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Using EFT To Co-Regulate Therapist Reactivity



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EFT therapists are all familiar with the experience of feeling vulnerable or reactive as they work with couples. In this article, we want to review four key ways that the EFT model can offer specific support to the therapist who may be swept off balance by a tide of personal reactivity to a tricky moment in couple therapy. We believe that these key resources, the sine qua non of EFT's attachment-infused, experiential, humanistic, systemic integration can help the therapist to be more deeply attuned and empathically responsive to the couple in front of her/him, thereby co-regulating reactivity.

The Alliance

We begin with the Rogerian core conditions of unconditional acceptance, communicated empathic understanding and therapist congruence. When personal vulnerability or agitation interferes with these core conditions, we rely on EFT's first task – alliance building and awareness of how we, as therapists, may be getting triggered by our clients and how we may be triggering them.

Bearing in mind that our mirror neurons may be firing with those of our clients, a first step might be for the therapist to recognize her increasing heart rate or other bodily arousal and acknowledge to herself that she herself is feeling vulnerable and triggered: "I am feeling a bit reactive here myself – what is this about?" She can slow herself down by breathing consciously and becoming openly curious. She might say to an escalating client, "I think I am missing something here. What you are saying is obviously very important and I may not be fully understanding you." To a client with a more avoidant, shut-down response, she may say, "I want very much to understand what is happening here and I need your help." Curiosity, genuinely felt and expressed, is a pathway to collaboratively joining with your clients rather than reacting to them.

Validation

To this we add the humanistic principle that change is made possible when the therapist *validates* what is rather than tries to *change* what is. To validate partners' present positions and reactive emotions, EFT therapists need to be aware of their own typical triggers and automatic (self-protective) attachment responses under threat. One therapist recognizes that he is triggered by hostile and critical remarks. He knows he has a propensity to get agitated with a client who makes a hostile comment to the therapist or to the partner. If a client has a hair trigger response of criticizing their partner, the therapist may have a slight tone of irritation as he steps in to respond. However subtle this tone, it is sure to be detected

by the client as non-acceptance and this may place the alliance in jeopardy. The EFT model teaches us that therapist reactivity to clients can actually fuel the cycle, whereas the ability to enter the client's experience, see, hear and understand and – yes – *validate* the inherent logic of the client's reactivity in the context of this individual's experience can calm both clients and therapists! Therefore, before conjecturing for vulnerable primary emotion, the EFT therapist tracks the cycle carefully, validating the secondary emotion and action tendency in the context of the trigger and the meaning the client creates.

Another therapist recognizes she tends to avoid or minimize hostility and escalating reactivity and is likely to sidestep hostile comments with a big conjecture so far from the leading edge that it is not recognized by either partner. For example, to a ranting hostile husband, "You don't really mean to blame her, do you? You are just afraid that you are not important to her anymore, is that it?" And the client replies, "I do want to blame her! She hasn't talked to me for days!" By increasingly recognizing her triggers and her automatic response, this therapist found the courage to risk staying closer to the client's immediate experiencing. She learned the value of validating the secondary emotions (such as anger) and attachment meanings (e.g.: "Her not talking to me tells me she has given up on me.") before leaping far beyond the leading edge into primary emotions that were not yet accessible to the client.

The Attachment Map

The third key resource for an EFT therapist is the **attachment map of love**: Insecure attachment responses come in two flavors (upping the ante in search of a response or tamping down all needs for connection), both of which camouflage core fears and needs. EFT therapists can hold on to this de-pathologizing and insightful map to soothe their own emotional imbalance, as in:

"I may not have found the core fears yet, but I know that somewhere inside this chaotic fighting, are two different reactions to a panic somewhat like a child's

emotional cries of "Mommy, don't leave me!" or "Mommy, you must respond to me!" I am witnessing two genuinely well-intentioned partners doing their best to survive, while caught in the chaos of unarticulated attachment panic."

