



Being a person-centered therapist and the challenge of working with the emotionally focused therapy model: a case study

Rita Ventura & Katherine Stavrianopoulos

To cite this article: Rita Ventura & Katherine Stavrianopoulos (2014) Being a person-centered therapist and the challenge of working with the emotionally focused therapy model: a case study, *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 13:2, 169-183, DOI: [10.1080/14779757.2013.871575](https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2013.871575)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2013.871575>



Published online: 16 Apr 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1579



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Being a person-centered therapist and the challenge of working with the emotionally focused therapy model: a case study

Rita Ventura^{a*} and Katherine Stavrianopoulos^b

^aICPS-Agios Antonios, Athens, Greece; ^bJohn Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, New York, NY, USA

(Received 21 June 2013; final version received 29 November 2013)

This case study will explore the process of therapy offered to a young distressed couple, along with reflections on the ways that process was experienced by a Person Centered Approach therapist (PCA) who added Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) to her practice. A brief summary of the EFT model together with its compatibility with PCA philosophy and values is presented along with excerpts from different sessions illustrating the different therapeutic steps involved. The case presentation is followed by a commentary of the therapist's supervisor.

Keywords: PCA Person Centered Approach; EFT Emotionally Focused Therapy; humanistic; systemic; attachment theory; self of therapist; supervision

Personzentriert therapieren und die Herausforderung, mit dem Emotionsfokussierten Therapie-Modell zu arbeiten: eine Fallstudie

Diese Fallstudie untersucht den Therapieprozess eines jungen Paares in der Krise. Gleichzeitig reflektiert die Personzentrierte Therapeutin, wie sie diesen Prozess erlebte, als sie die Emotionsfokussierte Therapie (EFT) in ihre Arbeit integrierte. Eine kurze Zusammenfassung des EFT-Modells und wie es mit der Philosophie und den Werten des PCA kompatibel ist, wird zusammen mit Exzerpten aus verschiedenen Sitzungen präsentiert, die die verschiedenen therapeutischen Schritte illustrieren. Auf die Fall-Studie folgt ein Kommentar des Supervisors der Therapeutin.

Ser un terapeuta centrada en la persona y el desafío de trabajar con el modelo de terapia centrada en la emoción. Estudio de un caso

Este caso de estudio explica el proceso de terapia ofrecido a una joven pareja con problemas, y también aporta reflexiones sobre las formas en que el proceso fue experimentado por un terapeuta del enfoque centrada en la persona (PCA siglas en inglés), que a la vez uso en su practica la terapia enfocada en la emoción (EFT siglas en inglés). A continuación presentamos un breve resumen del modelo del EFT junto con su compatibilidad con la filosofía del PCA y sus valores, junto con extractos de diferentes sesiones que ilustran los diferentes pasos involucrados. La presentación de este caso es complementada luego con un comentario del supervisor del terapeuta.

*Corresponding author. Email: r.ventura@icps.edu.gr

Etre un thérapeute centrée sur la personne et le défi de travailler avec le modèle de thérapie « Emotion Focused » : une étude de cas

Cette étude de cas explore le processus de thérapie proposée à un jeune couple en souffrance, et réfléchit sur les manières dont ce processus est vécu par une thérapeute centrée sur la personne (ACP) qui rajoute la thérapie « emotion-focused » (TEF) à sa pratique. Un bref résumé du modèle TEF et sa compatibilité avec la philosophie et les valeurs de l'ACP sont présentés, ainsi que des extraits de différentes séances illustrant les étapes thérapeutiques. La présentation de cas est suivi par un commentaire du superviseur de la thérapie.

