

From EFT Chapter of Gurman Handbook of Couple Therapy, 2013

Case Illustration: “Out of the Blue”

Trevor and Mandy came to see me because Trevor’s individual therapist, who was treating him for depression, told Trevor that he had to work on his marriage. Trevor, a handsome, high-powered executive in his late 40s, with a long history of many brief relationships, had been with Mandy, a rather quiet lawyer who was 10 years his junior, for 5 years. After much initial reluctance on Trevor’s part, they had gone to great lengths to conceive a child, who was now 18 months old. The infertility procedures had been hard on them, but they both very much enjoyed being parents to their little son. However, 6 months before coming to see me, Trevor had announced that he was unhappy in the marriage and in love with a colleague, and that he had to leave. Mandy was taken totally by surprise and completely devastated. But Trevor did not leave and after a few weeks the brief affair with his colleague petered out. He then realized that this highly manipulative person was attempting to get his support for her promotion. He expressed shame about the affair in the session, stating that it was completely against his own moral code and had nearly cost him wife, whom he loved, and his family. Mandy constantly pushed her short blonde hair out of her eyes and quietly wept through the entire session, telling me that she was “obsessed” with Trevor’s affair and still did not understand why this had happened. She described herself as alternating between surges of rage, relief that her husband was still with her, a desire for constant closeness and constant sex, and a “spacey kind of shut down.” As I listened to her, I was reminded of the state of emotional disorganization and seemingly inconsistent responses that have been observed in mothers and children when the mother is experienced as both a source of traumatizing pain and a solution to that pain.

As I asked about their relationship before this incident, Trevor shared that Mandy was the first woman with whom he had ever really felt close. Despite many brief relationships, he had never let himself “count” on anyone until he met Mandy. His parents had both been serious alcoholics, and he had left the family home to live with an uncle at 14 and then gone off to college. He had met Mandy just after his mother’s death, which had “thrown him off balance,” and had bonded with Mandy when she had helped him with the grieving process. Mandy had grown up in a very strict, religious home in which she was required to be “pretty well perfect” and had been jilted just before marriage by a long-term lover. After this, she had avoided relationships for many years until she met Trevor at an evening class and he had avidly courted her. She had been “amazed” that someone as attractive and confident as Trevor would want to be with her, because she saw herself as a “quiet, very ordinary person.” Mandy described their relationship before the affair as “great,” although she had been very tired for many months after their son had been born. She had been very “careful” to make sure, though, that she and Trevor still found time for lovemaking. The affair had been a total shock to her. She stated, “I thought we were bullet proof.”

Mandy and Trevor were very articulate, empathic and respectful of each other, and committed to their marriage. At first, I could not really see any rigid repetitive interaction cycle in their interactions. The affair was obviously an attachment injury for Mandy, but Trevor assured her

any number of times in the first sessions that he was sorry, very sorry, totally sorry. She said she believed him. They commented that they made love almost every day and enjoyed their evenings together after the baby went to sleep. Perhaps this couple did not need a full course of EFT. They just needed a couple of sessions to complete the reconciliation process.

Then I asked Trevor how he understood his apparently sudden and intense involvement with his lover. It must have been an overwhelming impulse. He thought for a moment, then commented that he had considered having the affair long enough to insist that this person go on birth control pills and that she prove to him that she was actively taking them. This did not sound like frenzied passion. He then went on to tell me, "It came out of the blue. I have no idea why I did this. I know I live in my head a lot. I think of lots of reasons why but I did this, but really, I don't know what came over me." Mandy pointedly turned her chair away, and her face became still and mask-like.

We began to talk more about the period of time after the baby was born, before Trevor began to be close with his colleague. Mandy wept and recalled Trevor telling her that she was not responding to his sexual cues, and she had then made sure they made love more often. Trevor agreed that he felt distant and "somehow rejected" during that time, but he could not really explain his feelings. "I would get mad, without even really knowing why I was mad," Trevor continued. "But the minute I got upset, she'd just change the subject or say nothing. There would be this silence. It sucked all the air out of the space between us." And then? "I would feel foolish and go buy her flowers. But then it would happen again. We would make love lots, so why didn't I feel close and desired?"

Mandy bursts into tears here. "Nothing I ever say or do satisfies you. I don't like it when you're mad. I just don't like fighting. I freeze up. How could you love me and do this? I get flashbacks all the time of his talking to that woman on the phone and telling me he is leaving. I can't sleep. Keep thinking about all this. I was suicidal for a good month or two. My first boyfriend left me and then you left me." Trevor comforts her. He says, "I am a bastard. I wrecked havoc here," Then in a quiet voice he adds, "All I know is that the affair felt like an escape. I felt empty and lost in our marriage. I should just be quiet about my feelings." The pattern that had left Mandy and Trevor alienated from each other and tipped both of them into a spiral of insecurity was suddenly apparent to me.

