

Working with an Attachment Injury in Stage One

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This article was originally published as a “Toolbox” article
in the ICEEFT *EFT Community News*, Spring 2015

In *Love Sense*, Sue Johnson explores how and why relationships fail, by describing two types of “Unraveling Bonds” – those relationship bonds which fail through “slow erosion” and those which fail due to a “sudden snap.” Repetitive, reinforcing cycles of increasingly negative affect slowly erode a relationship bond, whereas a relational trauma, known as an “attachment injury” suddenly shatters the bond between intimates.

EFT’s Attachment Injury Resolution Model (Johnson & Makinen, 2001), explicated and demonstrated in the recently released interactive video training program by Brubacher and Buchanan (available from www.attachmentinjuryrepair.com), is a Stage Two process. Before an EFT therapist can follow the Attachment Injury Resolution Model to guide a couple through a healing conversation where they are able to resolve the injury and feel safe to trust once again, current cycles of raging and defending or apologizing and distancing need to be tracked, unpacked, and recognized as the problem blocking them from mending the shattered trust. This tool box contains tools for working with an Attachment Injury in Stage One.

By definition an Attachment Injury (AI) is a relational trauma - an event which shatters the attachment bond between intimates. One partner violates the expectation that the other will offer comfort and caring at a time of urgent need. This pivotal event redefines the relationship as unsafe and untrustworthy from that moment on.

In a safe secure bond hurts happen and hurts are repaired. Injured partners reach safely to share their pain. Offending partners tune into injured partners’ pain and reach back to them in an attuned way that shows they truly feel the painful impact of the event. Emotionally attuned reaching and responding restores the bond. However, when couples cannot walk the path towards repairing a broken bond and rebuilding trust, they spiral into a distancing dance. Failure to respond to a hurtful event, whether seemingly large (as when an affair with one’s best friend is discovered) or seemingly small (such as when a call for help is ignored) – remains as a pivotal moment that redefines the relationship as unsafe and untrustworthy.

Tools in this toolbox, include two tools for clearly identifying an attachment injury, and two tools for de-escalating the current cycle before attempting to repair the

injury.

Identify a clear attachment Injury

1. Differentiate gradual erosion from a sudden snap.

Can you identify a specific AI event? Or is it possible that “Attachment Injury” is an overused term in your relational assessments? Learn to differentiate an attachment injury from general levels of trust in a relationship. Ask yourself, is this an attachment injury? Is the distress, mistrust, hostility between partners an evolution of an increasingly rigid negative pattern of diminishing trust and warmth or has there been a pivotal event within the relationship – an unresolved relationship injury that shattered the trust and broke the bond between them? Did a relationship event – a shattering moment with a clear offending party and a hurt party – break the bond or did the bond slowly erode? A two-person dance, where both are hurting and being hurt is NOT an attachment injury

2. Differentiate relational traumas from trauma external to the relationship.

One partner’s traumatic experience, be it the trauma of childhood abuse, a parent’s suicide or mental illness or the trauma of serving in war or one partner’s traumatic motor vehicle accident, is not an attachment injury to the relationship bond. Working with a couple shaken by Sol’s recent severe MVA, Jane, a relatively new EFT therapist wonders aloud if the accident was a pivotal moment which changed everything between them. In her own mind she is wanting to understand if this was an attachment injury event which suddenly broke the trust and bond between them – where one of the partners felt totally let down in a moment of grave need, and essentially stepped back with a “Never again can I trust you” reaction. She discovers this event was not an attachment injury, because the trauma was not a relationship trauma. The accident itself was a traumatic moment for both of them. This one event did not shatter the trust between them. Sol’s accident was not a moment where one partner violated the expectation of comfort from another. “During the accident itself, we actually pulled together,” recalls Sol. Jill concurs, “But then he got his strength back and now we’re back in the same old trap. Jane hears Sol and Jill describing a bond of trust that slowly eroded over 16 years of an increasingly negative cycle.

De-escalate the current cycle in light of the injury, before trying to repair the injury.

1. Boldly name the injury and state explicitly how the injury is part of the current cycle. When you identify one or more AI’s in Stage one, refrain from getting sucked down a content tube or onto a problem-solving carousel by focusing instead

on the process - uncovering and validating the over riding impact of the injurious event. "Scott, ever since you discovered that Diane turned to your best friend when your mother was dying, your heart burns with anguish and you desperately demand she not leave your sight. Diane, the more he pushes you to stay with him, the more you shut down inside, and the more you shut down, the more he pushes." If there are multiple events each event can be made explicit in the cycle in Stage One.

