

TRAINERS' TIPS ON CLOSING EFT COUPLE SESSIONS AND SOME HOMEWORK SUGGESTIONS

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Seventeen* trainers' responded to my questions about how they close therapy sessions, citing varying combinations of therapist reflections and evoking client feedback with the intention of ending on a note of clarity, hope and direction. Overall, they close sessions in a manner that will keep the intensity between sessions and create coherence for a couple about the work they have done in a particular session. They validate stuck places, heighten significant in-session shifts and paint a picture of the safe and secure bond towards which the couple is headed. It is my hope that therapists reviewing the trainers' responses will find a range of session closures that enhance EFT and will feel encouraged by reading different EFT congruent forms of closure that can fit with varying personal styles.

Trainers' Responses can be described under nine (9) basic themes. At the end of this article is a link to additional examples.

1. Summarize, meta-process or step back to reflect upon the work of the session.

This includes presenting an overview of the cycle and/or heightening the shift, bonding moments, attachment longings, the overall process of therapy and even the stuckness experienced in the session if it has been a difficult one..

In order to consolidate gains and to clearly organize the work the couple has done, therapists summarize new awarenesses or understandings that were disclosed or discovered and recap and heighten key emotional events or moments of connection. The contrast is made explicit between these heart-warming moments of connection and the typical, automatic way the negative cycle so rapidly ambushes them. At the end of a difficult session, review the stuck points experienced in the session, within the frame of how the cycle derailed them. This serves to convey hope, since it is precisely the defeat of the cycle which prevents safety and connection that you are working on together. Stand with them in the stuckness with hope: "We'll go back here next time. I will hang in with you. I expect to help you through this. Most people do work this out." This reassures the couple that even though there is much more work to do together, we know the steps and the path to relieve distress and to create a safe and secure bond. Whenever possible images and metaphors are used to heighten and consolidate the shifts.

2. Engage the person of the therapist:

Therapists express sadness, compassion, or honest recognition of the obvious stuckness or powerlessness in face of the cycle. “I am really sad along with you at how the cycle sucked you both in to-day, leaving you both feeling defeated and alone. “

Therapists also share their genuine self-expression when the session needs to end before they have been able to complete a task, by expressing honesty and sadness at the reality that the session needs to end even though the work is incomplete. Recapping where they work will pick up at next session or asking for the couple’s willingness to pick up at this point, helps to convey hope as well as make a specific connection to the work of the next session.

Finally EFT therapists, engage themselves by sharing with the couple how moved they have been with the work done in session.

3. **Validate, affirm, encourage the risks taken, and courage shown, with concrete and specific feedback, about this particular session.** With session endings, just as throughout the entire EFT process, feedback that is concrete, vivid and specific makes the work more alive and engaging and hence contributes more readily to transformative change. Commending a couple on their hard work and courage, and how touched you were by their determination or vulnerability is supportive. Mentioning more specifically how one was touched, and by what concrete moves on their part, will have a greater impact.
4. **Draw an attachment picture of the direction in which the couple is headed if they continue to do the work they are doing.** This picture may include an image or metaphor that concretely captures the work of this session or it may involve seeding an attachment picture of the secure bond towards which they are headed. “I can see that if you continue to explore these fears that suck you into these self-protection modes, that soon you, John will be able to let Ann in just a little more to that place that feels so undeserving, and you will experience that she really does admire you, and Ann you will begin to feel safer and safer to retire the sentinel that scrutinizes his every move, and you will also begin to sense how very precious you are to him, and how safe it is to count on one another.”
5. **Be intentional and conscious in planning how to end the session and be explicit with the couple in preparing for closure.**

During the last quarter of a session, some Trainers begin considering how to bring the work to a close in a safe and coherent way. During the final 5 to 15 minutes, they begin to engage the couple in the closure process, saying for example, “We’re going have to stop soon – how are you doing right now? Let’s go over what we talked about to-day. What I am learning is that there is a whole lot more going on than meets the eye (or than we realized) – a lot more feelings

going on than we knew – can we pick up on that next week, in particular that fear of asking for reassurance?” for example.

