

Emotion Begins with WHEN – Unpacking Emotion



Lorrie Brubacher

Emotion begins with “when.” Emotion is, after all, *a process*: a series of elements unfolding in rapid succession. The door into each component can be opened with the basic tools of reflecting and evoking, using different handles/elements of emotion.

What are the different elements of emotion that an EFT therapist unpacks?

- Perception of an interpersonal trigger
- Immediately (intuitively) appraised – “Oh oh!”
- Immediate body arousal (neural – fight, flight or freeze; facial or other body expressions)
- Immediate emotion action tendency (the urge to move towards or away from)
- *Emotion meanings* (views of self and other: what this tells her about him, him in relation to her, her about herself)
- The *emotion feeling* (primary emerges as secondary is validated and the process of emotion is unpacked)

What are the EFT therapist’s tools to unpack elements of emotion?

The tools are evocative questions directed at each component of emotion, continuous reflection, and validating links between elements in repetitive slow motion replays. Continuous repetition slows things way down and incrementally increases a person’s awareness of this rapid process of emotion.

Using the EFT tools

1. EVOKE the cue – the trigger that sets the process in motion.

- Evoke the cue with “WHEN..”

Emotion begins with WHEN. “Hmmm, I am curious WHEN is it that you find yourself particularly angry with him?” Jenn: “When his back stiffens like that, pointing to Kyle.”

- Evoke the cue with, “WHAT DO YOU SEE OR HEAR that sends you straight to feeling angry?”

Emotion in response to an interpersonal trigger happens rapidly in attachment relationships. Jenn: “I hate the way his back goes like that,” as she replicates a stiffening and arching of her back like she had just seen in Kyle.

2. EVOKE the cognitive appraisal – the meaning or cognitive-affective felt sense made of the interpersonal trigger.

“WHAT DOES IT SAY to you WHEN he sits like that?”

Jenn: “That he is pulling away – that he is not there!”

Kyle admits (in the cycle): “I am – I am stepping back. Obviously my worst nightmare is happening: she is unhappy with me. So I do step away!”

REFLECT (validating) the link between her meaning and her action tendency (expressing anger), heightening the attachment significance: “You see that he is pulling away and you immediately react angrily when he is pulling **away from you** just when you need him the most!” Jenn: “Yes, I get the sense that I am left behind!” (She softens and weeps, having moved from secondary reactive anger to the primary sadness and fear.)

3. EVOKE the felt sense just before the visible change. Go back to the moment WHEN the emotion showed up in facial or bodily expression. Slow the process right down and do a slow motion replay.

Emotion happens rapidly. The facial expression of an emotion feeling lasts $\frac{1}{4}$ of a second to 4 seconds, while the internal feeling state and physiological arousal endure much longer. "Your face (or your voice) suddenly changed. Can we go back to the moment just before you said, 'He makes me so mad!'" Here again you could evoke the trigger, "What did you see / hear just before the anger came up for you?" Or you can evoke the internal, fleeting felt sense, just before it was taken over by the reactive anger, "What came up inside just before you straightened in your chair and said, 'He makes me so mad!'"

4. VALIDATE links between elements of emotion. For example, the following links can be validated:

- The link between the trigger and the automatic "Oh! Oh!" (pre-verbal appraisal of danger):
"He goes to the computer and your body stiffens, your heart sinks..."
- The link between the trigger and Jenn's action tendency:
"He goes to the computer and you immediately feel like slamming the door!"
- The link between the trigger and the meaning Jenn makes of Kyle going to his computer:
"He goes to his computer and you tell yourself / you make sense of it by saying, 'See he doesn't care. I'm all alone again, and it doesn't matter to him!'"
- The link between the trigger and Jenn's reactive secondary emotion:
"He goes to the computer and you are immediately angry."

By evoking, then reflecting and validating the links between the trigger, and a) the action tendency, b) the "Oh Oh!" moment of threat, c) the meaning made, and d) the secondary emotional reaction, you open doorways into the deeper, primary felt emotion which has links to each of these emotion components.

In Stage Two pursuer softening Jenn returns to this very process: "I feel so left behind (weeping.) I just need you to move close and hold me." Kyle moves close, holds her as she weeps and is comforted. "I just need you close like this – now I feel safe! And that is why I used to always get so angry when your back arched – I need you close like this WHEN I feel so shattered." Reaching from a place of vulnerability, expressing primary emotion pulls the now re-engaged withdrawer close and the bond is reshaped as one of security and safety.

Put it all together in the EFT Tango – Steps 1 and 2

Reflect the experience – both within and between – which one partner expresses or hints at, hold it in awareness, continue by evoking additional elements in the process and validate or link the two components together, adding in yet other elements of the cycle. This is step one of the five moves of the EFT Tango: Reflecting the present process, both *within* and *between* elements of emotion. Reflect, evoke, reflect, reflect, reflect.

Validating (or linking) is how we then expand and connect these elements together, until the deeper primary emotion which has been pushed aside is accessed, recognized and the elements of this rapid process are replayed in slow motion. This is the second step of the five moves of the EFT Tango: Exploring deeper or more primary emotions or fuller awareness of how action tendencies are linked to danger cues and underlying fears.

Lorrie Brubacher, MEd, LMFT (NC) RMFT
EFT Supervisor & Trainer
Greensboro Charlotte Center for EFT