Step 2 of EFT is identifying the negative cycle, so I reflected on the pattern in their story and the moves in the interaction that I saw in front of me. Trevor was unsure of his emotions but felt rejected, disconnected. He tried to talk about this and became frustrated when Mandy moved away. As she shuts down more, he "gives up" on his feelings, becomes confused or tries to act in a conciliatory way. Trevor added that he then "goes analytic and cross-examines her, my motives, us, until I am exhausted." Trevor talked a little here about how Mandy was the first woman he had ever "needed" and to whom he really felt committed. He felt "off balance" when these vulnerable feelings would emerge. In past relationships, he had dismissed these feelings and the needs that went with them. With Mandy he could not do this. We began to talk about this pattern, in which the primal code of attachment needs and fear play out and direct the action but remain hidden and a "spiral of separateness" takes over. This pattern

could be labeled as demand-withdraw, but Trevor and Mandy have their own idiosyncratic, subtle version. Trevor did not even know what he was fighting about; he just knew he felt somehow empty and rejected. Mandy became more outwardly compliant but more emotionally wary and distant as Trevor became more upset. They both focused on the ball but could not see the game.

Step 3 of EFT is to bring each partner's underlying attachment emotions into this picture. Mandy reminded Trevor of the statements he had made as part of his announcement that he was leaving with his lover. "You said that you were happier single. That you were never happy with our sex life. That you never felt safe with me." Trevor responded, "I was just trying to justify what I was doing." "I didn't know how to talk about the emptiness. But the never feeling safe—that was true." So we talk about the emptiness and lack of safety.

As we unpacked this emotional experience, with interventions such as reflection, evocative questions, and heightening, Trevor first became angry: "I feel like I am responsible for the relationship. I ask for sex, you do it to please me. But I don't feel desired. And if I get upset, I can't find you. You change the subject. You go off and shut down." Then he got sad: "I can't connect, and I can't lean on you, trust you when I need to." He began to understand that when he felt "empty," he had "escaped" into his old strategy for relationships, which was to numb out, detach, and go off with someone new. Mandy said, "I never see your need. You are Mr. Self--Sufficient. You are the perfectionist. I am always afraid of hearing that I am doing it wrong. You don't like the way I clean, the way I dress. I am not passionate enough. I was always terrified of losing you, even before the affair. You judge me." She began to cry. She told him, "I need a shell to deal with the fear. It's like I'm back home trying so hard to be a good little girl and never making it. I just want to die, to disappear." Trevor leaned forward and held her.

Trevor and Mandy moved into de-escalation. They were able to integrate their sense of relationships patterns and underlying emotions, and could see these patterns as the problem that prevented them from being open and responsive to each other, and that set up the crisis of the affair. However, they still needed to create new levels of accessibility and responsiveness, and to heal the pain of the affair.

In Stage Two, the more habitually withdrawn partner usually goes one step ahead, so that this person becomes reasonably accessible before the other, more blaming, controlling partner is encouraged to risk asking for his or her attachment needs to be met. Both Trevor and Mandy withdrew at times. Trevor pushed for contact but then, when disappointed, felt "empty," shut down, and pretended for a while that everything was OK before getting openly frustrated again. Mandy was very anxious to please Trevor and to be close to him, but when she picked up negative cues from him, she habitually went into her shell, dismissing his concerns. The therapist then began the Stage Two process by encouraging Mandy to explore her attachment fears and needs more deliberately.

A summary of two the key moments and key interventions in Stage Two of EFT follows:

Step 5. Unpacking and Deepening Mandy's Emotions as Part of Withdrawer Reengagement

Trevor told Mandy how hard it was for him that she insisted he always “stay calm” if he had any issue in the relationship, and then went silent and did not discuss his points. Mandy stayed silent. Then she brought up an intellectual point, and a rather abstract discussion of closeness began. We refocused and began to unpack Mandy's emotions as she listened to Trevor's concern.

Therapist: What is happening for you right now, Mandy, as Trevor says this? As he tells you that it is hard for him for always be “calm” and to know how to deal with your silence at those times?

Mandy: I don't know. He's the most important thing to me. I don't know how I feel.

Therapist: But what comes up for you is a sense of how important he is. What do you hear him saying ? [Focus on emotional cue.]

Mandy: I hear that he is mad at me. That I am failing here. That is why he had the affair.

Therapist: That is what you hear, that you are -failing—disappointing him. How do you feel as you say that?—emotionally, in your body? [Focus on somatic sense.]

Mandy: I feel sick. Like I am going to throw up. The other day, when I burnt the muffins we were going to have for breakfast, it was the same. It's worse since the affair, but I think it's always been like this really.

Therapist: So what comes up is, he is so important to you, and he is mad, you are failing, you feel sick, and then what do you do with this feeling? [Focus on action tendency.] You go “into your shell”?

Mandy: I just give up. (*Throws her hands in the air and starts to cry.*) I have lost him already.

Therapist: And the feeling that comes with that? [It can only be sadness, shame, primal attachment panic.]

Mandy: I am terrified. Terrified. I have nothing to say. I can't say anything. I am not enough. And I shouldn't even feel this way. It's stupid. I shouldn't be so sensitive to his disapproval, especially after all this affair stuff. My mind spins.

