

The EFT Therapeutic Stance: An Antidote to Therapist Burnout

How can EFT therapists attend to and manage those emotional floods and seemingly automatic blockages that exhaust us and drain our vitality? Do you at times feel yourself reacting with agitation to clients' belligerence or escalating cycles? Do you feel your toe nails gripping into your shoes as the more withdrawn partner looks at you with a plaintive, "See what I have to put up with!" glance?

The following case example demonstrates that the fundamental resource for self care and effective therapy lies in the stance we take in our work. EFT is rooted in the person centered stance of empathy, unconditional acceptance and congruence - which includes a focusing attitude of empathy, acceptance and curiosity. Curiosity and caring towards the hostile pursuing partner can provide a firm base on which to stand. While a hostile, anxious pursuer rivets in his chair with fury and threatens his partner with, "One more look like that and I am out of here!", I take a deep breath and deepen my curiosity about what just happened inside for him - that his wife's facial expression catapulted him into fury. I speculate out loud about this: "What just happened as that grimace on her face flooded you with anger? It seems something very painful or frightening just shot through you for a second before you threatened you would leave if you saw one more look like that?" He slows down enough to be slightly puzzled or perhaps to notice my curiosity in the rapid interaction beginning to spin out of control. I conjecture, "Is there perhaps some fear, something softer underneath that intense frustration you feel?" At the same time the bullets are flying I feel a space for curiosity and empathy opening up within me. His partner has said moments earlier, "I try to express myself very carefully so that he doesn't get triggered and fire back at me. Anything I say can fuel his rage. I walk so gingerly in our house!"

When I manage to be grounded in my stance of empathy, acceptance and congruence, I feel deep within me that these are two good people caught in a mutually threatening dance. I feel and express out loud that we are not trying to fix the problem right now; that first of all we are trying to be detectives together to find out how they are caught and what it is that each partner is doing that feels so threatening and unsafe for the other one. When the more hostile and hyperactivated spouse tries to take over the session and becomes verbally hostile towards his partner, I step in firmly to create safety. I say that I need to take charge of the process for a moment. Briefly he says this

cannot work if I don't let him speak. I reassure him that I want to hear from him but also that, in fact, it cannot work if he doesn't trust me and allow me at times to direct the process. Then, (remembering the penultimate importance of task alliance in EFT) I describe again the task on which I am working with them - to discover how each of them can find and own what it is that they are doing that is triggering their partner to feel threatened and to respond as they do. I ask if they can see the relevance of this task. We pause until I receive each partner's confirmation.

This gives me time to engage my own patience, tolerance and curiosity towards myself as a therapist struggling in the moment, feeling like throwing up my hands in defeat. Grounding myself again in the stance of empathy, acceptance and curiosity, in particular towards the partner that triggers me the most, I find the courage to move forward with reflections that validate the intense wall of frustration that blocks any willingness to hear his partner. Then I conjecture about their pain or sadness related to the broader picture that they have presented. These conjectures are almost too far out at the leading edge to be received in the moment but they are helping me slowly attune to the moment-to-moment experience. They are also dropped as seeds with enough tentativeness that they can be picked up later.

Several reflections later, I mirror what I am told: I say that I sense that there are no feelings of sadness or pain - in fact "nothing at all" beyond frustration. I paint a poignant picture of him feeling nothing at all, remembering the day he thought that he had lost her forever. Gradually, as I allow him to feel "just nothing at all" and as I communicate total acceptance, I feel myself beginning to feel more tolerant, more deeply in touch with his slowly emerging pain. Firmly and purposefully directing a stage one enactment, they begin to experience some de-escalation and engagement with previously denied primary emotions and longings for one another. A large tear runs down each partner's cheek as the more withdrawn partner, says "Now that I see into your heart, I feel safer with you already!" I am refreshed with knowing that having grounded us empathically and openly in the safety of the cycle reframe, we were able to follow their reactive emotions to core primary action tendencies and longings and that this tumultuous therapy is slowly inching towards safety.

During these very challenging sessions, I notice myself moving between fragmentation and incompetence and back again to the solid ground of connection and reassurance that I can be an effective therapist. Adopting the

person- centered, focusing stance, I can feel safe in this “flow experience” of simultaneously monitoring the moment to moment processes within myself and within my clients as they make contact with each other. The openness and tolerance of the EFT therapeutic stance allows me to accept my limitations as it broadens my tolerance and unconditional acceptance for the clients and cycles of interaction I have not yet come to fully understand. Being committed to continually accept and more deeply understand the internal and in-between dynamics of my clients grounds me in a stance of self-and-other-forgiveness for the slips we make.

This “flow experience” – in and of itself – is replenishing, invigorating and also reassuring that while we cannot “fix problems” we can guide people through the steps of reshaping dangerous interactions into safe and secure relationships for which we all long.

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