Introduction

Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) (Greenberg & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2004) is a widely researched and effective therapeutic approach to distressed couples yielding long lasting effects. The goal of therapy is to address core conflicts and facilitate the couple to express underlying needs for closeness and safety:

EFT is integrative; it looks within and between. It integrates an *intrapsychic* focus on how individuals process their experience, particularly their key attachment-oriented emotional responses, with an *interpersonal* focus on how partners organize their interactions into patterns and cycles. It considers how systemic pattern and inner experience and sense of self evoke and create each other. (Johnson, 2004, p. 9)

EFT rests its theoretical foundations on an integration of humanistic (Rogers, 1951) and systemic approaches (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) and draws upon attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) as well as adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) in order to understand adult intimacy. The main focus of the EFT therapist is on how expressed emotions lead to repeated patterns of interaction.

A number of EFT characteristics can be traced to their humanistic foundations. It is growth oriented with a focus on the present, the therapeutic relationship rests upon empathic understanding, non-judgemental caring and genuineness, and the therapists trust the therapeutic process rather than the content recognizing the importance of congruence between emotional needs and expression (Rogers, 1965). These basic building blocks help clients to feel seen and heard, thus allowing them to disclose previously unexplored emotions.

The major influence of systems theory on the formulation of EFT can be seen in the premise that one partner's behavior creates a response in the other partner. There is a focus on patterns and sequences, on how elements in an interaction reciprocally determine each other (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). For example, "I disappear because you are relentless, and you are relentless because I disappear."

EFT also espouses a specific theory of close relationships – attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988) – as applied to adults (Shaver & Hazan, 1993). Seeking and maintaining contact with significant others is an innate primary motivating principle in human beings. Understanding close relationships from an attachment perspective addresses how partners deal with their emotions, process and organize information about self and others, and communicate with loved ones. For example, the couple therapist understands the emotional reactivity of the anxiously attached and the tendency of avoidant partners to withdraw from emotional engagement at the moment when they or their partners experience vulnerability or need (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

The origins of EFT and notions of working with emotions can be traced to Greenberg and Safran (1987), Greenberg, Rice, and Elliott (1993) and the pioneer work in couples by Greenberg and Johnson (1985). The focus on the expression and expansion of emotional experience in EFT has a powerful role in shaping the couple's relationship. Emotion motivates and signals key moves between partners. In the EFT process emotions are viewed as action tendencies that arise from automatic appraisals of the relevance of situations to a person's basic concerns and needs (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004). It is anything but a primitive, irrational response. It is a high level information processing system that integrates innate biological and emotional needs with past experience, present perceptions of the environment, and anticipated interpersonal consequences. Throughout the EFT process, emotional experience is focused upon, expanded, reformulated, and restructured. The expression of new and expanded emotional experience allows for a change in the interactional positions partners take with one another.

The "relentless focus on emotion" required in EFT is equally challenging for those learning and teaching the model. PC therapists are trained to follow and empathize with the client's emotions and EFT stresses the importance of accessing and labeling underlying emotions. The EFT therapist helps each partner discover underlying emotions such as, fear of abandonment, fear of rejection, helplessness and desperation, by slowing down the process and creating a safe place for them to explore their feelings. By recognizing and validating secondary emotions (e.g. frustration, anger) and linking these to a negative cycle the couple may be engaged in, the EFT therapist helps the client go emotionally deeper. "That is the first thing you feel – this frustration – but my sense is that there is more than that happening." The therapist's goal is to keep the clients engaged in their experience and have them expand it from the inside rather than help them label emotions from a distance.

This article provides an overview of EFT and illustrates the learning process of the first author as she applied the model with a couple while under supervision. The case focuses on two primary change events that demonstrate the therapist's use of emotion to promote change, and the challenges she experienced in adapting her practice to working with the EFT model. The second author's commentary focuses on how supervision was used to work through these challenges.

The process of EFT

The EFT builds an alliance with the couple through inviting each partner's view regarding the presenting problem and how they have tried to deal with it. The therapist proves accessible and responsive to the couple through reflecting and validating each person's experience in the relationship and their presenting concerns. As partners discuss how they each perceive their concerns reactive emotional responses are expressed or suppressed allowing the therapist to witness the negative interaction pattern first hand. The therapist tracks and reflects the behaviors that elicit the negative response and begins to identify the pattern that is associated with the problem (Johnson, 1996, 2004).