Therapist: So, in these moments, when you sense that Trevor is in any way disappointed in you, you feel terror. It brings up all your fears that you are not good enough here, and then you feel stupid for even feeling this way. That is -unbearable—yes? So you just go still and silent. (*Mandy nods.*) Can you tell him, “I am so afraid that I am not enough for you—so scared.”

Mandy: (*Looks at Trevor and then points to the therapist.*) What she said. (*Laughs and then cries.*) Yes. That's right. I am scared, so I go into my shell.

Therapist: Trevor, can you hear your wife? What happens to you when she says this?

Trevor: I feel sad. I am hard on Mandy. I'm demanding. (*Turns to Mandy.*) But when you blow me off like I don't matter, when you just go silent, I can't handle that. I don't want you to be scared of me. Either way it seems like we are stuck. If I get demanding, you go into your shell and shut me out. If I numb out and pretend there is nothing wrong and that I don't need you, that still doesn't work. I guess we are both terrified here.

As Mandy became more engaged and began to articulate her longstanding insecurities, Trevor was also able to explore his emotions. He began to be able to articulate these emotions in statements, such as "I realize now that I cannot tolerate your withdrawal. I feel so alone, so helpless" and "The baby was your big project. Then you were so tired. I couldn't find you." Mandy was more and more able to order and articulate her experience coherently and to demand that they now deal more openly with the trauma of the affair, so that she could begin to feel safe with Trevor again. Trevor was more able to engage actively in the steps for the forgiveness of attachment injuries now that he had access to his underlying emotions.

Steps in the Forgiveness of Injuries Conversation

The therapist guides Trevor and Mandy through the steps in this conversation, heightening emotional responses and shaping enactments as they go.

Step 1 in this process is where the nub of the injury is outlined, and the traumatic nature of the injury articulated. Step 2 is where the therapist supports the injuring partner during any initial reactions, such as minimizing or defending. Step 3 is where Mandy, the injured partner, is able to voice her hurt and its attachment significance. She puts her finger on the core of this experience when she tells him, "The night that I keep going back to is when you said you were leaving, and then you blamed me for the affair. I was literally on the floor, and you announced that it was all my fault, and went off wondering about what your life was going to be like without me. I was irrelevant. How could you love me and do that?"

In Step 4, the injuring partner acknowledges his pain and explains his actions in a coherent way that makes them predictable again to the wounded partner. Trevor no longer says that the affair came "out of the blue." He says,

"I got lost. I didn't know how to talk about my feelings. I didn't know how to ask for comfort. And I felt so helpless. You didn't seem to want me. You were closed off from me; even when we made love it felt like we weren't connected. I got angrier and emptier and more and more numb. The affair was an escape and an attempt to get back to my old life, when I didn't need -anyone—didn't need you. When I woke up, I was horrified that I might lose you. Horrified at myself and what I had done. I understand that I broke your heart, and that I even blamed you for my craziness.

I decided that you didn't desire me. I turned into a sexual thing."

As Trevor opened up, Mandy could move into Step 5—a coherent, clear statement of her ongoing pain and attachment fears. The therapist supports, reflects, validates, and helps her stay engaged with and order her experience. Mandy tells Trevor, "All my worst fears came true. You were leaving me and it was all because I wasn't enough. I couldn't meet your needs. And then my dismay and my hurt didn't matter at all. I wanted to die then. And now, how do I know if your love is real? All that stuff did come out of the blue for me. Do I really know you? I get into this frantic state."

Trevor now cried with his wife and expressed his shame and his remorse (Step 6). He told Mandy,

"I told myself lies. I focused on the sex. This wasn't about sex. It was about me getting desperate and alone, and not knowing how to reach for you. You are so perfect, so beautiful, and I can see that all my flailing around and making demands freaked you out. I didn't know how to say, 'Let me in. I want to feel cherished'. So I turned away and I hurt you so badly. I don't know if you can ever forgive me. I am ashamed, I feel sick that I did this. I am afraid that you will never trust me again. I squandered our love. Now I want to make you feel safe, make you feel happy."

Mandy could now move into Step 7 and ask for the attachment needs sparked by this relationship trauma to be met. She said,

"I get frantic and spacey, not sure what to trust or believe. Not sure which way is up. I need a ton of reassurance from you. I need to cling to you sometimes. Right now, I just can't get enough caring and holding. And if I get mad, I want you to hear it. I have to know you are right here with me." And Trevor could move into Step 8 of this forgiveness and reconciliation process by responding to his wife's needs and so creating a safe haven for her. He says, "I am so grateful for a second chance. I want to hold and comfort you. I want us to be close. I will never risk losing us again. I am here."

Trevor and Mandy could now stand back and create a clear narrative of their relational problems and attachment injury and how they had healed this injury. They were able to continue to confide, with Trevor discovering and sharing more about his needs for emotional connection and how hard it was for him to admit this need, and Mandy opening up and sharing her fears and asserting her limits in the face of her partner's demands and perfectionistic style. They told me that they had a better relationship than ever before, but that this time, the big change did not come "out of the blue." Now, they knew how they had lost each other, and they knew how to create a sense of safe connection.