

Case Study: Amanda and Gina  
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### **Stage 1: De-escalation**

Amanda and Gina are a young professional couple in their early thirties. Gina is a charming and genial entrepreneur and Amanda an introverted and expressive social worker. They have been together for five years and married for two. In Step 1, I strove to create safety and assess for compatible agendas. Amanda made the initial appointment, expressing concerns that she and Gina no longer felt connected. Gina acknowledged there had been more conflict than usual lately but voiced a belief that their relationship was close and that they communicated more than most couples. As Amanda went on to tearfully lament the ways Gina let her down practically and emotionally, Gina sat tight-lipped. Her initial responses reiterated her stance that things weren't that bad between them. As the counselor continued to reflect and validate how tense and uncomfortable Gina looked, Gina eventually expressed her exasperation that whatever she said seemed to displease Amanda. Shrugging she said, "I can't seem to do anything right. It's like Amanda wants me to be a different person." Both affirmed their investment in the relationship and expressed openness to the EFT process and a hope that they could learn how to get back to the playful and comfortable rapport they used to have. In our initial appointment and in individual sessions with each partner, I assessed for violence, addictive behaviors, secrets, attachment injuries, and mental health concerns. I solicited information about their childhoods and families of origins, and because the sexual identity stress that LGBT individuals and couples experience can disrupt the bonding process, we also discussed their sexual identity formation and current life stressors related to sexual identity (Zuccarini & Karos, 2011).

Within the first session, I had identified Amanda as the anxious pursuer and Gina as the avoidant withdrawer in this pursue-withdraw cycle. In the second conjoint session, the couple discussed a recent fight they'd had, and this provided the context for Step 2, in which I sought to

support Amanda and Gina in recognizing their respective positions and to track the steps in the automatic reactive cycle. Amanda owned that she does “blow up” when she perceives Gina as inaccessible. Gina explained, “I just try to hunker down and take it until the storm blows over... There’s nothing for me to do in those moments but to keep my composure and make myself as small a target as possible.” I persistently tracked their interactions, linking the cues that trigger each into the cycle, the attachment meanings they make of these cues, their reactive emotions, and their automatic behavioral responses. To Amanda, for instance, I said, “So when Gina replies ‘I didn’t know she was coming this weekend,’ inside you think, ‘Oh no, she hasn’t been listening, she hasn’t been hearing me’ and you get angry. And this sense grows and grows as you talk. The more you worry that Gina is tuning you out based on the things she forgets or the look in her eyes... the more she hunkers down, the louder you get – you push and push because you want her to hear and understand and react.” Soon Gina and Amanda began to recognize their automatic cycle. The more Amanda demands and protests Gina’s lack of engagement, the more Gina seeks safety by hiding out – getting silent and stoic or dodging Amanda’s calls. The more Gina checks out, the more desperate Amanda feels to get her attention, and the more urgently and loudly she pursues a response.

In Step 3, Amanda and Gina were able to access the underlying fears and longings beneath their reactive emotions. My empathic reflections and evocative questions helped Amanda to expand on the lonely panic of “shouting into the wind” and the fear of abandonment that lies beneath her stormy anger. I tracked how Gina “keeps it calm and cool” when Amanda launches into tearful complaints. I evoked Gina’s meaning of the trigger by asking, “What do Amanda’s tears mean to you?” Gina responded with frustration, “They mean she’s not satisfied. She’s never satisfied.” As I continued to repeat this cue, the tension in Gina’s body

gradually melted and her shoulders slumped. Gina admitted that beneath her mild and indifferent exterior she felt the pain of seeing the woman she loved so disappointed and the despair and fear of thinking “I’ll never be able to give her what she wants.” Amanda’s eyes shone and she smiled through her tears as Gina turned towards her to say, “When you’re upset, I feel like such a failure...so small. I can’t figure out how to make you happy. Any move I could make feels like the wrong one. The best I know to do is to lay low and try to put on a cheerful face for the both of us.” Amanda reached out to touch Gina’s arm and said, “I thought my feelings went totally unregistered by you! I don’t want you to feel badly about yourself, so it sounds weird to say, but it makes me happy to know that I could actually affect you in this way...that you do still care. And to let me in on what you are feeling – this is the kind of connection I’ve been asking for!”

