

THERAPIST TOOLBOX



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SHAPE Emotionally Engaged Interpersonal Encounters

Traditionally called an *enactment* in couple therapy, this core restructuring intervention is also known across all modalities of EFT with couples, individuals and families as an *engaged encounter*. Interpersonal encounters are specific dialogues shaped in a predictable manner by the therapist in what is known as EFT Tango Move 3. In all modalities of EFT, *engaged encounters* are essential to shaping corrective emotional experiences that create lasting change.

This toolbox focuses on EFT Tango Move 3 with mini moves elucidated by the acronym SHAPE. The predictable nature of how to SHAPE encounters provides a reliable guide for a task that for many therapists and clients can initially feel quite daunting.

There are two clinical implications of attachment science that inform and direct EFT therapists. First of all, that emotion – the target and agent of change in EFT – functions simultaneously as both a powerful intrapsychic and interpersonal process that can be harnessed to create change. Secondly, that change is inherently interpersonal in nature and is shaped by emotional messages shared in dialogue with another. Keying in on the fundamentally interpersonal nature of change events in EFT, the tools of SHAPE bring life, depth, and utility to this process.

SHAPE as an acronym to guide an EFT therapist in shaping encounters is briefly illustrated below with Maya, an adult client struggling with anxiety and fears of judgement across relationships. A troubling childhood image resurfaces as she struggles to build a better relationship with her mother, one of her key supports.

EFT Tango Move 3 – SHAPE Engaged Encounters

The text below is the therapist's words, often in proxy voice.

Simplify, **S**harpen the message to be shared.

You scared me mom – you were loud and angry and I was all alone – scared and alone and you were not there for me!

Heighten the emotional experience of the message. (RISSSSC: repeating cue and emotional handle in client's words; simply, softly, slowly, specifically.)
You're yelling – me so alone, so afraid, hiding under the bed – fearing your anger and your judgement.

Anticipate encounter with other.

Can you close your eyes and picture your mom? What does she look like? What comes up inside as you see her in your imagination? Can you imagine telling her, "I was so afraid – hearing you yelling, felt so alone, so afraid of your anger and your judgement?"

Direct client to **P**resent message.

Tell her now, "You frightened me mom – you were loud and angry and I was all alone – scared and alone and you were not there for me!"

Engage – re-engage, refocus, slice thinner. (If client hesitates out of worry that mother feels badly, slice thinner.)

It is difficult to tell her when you imagine her looking so sad and ashamed. Can you tell her, "It's very hard to let you know how much you frighten me when I see your face of shame?"

EFT Tango Move 4 – Process the Encounter

Process with client:

What is it like / what happens inside to say, “Mom you scared me – you were loud and angry and I was all alone. Hiding and alone!”? (Repeat the core message disclosed.)

Process how client imagines the other to be responding:

What do you sense it is like for this image of your mother to hear her daughter say so courageously to her just now, “Mom you scared me – you were loud and angry and I was all alone. Hiding and alone!”?

Since all moves of the EFT Tango are oriented towards corrective emotional experiences that are shaped through interpersonal dialogue with EFT Tango Move 3, the tools in this Toolbox assume proficiency in the other moves of the EFT Tango. The other Moves of the Tango provide the bookends for EFT Tango Move 3.

That is, you need finely honed tools in Reflecting Present Process (EFT Tango Move 1), with a keen awareness of the link between typical attachment threatening cues and reactive action tendencies. You also need to check that you are adept at using the tools of EFT Tango Move 2 to assemble and link elements of the rapidly unfolding cascade of emotion: Attachment threatening cues; bodily felt arousal; meaning making; and reactive emotions / action impulses. Linking these elements to access and heighten the core attachment fear that was overlooked during this rapid self-protective process, is a key tool of EFT Tango Move 2, needed for choosing and shaping encounters.

To maximize the corrective emotional experience of an interpersonal encounter, follow Tango Move 3 with Tango Move 4, processing the impact of the moment of interpersonal contact. The encounter is processed first with the one who has disclosed the message and secondly, with the recipient or the imagined recipient of the message. Most often the one who has disclosed the message is invited, first of all, to linger, to notice internally how it was

to put this message out loud to the other, and then is asked to express how it was to share this disclosure. Following the slow, intentional process of how it was to share this message, the one who has received the message is invited to describe how it felt to receive. If the recipient is an imagined other as in EFIT, the imagined response of the other is processed. The emotional experiencing level is deepened most effectively in Tango Move 4 when the therapist repeats and repeats again, the core message just shared.