6. Evoking clients’ feedback / collaborating with clients to make a coherent picture or story of what happened in the session:

Additional ways this can be done are to ask the couple, “How was it for you to experience each other in this [more vulnerable or honest] way to-day?” “How was this session for you to-day?” “Did you experience a new vulnerability or softer emotions in yourself? Did you see your partner in a new or more vulnerable way to-day?” “How did you notice or experience the negative cycle in the session to-day? How did you recognize yourself getting sucked into old patterns?” If an important milestone or change event is achieved, heighten their contribution. For example, “Wow, I am so moved by the places you went today, how you took so many risks with each other and discovered things about each other that you didn’t know before. How was it for you to experience each other like this today?” Invite them to direct this reflection to each other rather than to the therapist.

7. Approach closing sessions differently, based on the stage in which the couple is working.

At the beginning of therapy, in alliance building, focus on checking carefully whether partners feel heard and how they feel about the direction and process of the work. In Stage One, some trainers give less summary because Stage One is oriented more towards containing and alliance building than on deepening and opening. It is common in Stage One endings to evoke each partner’s sense of the session and experience of the relationship and to check if they are beginning to recognize how they get stuck in the negative pattern and how they trigger their partner. Once the alliance is solid, and the couple is engaged in active change, the therapist as the choreographer of change, puts more emphasis upon reflecting each one’s work, whether it be deepening and disclosing or receiving and responding to a new view of other that comes in Stage Two. The therapist reflects, validates and honors this new, deeper work.

8. Stage specific homework: Some trainers are very focused in their choice of step and stage specific homework while others seldom give homework, noting that in EFT, an experiential therapy, corrective emotional experiences happen in-session, and thus homework is unnecessary. Many encourage reading *Hold me tight* and some are more focused than others in pointing out the relevant homework from the book to correspond to where the couple is in the EFT process. In spite of homework not being necessary for EFT’s effectiveness, couples frequently

request it, and many find that it is a way to enhance couples' awareness and sense of efficacy in de-escalating negative survival responses and growing a bond of emotional safety. [Examples given in the link at end of article].

9. **Note taking for therapists:** At the end of session, note key elements of the session and note where to focus in the next session, noting the step and partners' relevant experiences.

• Seventeen trainers who contributed were: Alison Lee, Michael Barnett, Jeff Hickey, Jim Thomas, Lisa Ruderman, Annmarie Early, Karin Wagenaar, Gail Palmer, Leanne Campbell, David Fairweather, Sam Jinich, Jenny Fitzgerald, Mark Kaupp, Debi Simeca-Diaz, Normand Gingras and George Faller.

Additional Examples of themes

Theme 1: Close with a summary and reflection on the work of the session.

1. Summarizing the key moment(s) that occurred in the session. Heighten powerful bonding moments and contrast them with the familiar, yucky, negative pattern. Talk about how this reveals that they are able to exit the old pattern, and go down this "good-feeling" route together. Highlight the likelihood that they may very well get stuck again in the coming days, and that this is okay -- it's not a sign that all is lost -- it's just another opportunity to process and work through it, and get back to that more positive, bonded place again. Capitalize and build upon the sense of hope and convey in some way, "See you can do this...you just did this together!"

If things have stayed more stuck in the session, summarize what happened, focus on the primary feelings that were close by, or were expressed, and map out how the cycle continues to ambush and swallow them. Be a champion for a positive pattern, and express sadness and compassion for each partner around how badly and powerless they must both feel. Acknowledge that they both miss and want to reach out to the other, but it's so hard to move away from self-protection mode given how little room there still is to navigate when the negative cycle rules the day.

2. "So today you were able to reach just a little bit and share some of the pain and sadness under the hurt. Even though there is much more in there that needs to be spoken, this was a very important step now that the dance of distress has less pull on you and you feel your partner more present to hear from you."

Themes 2, and 3:

- **Engage the person of the therapist with how the work has moved him/her**
- **Validate and affirm the risks taken and courage shown, with concrete and specific feedback, about this particular session.**

"Your risking today really touched me. You both did supposedly what the negative cycle says you can't do. Joe you came forward and let Carina into your world where you are not sure what to do to be enough for her and how helpless that makes you feel. Carina you were so honest in sharing how you didn't know how to respond. Your survival strategies look very different: Joe you go away when you feel like you can't get it right and Carina you come forward, with exasperation and frustration when you can't get Joe to stay present but underneath you both are saying the same thing – both acknowledging how helpless you feel in not knowing what to do to get together. Sharing your helpless feelings is radically different than being totally alone and isolated". I feel inspired by your openness and want to explore how you get stuck in this helpless space more next session.