Amanda and Gina each felt relieved and encouraged as they became more understandable to one another. Just as Amanda realized that Gina’s behavior was borne out of self-protection rather than indifference, Gina came to see how Amanda’s complaints and anger were informed by a desire and a desperation to connect. By the end of Step 4, markers of de-escalation were evident in their interactions both in and outside of session, and I reflected to the couple the progress that they’d made. As Amanda expresses her distress, Gina is able to maintain attunement, keeping her eyes on Amanda’s face and sometimes leaning forward. Amanda’s impatient interruptions and tearful eruptions have become less frequent too. Amanda took Gina’s hand as she explained, “I get it now. My loneliness leads to this frantic desperation. I think that if I can just get a sense that Gina is really with me, I’ll feel better. But the more I ramp up my demands, the more Gina is afraid of disappointing me, which leads her to disengage. That makes me feel more alone, and then more panicked, and then more angry, and the whole thing repeats.

I end up getting the opposite of what I want!” There is a new sense of alliance between Amanda and Gina against the cycle, which they can now recognize, and occasionally interrupt, as it occurs.

### **Stage 2: Restructuring the Bond**

I began Withdrawer Reengagement with Step 5, deepening Gina’s exploration of her attachment fears and needs. Using emotional handles, I evoked and heightened the pain, helplessness, and despair first recognized in Stage 1, and new fears emerged too. I slowly repeated phrases like “so small” and “like a failure” and used her imagery of hunkering down in the face of a storm. “It is so scary to pick up the phone and hear that tone of disappointment in her voice,” I said. Gina responded, “It freezes me, this paralyzing dread. I feel miserable and incompetent. It seems inevitable that I’ll lose her. I feel like who I am is not good enough – I can’t be what she needs. I’ve tried so hard and she’s still not happy. She wants me to change, but what’s left? But how much more can I cede without totally losing myself. Sooner or later the real me will be snuffed out, suffocated inside this automaton that only does and says the things she wants.” I reflected this fear of annihilation, using Gina’s own words and a soft, low, and slow tone, “It is so scary and dreadful to imagine losing Amanda and also so terrifying to imagine losing yourself. Right now you are trying so hard to please her, but there are parts of you that are suffocating!” I deepened her fear by evoking her embodied sense of it, which she described as a feeling of constriction in her chest. I checked in to ensure the emotion was fully alive in the moment and prepared Gina to disclose her fears directly to Amanda.

In Step 6, I supported Amanda to respond to Gina’s disclosure. Amanda’s face twisted as she listened, and she reacted with hurt, despair, and defensiveness. “Suffocating! Am I really that bad? This makes me feel like a monster. Is what I’m asking for so impossible and

unreasonable?” Amanda’s breathing slowed and she became calmer after I validated her response, communicating my empathy for Amanda and also reframing Gina’s fear within an attachment context. Leaning in, I said, “It makes sense that it would be difficult to hear that Gina loves you so much that she’s willing to suffocate, to snuff out every part of herself in the hopes of making this relationship work.” Gina was moved to respond to Amanda’s fear and vulnerability. “No one thinks you’re a monster,” she said, squeezing her hand. I reflected how different this was for Gina to tell Amanda how she was feeling and to move towards her distress, rather than to freeze and go away.

I refocused on Gina’s experience in order to facilitate Step 7. With her fears of inadequacy and suffocation once again fully online, she made contact with her needs for acceptance and was able to communicate these to Amanda. “I know I’m not perfect. I need to know that you love me for who I am and that you want *me* as *me* in this relationship. I want to engage with you more, but it’s hard to say close when every interaction feels like a test. Can you help with this? Can you reassure me that if I step towards you, you won’t reject me?” Gina was newly in touch with a desire for closeness and connection and wanted reassurance that it was safe to show up more. Amanda still looked somewhat guarded and unsure as Gina began to speak, but as tears rolled down Gina’s cheek, Amanda softened. She seemed impressed by the new assertiveness and clarity she heard from Gina and moved to hear Gina express her desire for connection. She responded shyly and tenderly, reassuring Gina that she did love and accept her and wanted to help her feel comfortable expressing herself in the relationship. “I know I ask a lot of you, and I can be rigid and particular about things. At the end of the day, it’s not about wanting you to be different, it’s just about wanting you to be there. I love and respect you...and I miss you.” I tracked this new corrective emotional experience, “Gina, you’ve been hiding out

and hunkering down for so long because you felt paralyzed, so fearful and despairing that you'll ever be able to please Amanda and remain authentically yourself. Now you've just turned and shared this very fear with her. You have reached out and asked her for help with this too. What a big risk! And Amanda has responded to this reach, by saying 'It is you I want. I don't need you to perfect.'"