The therapist's goal is to make explicit the relationship of emotional response patterns to the presenting problem. The therapist reframes the couple's problem as one arising out of an attachment crisis and thus normalizing difficulties without blaming anyone (Johnson, 1996, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005).

In the first stage of EFT patterns are highlighted with specific attention given to the position each partner takes in periods of heightened distress. Couples tend to react to

insecurity in the relationship through predictable responses to emotional distress. These may include: withdrawing, pursuing, blaming, or placating. Underlying these responses are attachment strategies of avoidance and anxiety that represent adaptive attempts to correct for insecurity that is experienced in the relationship. Rigid patterns emerge as efforts to control or coerce change are met with responses of withdrawal or heightened defensiveness. The EFT therapist reframes maladaptive or secondary emotional responses as part of a broader negative interactional pattern. The therapist helps partners to access underlying emotions and attachment needs. Accessing primary emotions such as fear, hurt and sadness creates empathy between partners, facilitates responsiveness and helps the couple de-escalate (Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005).

In the second stage of EFT the therapist facilitates the restructuring of the reactive couple patterns identified in Stage 1. Typically the focus of Stage 2 is on accessing and expanding the unmet attachment needs of each partner and promoting accessibility and responsiveness to each other's underlying emotions and needs. The change event in stage 2 involves the therapist facilitating the enactment of the withdrawn partner reaching to the blaming partner with these underlying needs and vice versa. In Stage 2 the therapist recognizes the need to support both partners in working through their fears often associated with the vulnerability experienced in distressed relationships.

The final stage of EFT focuses on consolidation of the changes a couple has made in Stage 2. At the end of this stage the couple is able to integrate the new ways of engaging in discussions and problem solving. Discussions are characterized by more openness, responsiveness and engagement between partners. It is imperative for the couple to learn how to repair failed attempts to connect outside of session. Before termination, the therapist wants to see the couple handle old problems by going underneath and resolving the issues in new ways. The therapist also wants to help the couple amplify their vision to include more mindfulness of positive affect, vulnerable reaching, and the benefits of connection.

The therapist's background and training lies mainly in the Person-Centered Approach (PCA), while prior to that she was trained in Bowen's (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) systems theory and other systemic approaches. Working as a couple therapist for approximately 20 years, her main focus has been to apply Rogers' (1957) six therapeutic conditions to families and couples according to Gaylin (2001) and O'Leary (1999). She tried to integrate both Systemic and Humanistic theories and at the same time remain faithful to her humanistic philosophy of trusting the self-actualizing tendency of clients. Most of the times listening, empathizing and prizing couples and families was sufficient; still something was missing. The therapist found that missing part when she was introduced to EFT systematic theory and practice. She has been working with EFT the last 3 years and has been trained in accordance to ICEEFT standards and has acquired certification.

The supervisor was also trained in Person-Centered and Systems Theory prior to training in EFT. Although she had success working with both these models there was a point in couple's therapy that she felt stuck. There wasn't much movement in the couple process for change. She observed her couples listening to one another and having good intentions for change but permanent change was difficult to achieve. EFT was able to fill that gap by accessing and expanding the partners' unmet attachment needs and promoting accessibility and responsiveness to each other's underlying emotions and needs.

The following case example illustrates the successful treatment of a distressed couple, Elena and Gregory.¹ The case describes the therapeutic process in Stage 1 and Stage 2 of EFT. Comments on strengths experienced and difficulties encountered due to this approach will be incorporated in the ensuing presentation of the therapy process, ending with a few concluding remarks. The case study presentation is followed by an overall

critical commentary provided by the supervisor. The case of Elena and Gregory was one of the first cases the therapist worked applying the EFT model under supervision and it was videotaped with the couple's permission. Elena and Gregory gave their consent to publish a case study about their therapy process and were invited to review a draft of the manuscript. The case study was constructed on the basis of the videotapes' transcription, the therapist's post session notes and the feedback provided by the supervisor following each session. The therapy took place in the context of private practice and the clients took part in 20 weekly sessions spread over the period of approximately 8 months.

