

# TRAINERS' TIPS ON PREPARING FOR AND OPENING EFT SESSIONS

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As published in the EFT Community News Summer 2013

Preparing for a session and being intentional and focused from the moment of greeting a couple, contributes to the safety and the creation of change events in EFT sessions. In attempt to collect a range of EFT-congruent options for beginning and ending sessions, the trainers were polled. Seventeen trainers\* contributed their reflections on how they prepare for sessions, and typical approaches they use to open and close sessions with couples. Following are trainers' tips on preparing for and opening sessions. The next newsletter will continue with their tips on closing sessions and examples of homework that can fit with EFT.

## PREPARATION AND GOALS

The manner in which EFT therapists open session is impacted by their preparation and goals for the session. Following are some of the ways trainers prepare for sessions.

### 1. Review notes before a session:

- Immediately before a session, I review my notes, including any comments to myself about what needs to be followed up on or explored further. I review specific client words and images that poignantly capture their individual emotional experiences, attachment fears and needs and their cycle.
- It makes an enormous difference in session when I take time to prepare, by reading notes, reflecting on the specific nuances of their particular cycle, their pain and isolation, and their longing for connection.

### 2. Review where we are on the EFT map: Determine a clear focus on the relevant Step/Stage of the EFT map

- Prior to every session, I think about the EFT step I am in. If I am in stage 1, it's natural for me to expect to continue to explore their cycle. I examine the infinity loop metaphor of their cycle -- am I aware of each one's typical position in the cycle and of how they are triggered into their typical action tendencies? Do I have a sense of each one's attachment fears and longings? What aspects of the cycle do I hope to access/track to-day?
- If I am in Stage 2, I review the resources they have been developing, and my understanding of their fears. It is very helpful to consider the EFT map.(Specific examples are provided in the link)

### 3. Choose a goal for the session

- The manner in which I begin a session totally depends on what I want to achieve

in this session. I always write at the top of my notes what stage I am in and what my goal for today's session might be, even though I may very well not achieve it. Having the goal in my mind helps me to be focused upon where we are in the map of EFT. For example - I might write, "Stage 1 goal for today: De-escalation." or "Goal for today: Access primary emotion of withdrawer."

- My primary goal for every session is that the couple will experience me as a safe haven for comfort and a secure base from which they can explore/create change. [link to **Ways to maintain the primary focus of creating safety and fostering alliance at beginning of sessions**]

## OPENING SESSIONS

**1. Focused openings:** Many avoid asking very open-ended questions or asking about how the week went, because it leads us to verbal wandering without a focus or pulls for content-focused complaints from the pursuer and groans from the withdrawer.

When couples describe the events of the week before you set a focus, bring the process into the here-and-now by asking how they are feeling as they describe these events, checking if they were able to step out of the negative dance, and/or to share their underlying fears and needs directly with their partner. Then, expand on interactions that went well or explore what triggered the cycle.

### **2. Establish a focus for the session:**

- Balance focusing on the relevant step of the model with evoking or responding to the couple's present-moment experience of their relationship, by taking the content and quickly focusing on the process, underlying perceptions, reactions and responses, moving into the stage/step of EFT that you hope to cover in the session.
- Begin session with a diagnostic picture about where we are in process – especially if they have been in couple therapy with me for the last 50 years or so it seems!!! (Example given in link)
- Be explicit about the focus for this session and get the couple's buy-in around that. E.g.: "We are really understanding how you guys are getting caught and one thing I have been wondering about is what is fueling the caught places. Can we focus there?" (The focus here is on exploring triggers for the cycle and the primary attachment fears that drive the cycle).

### **3. Connect the present process to the previous session:**

- Review highlights from last session, emphasizing the cycle, if we are in stage one or the disclosure of a primary emotional experience, if we are in Stage Two.
- Open with reference to the cycle, briefly delineating it and asking if they avoided it this week.
- Recap what we did in the last session and check in to see where the couple is and invite their thoughts or comments about the last session.

- **Follow-up on homework from previous session:**
  - E.g.: Stage 1 (observational homework): “What did you notice about the cycle this past week?”
  - E.g.: Stage 2 (risking homework): Were you able to take any more risks of being vulnerable with one another like you did in the last session? (Recap the specific risks from last session.)

#### **4. Examples of open-ended beginnings:**

- Is there anything that particularly stuck with you from the previous session?
- If the previous session was particularly intense, I might say, “So, last session was quite intense/hard/heavy for you. I’m wondering how you have been feeling since then?”
- “So I’m interested to hear how you both are...is there anything recent of importance we need to focus on first, before talking more about your relationship?”
- "How are you with each other today, right now, as we begin our time together..."
- “Has anything significant happened in the week where you felt especially connected/disconnected?” Use this to segway into the task of couple’s current stage/step of EFT.

