

EFT With Individuals

In this article, I would like to show you how Attachment Theory can guide our experiential work with individual clients. The EFT therapeutic stance and all interventions can still be used for creating alliance, accessing and reprocessing emotions and restructuring interactions. Additionally, two key elements are needed to transpose the validated Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy model into an Individual EFT model. These are: (a) identifying disparate parts within an individual and (b) directing enactments between these parts.

From the beginning of the therapeutic process, we attune deeply to attachment themes in the individual's story of distress: Abandonment, loss, rejection, lack of safety and support and so on. We identify the disparate parts or "internal partners" functioning in opposition to one another in these themes. We track the patterns of interaction that block opposing parts from being accessible and responsive to one another.

Following primary emotions of each part caught in a negative cycle, we validate how this inner battle is likely to be the best attempt at survival. By choreographing enactments between opposing parts, we facilitate integration or bonding moments between internal parts, restructuring models of self and other. This creates a safer haven and more secure base in the client's internal and interpersonal world.

Identify opposing parts caught in a negative attachment cycle:

To track a negative cycle of interaction between two opposing internal parts, we need to first identify the disparate parts. Opposing parts of self may be experienced in one of several ways: an internal pursuer and an internal withdrawer, two different attachment strategies working in opposition, or a sense of self in opposition to a representation of an attachment figure.

Len's critical domineering part that pushes him to take on increasingly more challenging career opportunities is caught in a struggle with the anxious "little Mickey Mouse part" that panics and seeks to escape from responsibility and visibility. The more one part pushes, the more the other part freezes. The cycle escalates into an attack-attack dance where both parts of self are unbearably harsh and effacing, to the point of depression and despair.

Simone, unemployed, depressed and anxious feels hostile towards her previous employer and fed up with family and colleagues. Part of her longs for contact with others who would validate and understand her and the other part says, "I am better off alone." She experiences an internal battle between an anxious bodily felt tension in her chest, described as "a little cartoon guy, swinging his arms blindly trying to make contact" and the bodily sense of a rejecting cold hand holding her back. An anxious attachment strategy battles against an avoidant strategy. By separating the two internal parts, she is able to own each part's position: "I do panic and flail frantically." "I do freeze and judge you for doing this. I either ignore you or try to stifle you."

Isolating and unpacking the opposing parts within individuals is not unlike getting a clear sense of each side of the "infinity loop" in couple therapy. Each part has its own idiosyncratic attachment strategies, such as freezing the other out or criticizing relentlessly. Each part also has its own attributions and secondary reactive emotions that mask primary needs and fears. Attuning to the interaction between these two parts is like tracking a negative cycle.

Enactments between opposing parts:

Using enactments - with parts of individuals - may be both the least familiar and the richest dimension of EFCT to use in individual work. An enactment between two opposing internal parts needs to be intentionally set up, directed and processed just as enactments between couples.

Enactments can be two chair dialogues (between two internal parts) or empty chair dialogues (between self and an attachment figure). The physical movement between chairs is not essential. Clients can speak from two distinct bodily felt parts; however, the physical act of moving from one chair to the other can evoke more emotional engagement in the process. This is much the same as the emotional shifts that couples feel when they turn to own a position or to disclose newly accessed emotion to their partner.... and when they receive such a disclosure from a partner. Movement between chairs facilitates accessing primary emotions and attachment fears of the discreet parts.

The therapist responds with empathic reflections and conjectures, and evocative questions to the parts in each chair, as well as validates and tracks the patterns of interaction. It is important moment- to-moment to only address and invite expression from the part or the person represented by the

chair an individual is sitting in. Stage one de-escalation occurs between opposing parts as they become familiar with their patterns of interacting and experience how each one's primary fears and reactions trigger a cycle between them. Simone, who has never had a felt sense of being lovable or competent, begins - in stage two - to develop a new model of self and other. As the therapist follows and evokes her emotional experiences in each chair, directing enactments between anxious self and avoidant self, and at other times between self and a representation of an unresponsive mother, a "process of repair and forgiveness" as validated in EFCT emerges.

The therapist choreographs emotionally engaged interactions between Simone in one chair and her representation of her mother in a facing chair. To the chair representing her mother, Simone vividly articulates the injury of mother's unavailability and sarcasm, "You mocked me. It went straight to my soul! I was trying to reach out to you and you shut me out when I needed you!" In the chair representing her mother Brenda, she is guided to feel the impact of Simone's words. Initially "Brenda" responds with excuses for not knowing she needed her and stilted regret saying she didn't get any support either as a child. Back in the chair of Simone, she intensifies her expression of need for her mother's response and presence. In the chair representing Brenda she begins to weep saying, "I've done to you what happened to me...made you the lonely little girl that I was growing up. I am so sorry!"

Simone receives "Brenda's" response and experiences physiological shifts in her neck and shoulders. The shifting sensations tell her that she is lovable and competent: A moment of bonding between Simone and her representation of Brenda.

As the more avoidant, withdrawn part accesses and expresses feelings of worthiness and entitlement, she is able to express her needs to her more judging self. Initially shocked to hear that there is a way they could work together, "judging self" responds with love, validation and support. The pressure of the cold, rejecting hand that had been holding her back, moves deep inside "like velvet on velvet." She describes feeling comfort and reassurance "in my soul." This is a change event of bonding between two formerly opposing parts of self. In future sessions, the enduring felt sense of an internal safe haven and secure base compel Simone toward more emotional reprocessing and restructuring of relationships with her estranged siblings and her career interests and potential.

From Opposing Team Players to Securely Bonded Team Mates:

In conclusion, as the case of Simone illustrates, bonding moments of secure attachment between seemingly disparate parts can be choreographed in individual therapy. We begin with identifying and de-escalating the internal battles of abandonment, rejection, judgment, dismissal and so on between opposing parts, by unpacking emotions and attachment meanings and tracking the stuck cycles between the parts. Then we reprocess the emotional experience of attachment themes and direct enactments of engagement and softening between internal parts, creating change events that are bonding and integrative. These transformative change events are similar to stage two of EFCT. The previously opposing parts of self are now able to work and play in harmony, giving and receiving support to one another and encouraging exploration in relationships with others.

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Published in ICEEFT Community News, 8th Issue Winter 2010/11