Case study

Background and presenting problem

Elena and Gregory are a couple in their mid-thirties, with a 2½-year-old boy. The presenting problem was Gregory's parents. They all live in the same building but in different apartments. The father did not speak to them, he did not even say hello, while the mother had very conventional old fashioned views about family life, which she wanted to impose on the young couple's family. Although Gregory understood that he and his wife were different from his parents, with whom he did not agree, he wanted Elena to realize that they are his parents and consequently they had to be respectful and tolerant of them.

Stage 1: cycle de-escalation

In the first session as a therapist, I tried to understand the problem and assess the couple's difficulties. I felt that right from the beginning, we made very good contact and I could detect the main pattern in their relationship. Elena and Gregory had a typical pursue/withdraw cycle. Elena was the pursuer and Gregory was the withdrawer. When they had a disagreement, Elena felt anxious and wanted to talk about things in order to get them resolved. She "pushed" Gregory with questions and Gregory got annoyed. He did not want to talk because he worried that things would just get worse, and there was no sense in talking. Therefore, he shut down and went to work. The more he did not respond to Elena, the more she pushed until she withdrew as well. After a while, they would stop arguing, but nothing was resolved until the next time, when the cycle repeated itself. They were both insecurely attached; she was anxious and he was avoidant.

The next two sessions were individual sessions dedicated to their attachment histories. Attachment histories are relevant to the therapist to understand better and empathize with each partner's wounds and traumatic experiences.

Elena's attachment history

Elena is a beautiful, bright, tall, young woman who started talking from the beginning of the first session very sincerely and eloquently, showing her trust to the process. She described her family as a very loving one. She has a brother who is 2½ years older than her, and, as she said:

... was the one to create all the problems at home. He was a rebel and hyperactive. I, instead, was cute and a nice good girl. I was daddy's girl and whenever I needed him, he was there to take me in his arms. However, one day when I was 11 years old and I started growing up this stopped abruptly. Suddenly when I went to ask for dad's support, as I always used to do, I found a closed door.

The father's changed behavior was very painful for Elena, but later on, she understood why he changed. As she told me, he had to turn her away so that she would confide in her mother, who as a woman was more appropriate to explain to her the wonders of life and help her to become a woman. Her father instead had to help her brother to become a man. I said to her, "That must have been painful for you, wasn't it?" "Yes," she said and tears appeared in her eyes. "Almost traumatic" I said and she continued, "it took me some years to accept it, but later on I understood how right my dad had been, he wouldn't be able to teach me how to become a woman. We discussed it some years ago and it was a surprise for me to see that it had been so painful for him too." "You understand it now", I told her, "but it was very hard on little Elena, I believe." "Yes," she agreed, "It was!" "Of course," she continued, "there have been a lot of disputes between myself and my mother. We succeeded in ameliorating our relationship much later, when I got married. Now I feel both of them to be very close to me and always available when I need them."

The relationship with her husband was not always in the state presented when they came to therapy. She missed the Gregory she fell in love with. He would always come to her with a flower or a plan to do things together. "He does not do that anymore", she said very sadly.

She described Gregory's parents as being "peasants" not talking much, not knowing how to express their feelings. His parents lived in an apartment one floor up. Elena's relationship with them was very difficult! She did not want to talk to them but she had to because of the child. She did not want to prevent him from seeing his grandparents. On the other hand she saw in Gregory characteristics of his father, who lives like a hermit, distant and detached and showing a very bossy behavior towards his wife.

Gregory's attachment history

Gregory was quite reserved in the beginning. I immediately acknowledged how awkward it must have been for him to come and talk to a therapist. It was difficult for him to understand my question on: "What was it like growing up in your family? Who did you grow up with?" After a while, he understood and replied, "I grew up in Athens but my parents came from a little village in northern Greece. My father was a builder until he got severely ill and he had to stop doing that job. Fortunately, he found a job as a ticket inspector."