[Link contains **more examples of focused openings and other open-ended beginnings**]

**5. The manner of opening sessions is different in Stage One and Stage Two**  
**Whether beginning with a general check-in or more specific question related to the previous session or the current relevant step of EFT, all EFT therapists begin with an intention to move from the content into exploring the relevant step of EFT as quickly as possible.**

##### **Stage One**

- "In our sessions, we have been exploring the dance that you both get caught up in. I wonder if you are noticing it more at home, (or recognizing how you get pulled in or seeing how your partner gets pulled in, etc)?"

##### **Stage Two**

- Open with more focus than stage one, building directly on where we left off the previous week. Remind them of the work we have done, check in to see how they each are doing, and ask if it would be alright to return to the work we have been building on, namely, a reengagement or a softening. I ask the person that I am *not* focusing on whether they would be ok with my continuing to work a little longer with their partner.

Please refer to this link for additional examples of trainers’ suggestions for preparing

for and opening sessions: \_\_\_\_\_ This includes ways to foster safety in opening a session as well as tips for when therapists and couple are having difficulty focusing and getting engaged with the process in the beginning of a session. Watch for trainers' tips on closing sessions and giving EFT congruent homework in the next newsletter.

\* names of therapist who contributed: Alison Lee, Michael Barnett, Jeff Hickey, Jim Thomas, Lisa Ruderman, Annemarie Early, Karin Wagner (sp?), Gail Palmer, Leanne Campbell, David Fairweather, Sam Jinich, Jenny Fitzgerald, Mark Kaupp, Debi Simeca-Diaz, Normand Gingras and George Faller

### **Additional Trainers' Tips on Preparing for and Opening Sessions**

#### **PREPARATION AND GOALS**

**More examples of reviewing the EFT map in preparing for a session and choosing goals:**

- Depending on where I am in the process, I ask myself some of the following: "What is each one's primary attachment fear that they have accessed in Step 3? Which partner is the withdrawer who needs to go first into Step 5? Have I completed their step 5 of fully engaging with their primary emotions? Have I completed step six with their partner? Is the withdrawer ready for me to support his/her risking to step assertively into the relationship? Am I prepared to encourage this risk and access and evoke what they need to ask of their partner? If I am working with the blamer in Step 5 or 7, am I aware of the previously explored attachment fears and views of self and other? Am I prepared to explore his or fears of reaching? Where am in the steps of blamer softening?"
- If I am in Stage 1, my goal is to track the cycle that has been triggered in the past week or that gets triggered in-session
- In Stage 2, my goal is to begin with a clear focus on the step we are working at, and to share this explicitly with the couple.

#### **OPENING SESSIONS**

##### **1. Ways to maintain the primary focus of creating safety and fostering alliance**

- Attune to the couple before saying anything: Couples often reveal whether they are in the midst of conflict or distancing from the way that they greet me and engage with me in the first few minutes of the session. From the start, I sense whether they have been triggered into their cycle. In my greeting and in my

opening, I want the couple to feel that I am accessible to them and that my aim is for them both to feel supported and understood.

- Give the couple the message that I have been thinking about them between sessions and validate how hard they worked with a specific, and concrete example: “You, E worked especially hard to share your innermost fear of not being enough for him, and you D listened very intently in spite of this being very difficult for you to grasp.” Or “You both took enormous risks to share your fears of not measuring up (E) and of being too wimpy (D) if you drop your superman cape.”
- Start with validating how hard the couple or family are working and let them know what I see in terms of their progress.
- Provide space for couple to share latest content: “It’s good to see you again! How are you both?” My thoughts here are that the therapist needs to know the latest happenings of significance before exploring deeper issues.
- I pay attention to any positive news (eg., “We seem to have been getting along better”) and show pleasure for them and ask what each of them did differently. I

## 2. Focused Openings

- Open with a diagnostic picture of the couple’s stuckness: An example: “What I get is – and it seems to me this is something that happens often in our work together – what I am noticing is that sometimes Jack you can share with me how truly painful it is for you to feel like she just isn't there- she is totally not interested and her mind is on more important things than you, than your pain – and this is a very painful moment for you to inhabit – and when I focus on this pain – you can touch it a little bit with me here in the session – right? And when you do this, I really get the sense of what a risk you are taking. Then predictably - Jane – what happened last week – and I have seen this before too – you get all giggly and fidgety and you look at your cell phone - then when Jack see this – well my sense it this is kinda painful and humiliating - kinda like “Here I am bleeding out over here and you truly don’t care a bit – your mind is on more important stuff... truly it seems like my pain – like I – don’t matter to you,” yes? Am I getting this right? And what I see you do then Jack is you go back into your shell – like “It will be cold day in Hell before I EVER take such a risk again!” And then later in the session – Jane – you let us understand the pain and the loneliness of feeling like he has shut you out – and yet again – when you touch this pain – lo and behold – then Jack is not there for you either. It seems in a way like a bit of tit for tat – “You hang me out to dry and I will hang you too.” Is that it? But what I feel so keenly is that inside – and underneath all this – there you both are – two sweet souls who each truly love the other, but somehow you keep missing each other. Am I getting this right? How sad this cycle is!”
- Connect the present process to the previous session: Be very intentional in opening, setting a frame for the work ahead. Recap what we did last session (with clarity in my own mind as to how this fits in the steps and stages of EFT), honoring courageous

steps on the part of each of them, using key metaphors and images used by the clients to bring their experience alive. This helps to focus our work, and limit the amount of sharing about events of the week. E.g.: "What we worked on last week was your willingness (withdrawer) to engage your partner even when it is scary and you fear "bullets" are being shot at you. You really took a risk to look at your partner and speak your needs. And you, (pursuer) in the midst of holding your own pain heard and received what he said. You actually said it helped to hear his perspective so directly. I was really impressed by both of these steps last week."