Tango Move 5 – Integrating & Validating involves the celebration, integration and summary of the corrective emotional experiences and consolidates the encounter into the client’s change process, whether the client is an individual, a couple or a family.

Examples of the tools in this Toolbox are illustrated in the EFIT encounter below, as well as in my review of Dr. T.Y. Wong’s EFFT session elsewhere in this newsletter. Although the examples given are from EFIT and EFFT, the process also applies to couple therapy.

An EFIT encounter with an imagined other whom the client is terrified of seeing:

George (not his real name) self-identifies as neurodiverse. He is a white male in his late forties who grew up in South America and moved back to his home country of Canada as a young teen. He spent time in jail for his responsibility for the death of his friend who was killed while George was driving while intoxicated. Decades later, while facing the grief of separation from his long-time partner, he entered therapy to face the impacts of the traumas which were feeling pervasive and preventing him from achieving his goals. In addition to the trauma of being in jail, subject to hostile others who did not have his best interests in mind, he lived with the weight of responsibility for his friend’s death. Additionally, he struggled with memories of other traumas and experiences of death. He felt particularly haunted for decades by a terror of possibly one day remembering consciously what his friend looked like at the scene of the accident.

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The first six hours of therapy included several encounters with his friend as he remembered him alive, yet this was his first encounter with an image of his dead friend at the accident scene. Following are the therapist's words, shaping an encounter with this imagined other – most are first person, proxy voice reflections to heighten client's present moment experiencing.

EFT Tango Move 3 – SHAPE Encounter

SIMPLIFY, **SHARPEN** the message to share.

Therapist: *I have been terrified for decades about really facing what happened! I know you suffered massive trauma. I am filled with terror! I've been blocking any possible memories of that night for decades!*

HEIGHTEN the emotional experience of the message. (RISSSSC: repeat cue and emotional handle in client's words; simple, soft, slow, specific.)

Therapist: *I always wanted to be a person that didn't cause a lot of damage in this world – that didn't harm other people... yet I feel responsible for your death. I drove that car! I see you there, lying on the ground and I am so sorry!*

ANTICIPATE encounter with other.

Therapist: *Can you close your eyes and picture Todd there on the ground? Can you hear his words from those previous imagined conversations you've had with an image of him? When you told him how sorry you are and he said, "I wanted to go drinking too. We were both drinking. I don't blame you." Can you feel that tension in your chest right now? Can you tell him again, "I see how badly you are hurt – I see you are dead – and I am so sorry!"?*

Direct client to **PRESENT** message.

Therapist: *Can you tell him, "I feel responsible – I am responsible and I am so sorry! I always wanted to be a kind gardener and not do this kind of harm. I know you have no malice towards me but I am so sorry and filled with grief and remorse!"?*

George to his dead friend: *I feel very badly that I was drinking and driving. I feel very badly. I feel responsi-*

ble. And now I can feel the grief of that... I do feel badly for what happened. I feel sadness now – not shame – so very sad you died!

ENGAGE – re-engage, refocus, slice thinner, as needed.

Therapist: *Before you feared the sadness was too much, it would just overwhelm you and now the sadness is important to you, yes? Now you are able to look clearly at the scene of Todd's death and feel the loss and know you are on the path to being the kind person you want to be. Can you tell him that too – how feeling the sadness and grief is beginning to help you?*

Process Encounter EFT Tango Move 4

First processing with George who has disclosed:

Therapist: *How are you doing as you actually stand in that scene? What happens inside to say, again, and this time directly to him on the ground, "I feel responsible. I am so sorry!" What is it like to tell him, "I am so sorry! I am so sad you died!" What is happening in your body right now? (Repeating the core message disclosed.)*

George: *I'm okay! I don't have that tightness that I normally get. Like, I'm very sad but I don't have that... I don't have that tightness. It's a little bit like letting some weight off. (Shift in bodily felt sense.)*

Second, processing with his imagined other's response:

Therapist: *What message do you sense coming from this image of Todd as you say, "I am responsible and I am so sorry!"?*