Gregory and his sister were well taken care of by their parents, there was always food on their table and were offered a good education. He felt closer to his mother and he remembered her being tender and expressing her love. His father was hard to approach, he said, "I cannot remember him either expressing his love or taking care of me, I do not even have any recollection of ever playing with him." They never had any kind of relationship and when he got older they would quarrel about everything. When he was 12, he stopped asking for his mother's support as well. "The fact that I could not succeed in having a good relationship with my father makes me very sad," he said and tears tricked from his eyes. He continued and said, "I do not know what happens to me lately, I become emotional, it is indeed very strange."

His parents never quarrelled, at least in front of him, and it was only then that he understood how much pressure his mother might have felt by his father's behavior. Gregory has a sister who is 5 years younger than him. They did not have any kind of relationship probably because of the age difference between them. From their childhood until now their relationship is nonexistent. Not a word is exchanged between them.

Gregory had many girlfriends in the past. He would never break up with them, he would make them so miserable that they would leave him. With Elena it was different. “This girl had it all, beauty and wits with a good education, she knew how to stand by my side with elegance! When we started dating, I did not believe my good fortune! I fell in love with her,” saying this his eyes filled up with tears... I asked him “Is it as if you are longing after that girl?” “Yes,” he replied, “I do not know how we ended up being like this, if we were without a child, I would have left, there are moments that I hate her. I do not believe that this can be repaired, what do you think?” I answered him that “this is usually how couples feel when they come to me, but the majority of them do find their way out. I know you doubt it right now, you feel disappointed! Still you are here, I am glad that you are giving it a chance!”

Access underlying emotions-reframes

Comments: As a good client-centered therapist, it was easy for me to follow faithfully the client’s lead. I would follow and empathize so that the client’s emotions would unfold. According to Rogers (1986) a strong therapeutic alliance is very important and especially empathic understanding is a “healing agent” by itself. This is particularly true for an EFT therapist as well. Still, in EFT theory and practice, emotions have a central role and thus are explored and analyzed more. Emotions have a survival value and thus become a motivating force to guide behavior. I soon understood that it was not enough just to access the underlying emotion of the partners. Even though it was not easy for me to do it differently in the beginning, I came to realize through my training and supervision the importance of proceeding gradually, slowing down the process. This involves going from the thinking process to the secondary emotions like anger, then moving on to primary emotions like sadness fear and loneliness and finally moving to attachment needs for closeness and security (see Johnson, 2004, p. 64). As Sanders (2004) points out, there are many different ways practitioners express their person-centeredness. The more “classical” practitioners and theoreticians like Brodley (1990) question experiential theories that have evolved from PCA. Their main objection lies in that if you espouse the basic tenet of PCA which is “trust in the organism to self-actualize” (Rogers, 1965), then you cannot interfere in the client’s process. In a way, I was breaking a fundamental law when I slowed down the process; still the outcome was so rewarding that I started trusting *my* process. That was not easy for me since breaking laws felt like a kind of “betrayal” to my non-directive training. Besides, I agree with O’Leary & Johns (2007, p. 267) that “Johnson’s verbatim transcripts often seem as though Rogers himself was the therapist because of her painstaking and respectful effort to exactly track the emotional heart of all client utterances.” An excerpt of the verbatim transcript of Elena and Gregory’s session 4 follows:

Elena and Gregory began to describe an incident that led them to get upset with each other. This is a typical incident that illustrates how they were led right into their cycle.

Gregory: I just remembered something that did not lead us to a fight but it could have been an excuse for a big quarrel. One day Elena came home from work and was tense – the problem is that when she comes home and she is like that, everything bothers her. I went in the kitchen, took the wooden spoon near the saucepan and tasted the food. Then I remembered it was difficult to replace

the spoon in its initial place. I then went and lay on the sofa. Suddenly Elena came in and started shouting “why did you leave the spoon inside the saucepan?” Do you remember that incident?

