

The EAR of EFIT: Attuned Empathic Listening

Extending the dyadic model of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy to Emotionally Focused Individual Therapy (EFIT) can be a natural and coherent progression. Individuals who have no significant attachment partners to join them in therapy, need what the attachment-oriented EFT model has to offer them, as do any individuals struggling with anxiety, depression and other forms of distress. The essence of EFIT – and a way to keep ourselves on track – is to constantly recall that the core of shaping corrective emotional experiences for individuals, is to *use the E.A.R. of EFT: Follow EMOTION, focus on ATTACHMENT; RESHAPE strategies for engagement.* This is essentially the epiphany EFT therapist Emily has in *Stepping into emotionally focused couple therapy*, as she struggles to translate EFT for couples into work with individuals (EFIT).

Follow **Emotion**: The acronym EAR can, first of all, help us keep attuned listening – the essence of following emotion – in the foreground of our consciousness. Following the elements of emotion requires moment-to-moment tracking of the client’s shifting present moment experiencing. Empathic attunement and reflections, which are fundamental to secure attachment, are at the heart of experiential therapy, throughout the EFT Tango, notably in Moves 1 and 2. EFT practitioners can easily minimize the power of reflection, moving quickly to evocative questions, conjectures, celebrating strengths or delineating needs. The central way in which we follow and order emotion is to be constantly and gently engaging in the power of empathic resonance and reflections.

Focus on **Attachment**: Secondly, attachment or dyadic work is the fulcrum of the EFT model. Thus, in our work with individuals, whether we are working with encounters between client and therapist, between client and an imagined other or between two aspects of self, the working unit is an *interpersonal dyad*. We are continually focused on following the attachment dynamic of one dyad at a time – be it a secure or insecure bond. We assess typical strategies of engaging with self, with other, with the world, and with emotional experience. Typical attachment strategies to regulate emotion are either secure, anxious, avoidant, or fearful avoidant. In EFIT we follow thematic dynamics across relationships. In Move 1 of the EFT Tango, we reflect how inner emotional experience triggers and maintains interpersonal patterns and how interpersonal patterns trigger and maintain internal patterns. Focusing on attachment strategies of hyper-activating or deactivating emotion is how EFIT therapists depathologize and formulate depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsions, and post traumatic reactions in an attachment frame. That is, depressive, anxious coping is framed as ineffective, although admittedly each person’s best attempts, at emotion regulation in the absence of a secure bond. In Move 2 of the EFT Tango, we assemble the dynamic process of the elements of emotion from cue to threat perception to bodily arousal to meaning making to action impulse. Then we deepen core attachment emotion to depathologize and stabilize before moving towards restructuring. Moves 3 and 4 of the EFT Tango focus on shaping new encounters in attachment dyads.

Reshape Strategies for Engagement: Thirdly, this acronym can help us remember what it is we are *reshaping* in EFIT. The corrective emotional experiences we are shaping begin with mirroring and reflecting ineffective strategies for emotion regulation or engagement with self, with others and with life, and shift to secure strategies of engagement. By following the process of emotion within attachment dyads we shape encounters (Tango Move 3), process the experience of the new encounter (Tango Move 4), and in Tango Move 5, integrate and celebrate the new encounter and new way of interacting. It is through this process that we help clients to reshape their strategies for engagement – as Dr. Sue Johnson says in her new EFIT training video, “to reshape their inner dramas.” By shaping new ways of engaging with and expressing coherent emotional experience, we help clients to shift their working models of self and other into ones of confidence, safety and security.

A session with Alex, available at <http://steppingintoeft.com> illustrates the *EAR of EFIT*. Therapist attunement facilitates mirroring and following emotional experience, creating corrective emotional experiences in-session with carefully shaped and processed “encounters” within attachment dyads.

Alex’s emotional experience shifts from rageful outbursts with no apparent trigger, to an awareness of attempts to suppress the traumatic flashbacks and the hate he feels regarding a violent attack decades earlier. New aspects of his emotional experience emerge as the therapist closely attunes with and reflects the danger cue of failing eyesight from the injury, the fear of losing his vision, his intense bodily sense of righteous rage, and his default avoidant attachment strategy of stifling his hatred and rage. The therapist follows his emotional experience: Trigger – threat perception – bodily arousal – meaning making – action tendency. In the first half of the session the therapist creates safety and stabilizes. There is an organic flow between encounters with therapist and client, and encounters between two aspects of self – the wounded self, on the ground, being kicked by his attackers and the survivor self. Although he has had frequent flashbacks of the trauma incident, he hadn’t before stopped to closely encounter himself in that scene. Thus, he had never before felt the intense compassion that this encounter instigates.

As his emotion is assembled more coherently, he deepens from rage and hatred to deep grief and sadness over the pivotal losses from this attack. Lingering in his sense of loss and the shattering impact of this crucial moment opens him to the grief of an earlier pivotal moment – the loss of his beloved father.

The therapist heightens a felt sense of the bond he has with his father and he invites his father to come close to him in this shameful, nonsensical trauma scene. In so doing, his father’s presence lifts him out of the guilt and shame he feels for the attack and makes it possible for him to integrate two aspects of self that were disconnected since the traumatic event.

In the final minutes of the session, in an EFT Tango Move 5, the therapist integrates and summarizes the experiences of the session, celebrating the power of his father’s presence to help him reclaim the lost aspect of himself and to release his shame. Celebrated as well, is the corrective emotional experience of no longer being alone in a helpless, powerless moment of

danger, but connected in a powerful and transformative way with his father who had also survived severe trauma.

Witnessing the power of the EAR of EFIT is to experience the courage of the human spirit and the restoration that comes from connection. It is the courage and transformation that is rooted in our innate dyadic nature and need for safe connection.

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