- Open with briefly delineating the cycle or speculating as to what triggered the cycle before last session.
- Open sessions by plugging in where we left off the previous week -- to keep momentum going.
- I might ask if they thought about what we did last session (and if they did – what did they think and did they share these thoughts – or even most amazing – did they discuss last session?) What did it mean for you/what was it like to talk about last session together?
- When the couple comes in : "How did you leave here last time, and what did you do with the things we talked about?" How did it affect you as a couple? Then we are on track again. We work further on the painful spots or the new things that happened.
- "Where did you go after last session?" to which they respond, "To Tim Hortons" to which I then ask about where they went *emotionally* or in their dance!!

### **3. General check-ins with the couple:**

- "What is happening".
- "How are things between you to-day?" "What feels different?" "What feels the same?" As a means of anchoring the process and monitoring progress, I will ask about their perceptions of where they were when they started, where they are now, and where they want to go.
- How have you been doing together since the last session?
- Have you been feeling more connected and close?
- Have you been feeling more distant or stuck?
- Have there been differences (good or bad) that you have experienced with one another?
- One trainer may ask if the couple caught any butterflies this week, to convey the experience of noticing and acting on the new and more connecting moments as they are happening in the moment. "Too often couples are only focused on the bees and wasps that get caught in their butterfly nets and I want to help each partner see that

positive change comes about not by luck but by their creating new and positive cycles.”

#### **4. Distinguishing Stage One openings from Stage Two openings:**

##### **Stage One**

- In Stage One work, open with a general check-in and then move from their context into tracking elements of the cycle.
- Assess for crisis and if there is no "crisis," move to whatever the stage and step we are in the EFT process.
- In stage 1, start with a broad opener like: “How would you like to start today?” Or “tell me about the kind of week you had and how the two of you got along”. Inevitably, they will bring up an example of how they were triggered into their cycle and we can explore it. My role is to go over these repeated impasses again and again, in the multiple ways that they present themselves, and I don’t feel compelled to follow the same topic from the week before, nor start where we left off. My focus is to explore their experience. Content is less important.
- If there is negative news (“We had a terrible fight driving here”) I would ask them if they would like to talk about it to understand more about how they got tripped up. I’d then be looking to tie what they say back into the negative cycle that we are working on. (Linking the triggers to the action tendencies).

##### **Stage Two**

- If they are in stage 2, focus the session into vulnerability and the expression of that vulnerability whether it be for the withdrawer or the pursuer.
- After getting their agreement to return to the work we were building on – in the event they have an escalation of conflict while we are continuing with the withdrawer re-engagement or blamer softening work we had started previously, I go right back to exploring the cycle with them and to reframing it with their help, so we all understand the attachment significance of what happened. This moment of reframing the problem as the attachment dance usually happens more quickly than in Stage One, and we can get back to working on the Stage Two step we were working on.
- Couples in Stage 2 may be ready and able to move quite quickly in a new session into deeper work, usually picking up from what was started in the previous session.
- As they start accessing more primary emotion: "Last session there were some moments of vulnerability (give a brief evocative description. Watch for their responses.) “Do you remember? What was that like? Have you been more aware of how you can impact each other?”

**5. When therapist and couple are having difficulty focusing and engaging with the process in beginning a session, here are a few suggestions:**

- Refer to session notes and read my paraphrases of the key emotional messages that each person was trying to communicate to each other in the previous session. Heightening primary emotions and expanding the leading edge of attachment longings: E.g.: John, you conveyed, "Sally is so important to me! I am actually very afraid of losing her!" Sally, you were beaming when you said, "I don't know if we have ever felt this close before! I feel so certain that things are going to get better for us if we can keep risking with each other like this!"
- Return to something significant that happened in a previous session to engage the partners in their process. E.g.: "You were sharing how you hold back out of fear of upsetting him and felt such relief and validation when he could say, "It's true I am holding myself back from fully loving you.'
- With highly reactive couples, couples on brink of divorce or trauma couples: "I was thinking a lot about you this week, about how hard you are fighting for your relationship, for each other, for \_\_\_\_\_ (insert their specific goal or longing such as connection, acceptance, safety etc) in a new way. You told me last week that this can be so difficult. Jo, you have been feeling more of the pain and loneliness and you don't like that. And you Sam want things better now, want his attention *now*, want him to open up *now*, you've been waiting so long, and yet here you are again, bravely ready to explore those feelings, to fight that cycle. I wonder how we might get to the vulnerable parts sooner today, how I can help it to feel safer in here for you each to open up a bit more."