Elena: I don’t remember it like that. There was boiling water for the spaghetti and I could not take the spoon out of the saucepan because it was too hot.

G: No, there was food in the saucepan that I tasted, I remember because I put some extra effort to place the spoon correctly after I tasted it. If I had said something to Elena then, it would have been hell. Isn’t it true Elena?

E: Yes, it could...

G: So, I went off the scene not to provoke further trouble...

Therapist: Gregory when you sense that things might escalate between you and Elena you go off the scene – you go away – in order not to provoke any arguments?

G: That’s right.

Th: (I see the disappointment in Elena’s face) So what is happening to you Elena right now? (“slowing the pace”) Gregory when you sense that things might escalate between you and Elena you go off the scene – you go away – to not provoke any arguments?

G: That’s right.

E: I am the one left to solve everything.

Th: What happens to you when you see the spoon in the wrong place?

E: I get angry.

Th: You get angry and what happens next?

E: I try to reach him. I try to get through to him.

Th: You go to Gregory and you say something?

E: Nothing in particular, I just do not leave things unmentioned . . . I am not in a good mood either and I say to him “Why did you leave the spoon like that?”

Th: You see the spoon out of place and that upsets you. You go to Gregory and you ask him why he left the spoon like that?

E: (Nods her head).

Th: What happens to you Gregory when you hear Elena say that?

G: Well, her tone of voice is not as calm. She comes to me and says, “WHY DID YOU LEAVE THE SPOON LIKE THAT?” (mimicking her tone of voice)

Th: This is how you hear it – much more intense, hm?

G: Yes, exactly.

Th: What happens next?

G: I switch off; she is no longer my Elena.

Th: This is hard for you Gregory, help me understand. She is no longer the Elena you know...

G: I feel like I have done a terrible sin!

Th: You feel bad.

G: The whole thing makes me nervous, angry, I am sad and I say to myself...nothing terrible really happened. It is not a sin after all to leave the spoon like that . . . I just want at moments like that to prove that I am not crazy.

Th: So, when something like this happens, it is like a surprise to you, you do not expect such a reaction from her, and it takes you off balance, you feel angry, and misunderstood, is that right?

G: Yes.

Th: What happens next?

G: My next move is to leave the scene and go somewhere alone. To save us and not to turn it into a big fight!

- Th:* So in a way you leave to save the relationship because you know that if you say something more, there would be a big disaster! In the meantime, you are feeling sad and hurt?
- G:* Yes.
- Th:* What happens to you Elena when you see him leaving?
- E:* Nothing, for one more time I say to myself, “all right then, you will spend the day like that, all alone.”
- Th:* That is what you say to yourself? You will be all alone?
- E:* Yes.
- Th:* That makes you feel sad?
- E:* Yes, exactly.
- Th:* So help me understand Elena, what is it like for you to be left alone and sad?
- E:* Not good. I am the one who will have to take the initiative once more to go to him and discuss it. Which is not so easy because I have to find the right time for it . . .
- Th:* So this stays with you for some time, until you find the right time to talk about it?
- E:* Yes, exactly and this can happen regardless of whose fault it is. I have to go and ask to discuss it.
- Th:* You cannot afford not to discuss it, regardless the cost.
- E:* Yes this is true (with a little laugh on her face).
- Th:* You are laughing?
- E:* Yes that’s true I need that, to get it out.
- Th:* It bothers you that Gregory does not give the same importance to what is happening between the two of you like you do? It hurts?
- E:* hmm yes. For me it is so important and for him it is nothing.
- Th:* It’s nothing. You are disappointed?
- E:* Yes, it is like he doesn’t care about our relationship.
- Th:* Right, it’s like your relationship is not important? You are not important? You are all alone in this?
- E:* Yes, exactly.
- Th:* What is your reaction to all that Gregory?
- G:* I am not sure, because when she comes to me, I don’t understand what she really wants.
- Th:* She wants something from you and you are not sure what that is? Is that right?
- G:* (hesitantly) Yes . . .
- Th:* You feel that you can’t please her, you are disappointing her and you don’t want to disappoint her. You feel sad and you shut down.
- G:* That is correct, what I do is never ok. She has to reprimand me, as if I were a little kid.
- Th:* This cycle that you get caught in happens ...with the spoon for example. Elena, you feel that what you want is not considered and it’s not important to Gregory, so you get upset and you voice your frustration. You want Gregory to know about your hurt but it doesn’t come out like that. You knock on his door with intensity, you are angry. Gregory, you hear the knocking and you are surprised, you don’t understand what is so terrible about what you did. You feel sad because you have disappointed Elena, you don’t know what to do to get it right and you close the door not to make things worse. The more you stay behind the door, the louder Elena knocks. You both enter into a cycle, where your relationship is being stolen by it, and you both feel sad and alone. Nobody is wrong, you are both trying very hard, but when the cycle takes over you get stuck in this terrible place.