2. De-escalate the Cycle that is blocking repair. In Stage One, do not try to heal the injury but track the cycle that is preventing the injury from being healed and which in all likelihood lead to the injury occurring. This includes:

1. Tracking the triggers, action tendencies or coping strategies, attachment meanings and validating defensive, reactive secondary emotions.
2. Pinpointing and validating the nub of the injury (the core pain, fear, resentment) which is blocking trust.
3. Accessing some of the underlying pain and mistrust.
4. Framing the problem as the negative cycle which is keeping them from repairing the injury.
5. Assuring the couple that you know the path to walk with them towards rebuilding trust, and that there is a path you need to take together *first*.
6. Reminding yourself and transparently showing them however much of the map they can tolerate: "Before rebuilding trust, you need first of all to name clearly how you are currently stuck in automatic behaviours that send messages of danger and hopelessness and more hurt to one another. After creating a joint picture of how each of your 'best-attempt behaviours' are code for as-yet unexpressed fears and needs, you will begin to name these fears and defeat this distancing dance together. Then you will be ready to walk the path of repairing your broken bond and rebuild lasting trust. I know how to guide you on this path – to help you (the injuring party) truly feel the pain your partner is experiencing and together to make enough sense out of how this dreadful event could have happened, that you will feel safe to trust again."

Case Example

Amara, a relatively new EFT therapist listens as Steve and Julie describe the event which has prompted them to seek couple therapy. The event was clearly a sudden snap of the bond of trust they had shared. "He was my hero," says Julie as she twists the tissue in her hands. "I knew I was his precious one and I trusted him with my life.

We struggled together to successfully raise two special needs children, and we had lovely times travelling with our children and he was always there for me. And then – at the rawest moment of my life – when my mother died – I found a receipt for a pearl necklace he bought for his office assistant and I knew at that moment, I wasn't his true love anymore. He has never bought me a piece of jewelry in my life!" She hesitates, "I lost my hero!" Gasping for breath and in a sudden mix of tears and rage, "I never in a million years thought he would do it, you know!" Steve reaches in – "I know –it was wrong I've told you I'm sorry – it was so wrong of me. I've told you I am so sorry! Amara catches her own breath. **This is truly an attachment injury – roaring out of the closet:** a specific event where one partner has violated the other's expectation of comfort and caring in a vulnerable moment.

Amara is briefly tempted to guide Julie to share her vulnerable pain with Steve – to help him understand how deeply he has hurt her – and to have him respond with enough remorse that will heal this injury. Then she remembers the EFT roadmap and jolts herself into consciousness! She refocuses and attunes more to the couple. She looks at the process of what is before her and sees an escalated couple: Steve in a defended and placating withdrawer position and Julie in a fragile and critical pursuing position. Amara reminds herself that she is working in Stage One, and that she needs first of all to help them de-escalate – to track the negative cycle, without ignoring the roaring ghost in the room.

She begins with naming and validating their "moves (action tendencies) in the dance" of their typical negative cycle that set the stage for the A.I. and which is keeping the hurt alive. "Julie, I am noticing that the more you share your pain and your anger that he could turn to someone else when you needed him most, Steve, the more you apologize profusely and then get impatient when you cannot make her feel better."

She continues to track the process of emotion in the negative cycle, evoking and reflecting attachment meanings created when triggers occur.

Triggers for Julie are Steve turning to his office assistant and her discovery of the receipt for the pearl necklace. "What do you tell yourself Julie, about his relationship with Lily and the jewelry receipt?"

A big trigger for Steve is Julie's unhappiness, so Amara asks, "What do you say to yourself when you see she is unhappy, when you cannot get her out of her depression? And now, when you see her pain and anger what does it say to you?"

She validates the secondary emotions of each partner, including the anger Julie feels and Steve's impatience and helplessness at not being able to make her feel better – for years and especially now that he has hurt her so badly. In this process, she catches bullets where necessary. Julie: I don't think he really thought he had a problem. I asked him to get therapy. I said he needed it. Amara: That was your way of saying let's break through this trap we're caught in – this repetitive trap where the harder you tried to pull him in, the more he seemed to disappear; the more he disappeared, the more you pointed out the dangerous distancing?

Then she evokes and make sense of the underlying emotional music that drives the dance: Loneliness, pain and fears of rejection and abandonment. Negative views of self, ("I'm unlovable and despicable.") and other ("S/he is unpredictable and unreliable.")

Finally she reframes the dance of distress (current negative cycle of Steve withdrawing, placating and defending and Julie as pushing and protesting and crumpling in despair) as the familiar cycle and the enemy blocking them from a healing conversation about the injury. Steve has struggled in silence, wanting to make Julie feel better, and finally pulling away more and more as he felt "inept at cheering her up and making amends." Amara describes what has happened as a tragic moment that broke the bond between them - where this final event of Steve getting involved with another woman shattered the trust between them, and nearly (but not totally) knocked him out of being Julie's hero. While, reassuring the couple that she knows the path to help them repair this broken trust, she validates that it makes total sense that Julie cannot trust him yet – and that still Steve gets stabs of fear each time he sees her pain and wonders if he will ever again be her knight in shining armor.