With Gina engaged, I began the process of blamer softening by initiating Step 5 for Amanda. Blamer softening is commonly regarded as the most difficult event in the model, but if achieved, this corrective experience can radically restructure the couple's emotional bond. Indeed it is the change event most indicative of treatment success (Bradley & Furrow, 2007). Amanda spoke of the fear of abandonment that is triggered when she senses Gina tune out and when she fails to respond or forgets something important to Amanda. I sought to deepen the emotion by evoking and reflecting the felt experience. "This alarm bell reverberates through your body, your heart beats so fast... [Pause] And this alarm says?" Amanda replied, "It says I'm not safe...it says I'm not important to her. That she doesn't want to be close to me." I asked, "Can you share with Gina this lonely longing for her? And this deep sense of danger, this alarm, that says 'not safe'?" Amanda wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. I prompted Amanda to experientially imagine the reach, "You can't imagine saying to Gina, 'I am panicked, terrified. Come close to me, I need to know that you care.'" I noted how Gina was leaning in, hanging on Amanda's every word with a look of warmth, concern, and eagerness to respond. Amanda explained, "It seems like she's really with me now, but I will ask too much of her. I'm a mess! I'm too needy! If she saw all that she couldn't love me." I expanded Amanda's fear related to her negative view of self and her fear of reaching, and, with fears at a boil, choreographed an enactment. "Amanda, can you turn to Gina now and let her know how scary

this is?” Amanda’s disclosure of fears was met with a loving, reassuring response from Gina, which I heightened in Step 6. In Step 7, I also asked Amanda to share what it is she needs from Gina. Amanda took a few deep breaths to steady herself and said, “I just need to know to feel seen and heard. And I need to know that I’m not a bother or a burden, that you want to make time for me.” This reach was met with comfort. Gina said “You are not too much. I am not afraid of you or your needs. You are important to me and it feels good to be able to care for you.” Amanda’s tears, once a trigger for Gina’s fears, no longer felt overwhelming. They signified something new to Gina – no longer Amanda’s disappointment in her, but Amanda’s need and desire for her – and evoked a new tendency to approach and care for Amanda and a new view of self as competent to meet Amanda’s needs.

We processed the enactment together. I validated the big leap that Amanda had taken and how clearly she’d articulated her needs and then asked “How does it feel to have risked and shared that with Gina?” Amanda shared feeling a sense of relief and security. “I was so afraid and ashamed to ask, but I took the leap and Gina caught me,” she said. I emphasized the newly experienced emotions and attachments needs, tracking what had happened in this new positive cycle. “Amanda, you reached from this deep place of fear to tell Gina what you felt and what you needed, and this vulnerable, frightened side of you, this side with needs, wasn’t too much for her. In fact, your reach drew her closer. And Gina, hearing Amanda say how much she needed you, made you feel strong, capable, and loved.”

### **Stage 3: Consolidation**

Gina and Amanda had each taken risks and grown in their ability to express vulnerable emotions and seek support from one another. Their new dance was characterized by greater openness, flexibility, and resilience. In this context of safety, they were able to navigate

pragmatic problems without attachment fears and uncertainties being triggered. Disagreements still occurred, but they did not feel as threatening. When Gina forgot to tell Amanda about a work event on her schedule, it might be an inconvenience or irritation to Amanda, but it was no longer interpreted as a reflection of Gina's love and availability, in which Amanda felt secure. In the midst of conflict, I encouraged Gina to remain active and present and Amanda to stay open. As part of my effort to consolidate and celebrate the work they'd done, I invited them to describe how they were effectively handling problems that once sent them into the negative cycle. This constituted Step 8.

In Step 9, I sought to further strengthen Gina's and Amanda's new responsive positions and their broaden-and-build cycle. Gina and Amanda shared the new attachment rituals they have developed, special activities they do together on the weekends and time they have set aside for cuddling and conversation at the end of each day. I encouraged them to co-create a narrative of how they transformed their relationship from one of distress to one of secure connection. I prompted reflection on their accomplishments with evocative questions like, "What changes have you each made that have enabled this transformation?" I tracked the positive cycle, "Before, Gina would hunker down and Amanda would blow up because of the fears – for Gina, fear of failing or being snuffed out, for Amanda, fear of being abandoned and unlovable. Now, when Amanda's fears resurface, you can tell Gina and receive comfort. When Gina needs acceptance and reassurance, you can ask for it and your fears are soothed by Amanda." I seeded secure attachment by asking, "How will this new positive cycle help to safeguard you in the future?" These interventions serve to consolidate and sustain new attachment behaviors, and views of self and other, on a neural level (Johnson et al., 2013). Gina and Amanda continued to see positive changes in their relationship as Gina opened up and asserted herself and as Amanda

reached for reassurance. Gina's attachment avoidance and Amanda's attachment insecurity have decreased and their relationship satisfaction has increased, as is commonly seen in couples who move through all 9 steps of the EFT model (Burgess Moser et al., 2016). They felt confident in their ability to turn towards the other, and this sense of secure connection has enhanced their ability to grow in all roles in their life.

## References

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