to make the assumption "I could learn it" and I felt aggravated, angry and my body tightened, my face (lips especially) got rigid and my vocal cords clamped down.

In the alternate role-play, using non-defensive methods to give her feedback, she describes the following reactions:

When Sharon gave her non-defensive response I had a totally uncontrolled physiological response—unconnected to intellect. I knew it was a role-play, and it was a role-play that didn't push any personal buttons. That awareness was not enough to stop the physical and emotional response. My body relaxed—I could feel a wave of tension release, moving from my head to toes; my throat and jaws opened, and I was powerless to stop tears from coming to my eyes. I truly felt validated (and that I had someone's belief in me) not for the example of the role-play (that I continued to recognize as fantasy) but for all the times I had felt unable

to move forward on something myself.

I felt the physical urges to react defensively had been switched off and my body was free to react naturally to the love and caring in Sharon's words. The defensive reaction was what now felt unnatural.

The person doing the role-play actually referred to "the love and caring in Sharon's words," which seems to support the research that suggests that when people have the capacity to shift quickly from defensive reactions to feeling connected and nurtured. It also suggests that the PNDC skill sets Sharon has developed can prompt this shift in a consistently measurable way. It demonstrates that a very defended person can instantly to move out of an alarm state and into one that is trusting and open.

In this case, beyond moving out of a defensive posture to an open one, the workshop participant seemed to take some steps toward healing a past wound/trauma having something to do with needing someone to have faith in her at times when she felt defeated. In the process, she felt more empowered.

Later, the organizers informed me that some audience members had at first thought the role-play scripted because the woman's responses were so out of character for the people who knew her. They told me she had a reputation for being a "hard nut."

Summary

Combining the changes in tone, body language and technique in the *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* process can enable one person to respond to another in a way that can prompt the person to feel calmer and secure enough to revert almost instantly to a constructive thinking mode. In essence, the PNDC process may thus actually help strengthen the pathways in "neurological terrain" related to connection and nurturing as opposed to further entrenching those that stimulate fight and flight. This information reinforces anecdotal data from many people who say that when practicing these skills, they are more able to access their compassion.

This process certainly still allows for people to feel genuine emotion as well, because it offers methods for non-defensive expression of a wide range of emotions, including anger.

Application of Skills in Therapeutic Settings

Many licensed therapists are finding that having PNDC tools are valuable in a number of specific ways, including:

- 1.** Helping to facilitate their clients' ability to process and heal from past trauma.
- 2.** Facilitating an individual's ability to shift out of emotionally reactive states, even when others (i.e. co-workers, couples and/or parents and children) are being reactive, thus providing a foundation for shifting from power struggle to resolving conflict in more constructive ways.
- 3.** Teaching the skill sets to both adults and children so they can generalize successful interactions that occur in the therapy or mediation session more easily to other environments, (such as in intimate couple relationships, working with co-workers, and dealing with bullying on the playground).
- 4.** For the increasing number of therapists working in collaborative family law, using these skills can (1) enhance the ability to work with professionals from non-therapeutic backgrounds and (2) to help parents develop skills needed to guide children and teens in making the difficult transitions inherent for them when their parents' divorce.