George: *Just love. I feel our love for each other. He has no malice. I feel lighter than I have in a long time!*

While there is no example here of an encounter with an abusive other, the tools for Tango Moves 3 and 4, augmented by the mini moves embodied by the acronym SHAPE, are also readily applicable for interpersonal encounters with imagined abusive others in EFIT. One significant difference is that when shaping an encounter with an abusive other, the client has the option of stating clearly that they do

not want to hear back from the image of the other. Stage 2 shifts in view of self as lovable, worthy and coherent, and view of *some* others as reliable and trustworthy are shaped through transformative encounters. A client is supported to speak clearly and safely to an abusive other about how totally wrong their treatment was. They are supported to assert that they hold the other fully responsible, to name the blame and anger they feel towards them, and to state their own worthiness. In the process, they are able to distinguish the abusive other from others who are safe and reliable, and to regain a sense of safety and worthiness in the face of that abuse.

The predictable nature of how to SHAPE and process engaged encounters provides therapists with the tools to shape the interpersonal encounters that are at the heart of change in EFT, across all modalities of EFIT, EFFT and EFCT.

[Click here](#) or visit www.steppingintoeft.com for EFCT and EFIT video examples of shaping encounters.

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EFFT with Dr. T.Y. Wong: Integrating Culture and Attachment



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In an EFFT session with a father, mother and teenage son who are grieving the recent deaths of both of the father's parents from COVID, Dr. Wong demonstrates amazing attunement and ultimate respect for cultural differences, while building on core attachment themes. He sensitively and explicitly names differences in Chinese culture between the generations and attends specifically to the son's parental caregiving stance as a block to his own grieving process. The son's grief has somehow gone unnoticed as his parents grieve and the son does his best to fulfill the expectations of being the eldest son and only child. He does not go to his parents for comfort in his loss of his grandparents. Among other elements of his profound attunement to the family, T. Y. also shows the power of accessing the parental caregiving

intent and brings it alive in his flow between Tango Move 3 (Shaping Engaged Encounters) and Tango Move 4 (Processing the Encounters). A unique demonstration of art and science in tandem!

Dr. Wong is powerful in his slow-paced, attuned repetition in EFT Tango Moves 3 and 4. With his entire being radiating empathic attunement, T.Y. repeats many times the father's emotional handle, "I hurt for you," (expressed in shaping an encounter to his son). Then he gradually builds the intensity of his attachment-informed conjecture, "There's room in my heart for you, for your pain, room to love you," and repeats that many, many times. With each repetition he seems to attune with his own heart and mind more deeply with the dad's deepest longings. He artfully flows between repetitions of encounters, processing with father and son and then shaping more encounters. This is a creative and very focused flow of EFT Tango Moves 3 - 4 - 3.

The preceding Therapist Toolbox article provided mini moves of Tango Move 3 using the acronym SHAPE, followed by the two parts of Tango Move 4. Below, I adapt powerful examples from Dr. Wong's session that illustrate these moves.

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SHAPE Encounter – EFT Tango Move 3

SIMPLIFY or **S**HARPEN the message to share

Therapist to father: *You see how you have hurt your son — how you were not there to support him in his grief and you long for him to know there is room in your heart for him!* (Continuing in proxy voice.) *“Despite everything on my plate, despite you seeing sometimes the weak side of daddy when I become unglued,” you are saying, “Despite it all... there’s room in my heart to carry your hurt.”* (Conjecture.) *Is that what you are saying when you say, “I see your hurt.”* (Checking conjecture.) *There’s a special room in my heart to feel your pain. Despite everything I’m going through there’s always a special room in my heart for you.”*

HEIGHTEN the experience of the message to share. (RISSSSC: repeat cue and emotional handle in client’s words; simple, soft, slow, specific.)

Therapist: *You look at your son now, and you feel deeply in your being how you hurt him and left him alone with his grief and you have room in your heart for him. “There’s room in my heart for you!” Yes? “There’s room in my heart for you!”*

ANTICIPATE encounter with other.

Therapist: You see him there in front of you on the screen and can you imagine telling him, “I see how I have hurt you and there is room in my heart for you. There is room in my heart for your pain!”?

Direct client to **P**RESENT message.