Holding this in mind long before the partners are ready to access their fears can help the therapist maintain emotional balance as she unfolds the cycle playing out before her, explicitly validating what is happening, without pressure to change what is. Balance and compassion for herself and the couple emerge:

"We are explorers, searching together to discover how this cycle sucks you into this distancing dance. We are making sense out of how your best attempts in this relationship are catching you up in this cycle that leaves you both hurting and distant."

Using the attachment map, the therapist can view reactivity, cold withdrawal and critical pursuit as each client's best attempts to deal with the threat of abandonment or rejection from their partner. This helps the therapist to not react even to harsh criticism or cold anger but remain genuinely curious about the triggers cueing each partner's defensive action tendencies. Therapist and partners co-regulate, as the inherent logic of the cycle emerges:

"I do increase the volume when I see her eyes turned away and arms folded tight. Her wall goes up and I go ballistic."

In turn, she says:

"I shut down and go further and further away, the louder he gets."

The therapist maintains emotional balance with the logic of how each partner's self-protective moves trigger the other, until he can access full empathic understanding of the unacknowledged primary emotions fuelling the negative patterns.

Love Sense Links

The fourth key comes from the systemic aspect of EFT. Creating sufficient safety to link the elements of

the cycle is a powerfully regulating resource for the EFT therapist.

You feel lost and helpless as a volatile attack-attack sequence unravels before your eyes...but turning to your model, you remember: reactive anger is code for attachment panic and what this couple needs right now more than anything is that you make this a safe place. Gently yet firmly you take charge – interrupting to say you need to make this a safe place:

"I'm just going to slow you both down right now. Jeff, (as you put your hand on his knee). Jeff, I need you to let me be in charge right now."

Sally keeps shouting at him, and you move forward gently putting yourself between their chairs:

"Sally, would it be ok if I take charge right now to make this a safe place for both of you?"

After regaining a sense of safety that comes from your being in charge, you choose to evoke responses from one partner at a time, e.g. staying long enough to engage Sally in owning elements of her experience in the cycle, creating clarity and coherence with how the elements of the cycle are linked.

Jeff calms down a little with your commitment to return to him shortly and you make sense together with Sally about what is happening for her. After, Sally is able to identify:

"It's true, I see that vacant look in his eyes and I just shut down and block him out – until he starts yelling – then I can outshout him any day!"

Slowly you evoke the meaning:

"Vacant look? You see a vacant look in his face?"

"Yes – just look at his face now. Obviously he feels nothing – just blank – I can't tell if I'll ever be important to him again!"

And you validate the meaning that she creates from the trigger (his vacant look) and link it to her action tendency:

"So this vacant look tells you he has no feeling for you, and when you see that, then what you do is you shut down – and pull away to protect yourself, yeah?"

Step by step you link the elements of her side of the cycle and after you have accurately joined with her in her part of the cycle, you return to him to understand what her action tendency (pulling away) triggers in him. You heighten the links between the primary fears and action tendencies, validating how if she pulls away (fearing that she doesn't matter), then he gets anxious that she will block him out forever. You help the couple to see that this anxiety turns up his volume as he tries to find her but she only hears his loud accusations... and in minutes they are attacking each other. They smile as they recognize how automatic and cruel this cycle is and how desperately it both fuels and hides/squelches their tender fears. The therapist slowly and deliberately unfolds and delineates the logic inherent in this cycle and reframes it as their best attempts to preserve the attachment bond. Some emotional balance is restored, within and between both clients and therapist.

We have reviewed four key resources of the EFT model that can come to our rescue when as therapists we feel personally caught off balance in the therapy room with cycle escalation: **Genuine curiosity** pulls us back to the core conditions of empathy and acceptance for both partners. **Validating what is**, rather than trying to *change* what is, lessens the pressure to make rapid change and collaboratively engages partners in the de-escalation change event. Using the **attachment lens** to normalize reactivity, co-regulates therapists and clients and they share a non-blaming frame of the reactive actions and emotions. Creating sufficient safety to **link the elements of the cycle**, restores more balance and makes "love sense" out of the cycle chaos.

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