

Weaving *within and between*: The intra-psychoic / inter-personal tapestry of EFT

Each step of the EFT model contains a continual weaving between intra-psychoic and interpersonal dimensions and impacts. Following the infinity loop metaphor, the entire EFT process is one of weaving between attachment-significant internal experience and interpersonal responses that cue and are cued by this experience.

We have tools to consciously hear and work with this intra/inter-personal flow. These tools facilitate “experience-near” processing or weaving of the relationship tapestry.

1. What to listen to:

Attune to the emotional experience of each partner in the present moment within an attachment frame. Ask yourself, “What is each of their emotional experiences in their frustrated attempts to have safe, secure acceptance and connection? (e.g. She is very frustrated at the distance between them. She must be feeling lonely and in pain. He is denying that anything bothers him, looking nonchalant. He must also be lonely and feeling lost -- that it is unbearable to hear that he is disappointing her.)

2. What to do:

As you listen, jot down or mentally highlight the salient attachment phrases, metaphors, and descriptors that your clients use. This will help you focus through content, into the boldly colored attachment threads. (e.g. “I just can’t reach him. He’s always in a fog.” “He used to be my best friend.” “I’m never enough!” “I just numb out the sounds of her complaints.” “I’ve dug myself into a hole so deep, no ladder can get me out.”)

3. Forming your responses:

- i. **In your verbal response, first “join with,”** each partner in their present moment experience (where ever they happen to be on the infinity loop). Use simple *empathic repetitions and reflection*. The signature tool of experiential therapists, known as RISSSC manner, will serve you well here. Use repetitions, imagery, a few of the client’s words, slowly, simply, in a soft tone. (“Lost and all alone.” “Just can’t find a way to reach him.” “You feel like you are in such a deep, deep hole.” “It’s so hard to understand, you say she is crazy.”) Remember, the pace and *manner* you use makes all the difference.
- ii. **Secondly track the flow *within and between*:** Weave inner emotional experience – (e.g. automatic secondary reactive emotions and primary attachment fears of abandonment or rejection) – with external pursuing or withdrawing behaviors (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice, criticism, silence etc) that cue these emotions. To do this use *reflection, validation, evocative questions and responses*.

Validate each one’s story, – each one’s side of the infinity loop – as being an understandable response to their experience of their partner. In turn,

validate the very different and equally understandable experience of the other partner.

Evocative questions engage a partner to explore and distill their experience or reactions to their partner. (e.g. When you hear that tone in her voice, what happens inside of you?" "What do you typically do then?")

Weave more deeply with empathic conjectures as you gather threads of nonverbal behaviours and of typical attachment fears that seem to be at the edges of their experience. (e.g. Tentatively suggest, "You shrug your shoulders and walk off – almost as though it's safer not to ask for what you want? You'd rather take care of yourself than to risk asking and experiencing her rejection. Is that it?")

- iii. **Invite and guide the partners to begin to weave their own new tapestry**, using the tools of *enactments and directive restructuring*. (e.g. "Can you turn to her and tell her how scary it is to long for her?" Choose enactments that are appropriate to help partners "own" their experience out loud to their partner.
- iv. **Check that your responses match with the stage and step in which you are working:** In the bonding change events of stage two, there is a deeper movement into the intra-psychic threads of primary attachment emotions. In the RISSSC style the basic tools of reflections, evocative responses, empathic conjectures, and enactments are used to heighten and structure the change events, weaving attachment fears and needs explicitly into expressions between partners. The threads of primary attachment fears and stated needs (needs for reassurance, acceptance, trust, to stop attacking etc) pull for new interactions and bonding experiences between partners. In stage 3 the therapist has the rewarding task of noticing, evoking and reflecting back to the couple the safe haven, secure base tapestry which is being consolidated by the couple's new intra/inter-personal cycles of secure bonding.

Obstacles that interfere with weaving smoothly between these two dimensions:

1. Getting distracted by content: Cindy and Ivan present their negative cycle frequently by arguing about parenting styles. The therapist who gets distracted from the couple's attachment dance by the content story line will lose the flow between inner and interpersonal impacts that is needed to de-escalate and transform patterns and threads of attachment anxieties and fears into a secure bond.

2. Diving too quickly to conjectures about primary emotions: Clients may comply with your suggestions at a cognitive level if you deepen the layers rapidly (e.g. rushing past secondary frustration or numbness to primary fears). If they are not emotionally engaged, however, in moving from protective secondary reactions to their primary attachment fears and needs, they cannot engage in change events.