Therapist: *Could you tell him that? Because it is easy for him to assume you’re so caught up in your sadness that there’s no room for him in your heart. But what you are saying as his dad is, no matter what you are going through, there’s always a special place in your heart for his pain, for his sadness. Could you tell him that?*

ENGAGE as needed, re-engage, refocus, slice thinner. In this example there was no need to refocus the father during the encounter itself; however, in Tango Move 4, T.Y. created an opportunity to

heighten the engagement, particularly when processing the encounter with the son, who required him to refocus on his own experience.

Father’s heartfelt encounter: *I know you are hurting. I know you are grieving because we all are. And I want to let you know that I love you very much. Just as much as Mom loves you. I want to get through this together. I have space in my heart for you. I have time for you and... we’re going to get through this together.*

Process Encounter EFT Tango Move 4

First processing with father who has shared:

Therapist: *What’s it like to share that with him? “Even though sometimes I seem like I’m in a mess, there’s always a special place in my heart for you. There’s always a special place of love — a place where I can hold your pain.” What’s it like to share that with him?*

After the father expresses how vulnerable he feels, T.Y. continues with more engaging, heightening and shaping more of the encounter.

Therapist: *You feel very vulnerable, right? So this place is almost sacred, right? “I feel so vulnerable. So hard to tell you about this.” Could you tell your son that? (Shaping more of the encounter before processing with son.)*

Second, processing with son who has received his father’s message:

Therapist: *Just wondering what’s happening to you as you hear your dad say that? I gather your dad doesn’t usually talk like this, right? Usually a quiet guy, right? So I just hear him say, “Son, no matter how down I am, how overwhelmed I am, or how caught up I am in my own emotions, there’s always this special... sacred place for you in my heart... It’s a place of love. It’s a place where I see and I feel your pain and your hurt.” What is it like to hear that from your father?*

Son: *It gives me real comfort to hear that.* (Glances

down.) And I also want to say that he has a place in my heart. I know it's been tough for the whole family, especially for my father because it's both his parents... gone... and I guess I can see, I understand, that everybody grieves differently and that I will always be there for my father no matter what. Like these circumstances... I'm trying to be like the best son I can ever be.

While **E**ngaging and refocusing was not needed in the Tango Move 3 above, it is used here. It is very common in Tango Move 4 that specific focus is required to engage the client with their own present-moment experience.

Therapist: *So let me ask you again ... I gather your dad doesn't usually talk like this, right? So this might be very new for you to hear your dad talking like this. How do you feel inside when you see that your father is overwhelmed, he's struggling to cope and yet there's this sacred, special place in his heart for you, where he can see your hurt, understand your hurt, and hold your hurt. What do you feel when you hear your father say that and show you this special place in his heart?*

Son: *I can feel that... It's... Um... It feels like.... Um... Uh... I'm not going to leave him, he's not going to leave me and we're in this together. We'll be there for each other. (Looks down.) And it's also a sense of assurance — I don't feel alone as much, I don't feel abandoned by my father in his grieving... I feel more together.*

The encounters that T.Y. shapes between father and son in this Stage 1 session are powerfully integrated in the family with the mother as well. The session demonstrates the change event of stabilization and begins the antidote process of reshaping the security of the father-son bond. This corrective emotional experience reaches to the core of the son's fear of, "Am I being a good enough son?" T.Y. beautifully adds attachment themes to validate their differing experiences of Asian culture, while strengthening their bond. T.Y.'s face, his tears, his presence, mirrors the sacredness of the father-son

bond. Laughter and tears and joking about father-son bonding over poutine (a French-Canadian specialty of fries with gravy and melted cheese) and Montreal-smoked meat, combine in this session of sacred, intimate moments which move many viewers to tears. In closing, he integrates the session with a lovely Tango Move 5 that further expands their work.

This session illustrates the power of staying with and deepening attunement to the combination of cultural differences and attachment poignancy. The attachment dimension – unblocking father's nurturing and caregiving and son's openness to receive father's comfort – clearly enriches the traditional Chinese father-son bond which is based on role, duty and responsibility. This session, together with a detailed annotated transcript noting EFT Tango moves, client stages and steps, and cultural considerations, was shared at the most recent EFT Canada Talks! It is available to purchase for viewing at: <https://tceft.ca/product/canada-talks-series/> or [click here](#).

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