Theme 7: Approach closing sessions differently, based on the stage in which the couple is working.

In Stage One: Name the dance, and its predictable effects on the relationship, and make a comment about how it eclipses the loving experience that just emerged in session.

Stage Two: Close by amplifying the significance of the reach and responsiveness that was experienced saying something like, "What occurred here is so big. Ken, you were never been able to take that risk with anyone before, and here you touched that deep fear of unworthiness and reached for Connie and invited her in. What a huge risk you took, and Connie, you were so completely responsive, and totally present to Ken. This is pretty incredible guys. You are really changing the dance with each other."

Theme 8: Stage Specific Homework

In the first stage homework will be observational:

The most common is to ask partners to observe and flag their cycle.

More specifically, ask them to do one or more of the following, depending on what is most relevant to their discovery process:

- Take note of what triggers you to get sucked into the cycle.
- Notice what you automatically do when this "alarm bell" rings.
- Observe your inner feelings when you get pulled into the cycle.
- If possible notice how your automatic behaviours seem to impact your partner.
- Count to ten and write down what you have noticed.

If a couple is further along in the process, give them written instructions to have a structured dialogue (open heart listening) around primary pieces of emotional experience that we have begun to unearth in session. This helps couples to begin to bring

in the work we are doing in session to their everyday life.

SPECIFIC STAGE RELEVANT HOMEWORK PRESENTED BY JENNY FITZGERALD:

Early in Stage 1, the homework involves getting a copy of *Hold Me Tight*, and watching the cycle. “Keep a close eye on how you impact each other. Check out what happens when you get angry/go silent/speak louder etc...What does your partner do then? What happens in ide for you? It may be too early to change what you do but I want you to get to know the pattern so please watch out for how you are impacting each other. Down the track a bit, you will discover how to interrupt the pattern of interaction between you both.”

Later in Stage 1, homework will expand to: “So I ‘d like you to continue to keep a close eye on what is happening between you. Where possible, if you see the old negative cycle starting up, one of you will hopefully be able to act to interrupt what is happening. For example, one of you might be able to say, “Oh, don’t let’s get stuck in that silly trap again” or “I can hear myself sounding very tense, I think we’d better stop talking so I can get calmer. Can we talk again later?”

I might also encourage the partners to take closer note of what happens inside for them when their partner acts/speaks in a certain way (eg., when the cycle is triggered). “So, today we have talked about how you often turn away when your wife is sounding disappointed or upset. Can you keep an eye on this and watch what exactly you are hearing or seeing just before you feel the urge to move away?”

In Stage 2, the suggestions might shift more into looking for deeper understanding, “So, today you have told us about how scary it is for you when you know your wife is getting mad with you, that she is disappointed in you. If anything like that happens in these next couple of weeks, try to take note of what is happening inside...what exactly is going on for you? What is happening in your body? What thoughts are going through your mind? What do you notice about this urge to turn away?”

Stage 2 also is about creating new cycles of listening and disclosure, so I might say, “So, today you have opened up about a very sensitive issue. If you feel you want to talk more about that at home, do so, but take it slowly and carefully. If you sense anything of the old cycle coming up to spoil your conversation, one of you will have to note it and suggest you pause to let the tension settle and get back into listening mode. If it is too hard to talk at home about XX, it will be a good idea to defer the conversation until we meet again. When you are feeling safer and closer, you will manage these conversations at home without me.

If one partner has been very vulnerable in session, I might close with asking how the other one can support him/her to leave the session. I would then check out with the other person if s/he were willing to do that to help wife/husband. (This helps to dismantle old patterns of helplessness and avoidance, and builds confidence that “I can do something that helps/pleases my partner.”) After a particularly distressing session recently with a couple processing the husband’s multiple affairs, the injured partner responded timidly to my question above by saying she would like her husband to walk with her to her car. At the next session, she reported he had taken her hand while walking, and then called his work that he was taking the afternoon off. This was very new behavior and created a small but significant positive shift for them.

Stage 3: These couples are typically doing well now, so it is more about consolidating. “Keep an eye on how each of you is doing things differently to help you feel safe and close.”