3. Omission of the attachment frame in any stage dilutes the effectiveness. Without the attachment framework that links internal emotional experience and partner responses, the therapist is left floundering without directions of how to weave the tapestry of attachment security.

Stage 1 Case example of weaving

Ben and Chris are stuck in a high conflict cycle of Ben's withdrawal and critical defense and Chris' frantic and critical pursuit for his response. As is typical of negative cycles, they both see the other one as the problem.

To attune to each one's emotional experience in the cycle, the therapist reflects on the following:

How Chris sees Ben as the problem: *Things would be better between us if he would just "show by his behaviour that he cares...If he would follow through... He doesn't care enough to try to understand what it is like for me!"*

Secondary emotions she shows: frustration, anger

Possible primary emotions: (outside of her awareness): – feeling unimportant, hurt, lonely, not wanted, judged, fear

of never having a partner to calm her.

How Ben sees Chris as the problem: *Things would be better between us if she would just "rise above it and get over it. There are things she will never get over that I have done. I will have to live with them forever."*

Secondary emotions he shows: frustration, anger, indifference. *Possible primary underlying emotions:* frozen, overwhelmed, numb, hopeless that he will ever measure up or that she will ever care for him.

Forming "weaving" responses that begin with each partner's immediate experience and track the flow between them:

Therapist (empathic reflection, validation of secondary emotions): "You are so frustrated and fed up with Ben for not supporting you in the household tasks...*It makes sense that you would feel angry and hurt that he is not there for you, like your needs are not important to him? Is that how it is?*" Then in order to weave this into the cycle the therapist asks her what she does when she gets this angry, hurt sense that she is not important.

Chris : "I start by asking quietly for help and in a few minutes I am screaming!" While the therapist reflects and validates Chris' out-of-control outbursts as her cry for help, she sees that Ben is sitting there rigidly, with his eyes closed and eyelids fluttering, head turned away.

To bring Ben's emotional experience into the room, the therapist uses reflection, evocative questions and some empathic conjecture to help him connect his tuning out (withdrawn position) to his emotional experience in their cycle: "I see your eyes closed there Ben...I wonder what is going on inside for you?" ...[Ben: Humpf.] "Almost as though this is all too much for you? Like you just need to close off from hearing what she is saying?"

Ben: "I wish she would just get over this! She is a crazy lunatic...the cycle always begins with her first thumping, then banging and then yelling and screaming and completely losing it!" There is no way I can ever do things fast enough or in the right way! She is always angry!"

Therapist (catching the bullet): "You don't understand so you call it craziness, is that it? Is it almost like it's all too much and you pull away even more...and sometimes you even make fun of her for acting this way?"

Therapist (using an evocative question): "Can you tell me what happens inside for you when you hear her "thumping and banging?"

Ben: shrugs his shoulders and throws his hands in the air "I just get confused! And then I go into my quiet shell"

To weave his emotional experience in the context of the cycle:

"You must feel so helpless and confused when you hear this yelling from Chris! -- You almost look like you get lost in this. Perhaps this is when you pull away?" Ben nods.

Therapist, using an evocative question): "Underneath your pulling away -- inside -- what does this 'craziness' feel like for you?"

Ben: "It's like -- I'll never make it with her...she'll never be happy with me!" Therapist validates the sadness in Ben's voice and makes a mental note to connect it to how important Chris is to him and to his attachment longing to get it right with her.

Therapist summarizes, weaving the couple's attachment threads of their relationship dance of distance and despair:

"Ben you hear Chris's requests and desperation as demands and dissatisfaction with you. And you get angry because you don't want to be told what to do. You pull away or make fun of her first and then pull away so as not to feel the sense of being bullied and not to hear the hints of her disappointment in you. Inside when you pull away you are very sad and hopeless, wondering if you can ever make it with her, yes?"

"Chris your frustration rises as you try to get him to respond. When he pulls away, you get even more frantic. You just want him to see that you need to be able to count on him. Inside you feel very alone, like he doesn't see how much you need him, how panicked you feel that you are all alone in wondering if the family can get all its jobs done. Is that how it is for you?"

“It’s like you are both so alone and hurting, caught in this cycle. Chris you don’t see Ben’s sadness and loneliness beneath his quiet shell, and you get louder and louder to try and get him to come out. The more Chris tries to reach you, Ben, and make you respond to her, the more you feel at first angry at her for her demands and then you disappear into your quiet shell where you feel confused and very sad that you can’t seem to make this most important person happy with you.” Am I getting the sense of the repeating pattern the two of you are caught in?

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