In a later session, when Elena and Gregory became well aware of their cycle they named it “Vangelis.” This was inspired by a very old Greek film (comedy) where a man named Vangelis had invented a whole machinery that would automatically slam the door the second that his name would be heard out loud.

Comments: In the excerpt above, I tracked the cycle. I focused on each partner’s behavior and secondary emotions. Elena gets angry and has a certain tone in her voice when she tries to talk to Gregory. Gregory gets upset and annoyed with Elena because he does not understand what he did wrong. Then I touched upon primary emotions. Elena felt sad, hurt and not important; she was not considered in this relationship. Gregory felt sad and not good enough, he could never please Elena. Elena pursued by wanting to talk about what happened and Gregory shut down because he did not want to make things worse.

Stage 2: changing interaction positions

In this segment (session 12) I focused on staying with Gregory’s emotions and really trying to understand what it was like for him to feel that he “doesn’t get it right” with Elena.

Th: I am wondering Gregory, I saw you were surprised to hear Elena’s statement of you not being there to listen to her. Is that so?

G: Why did she get tense, I do not understand. I can’t analyze it. I lost it. . .

Th: You are saying that somehow you feel lost, cannot understand what you did wrong. So you are wondering?

G: Yes, I am wondering, I am angry she cannot see that I am trying, trying really hard.

Th: You are trying really hard, it is kind of unjust, isn’t it?

G: Yes.

Th: It’s like you are in a maze, trying to find the way out and the more you try the more trapped you feel?

G: Exactly (his voice gets slower).

Th: You are wondering what you did wrong, you give up in despair?

G: Yes, I do not understand why this happens, I do not understand its roots.

Th: You say: “I am usually the one who solves problems,” and you feel completely useless to solve this one.

G: I do not understand what I did, to see so much despair and pain in her?

Th: What’s that like for you...to not understand, to feel lost?

G: It hurts, I think I want to go away... I cannot stay there anymore.

Th: So, if I understand it correctly, when you feel so lost and desperate one part of Gregory wants to go away and another part longs so much for Elena’s understanding and soothing?

G: Emm, yes I want to disappear still ... I do not know (his head looks down).

Th: I want to disappear because I might be reprimanded for not understanding?

G: Yes (in a very low voice) and for not doing “it” correctly.

Th: You are afraid that you will not get it right and then what might happen? What is the worst thing that might happen?

G: I know she wants to be with me but I am afraid.

Th: You are afraid you are disappointing her?

G: Yes, it could be said like that.

- Th:* Help me understand, Gregory that part, which feels that it disappoints Elena.
- G:* I always had to struggle to be somebody... I was so small...
- Th:* This is an old feeling that comes up? You were trying very hard to get over this feeling from the time you were a little boy? Is that what you are saying?
- G:* Yes.
- Th:* That's awful...to struggle as a little boy...to be somebody...to not disappoint.
- G:* Hmmmm.
- Th:* Now, you try, you struggle not to disappoint Elena. Is that right?
- G:* Yes, I try hard. I think I analyze.
- Th:* So you go to this place where you think, struggle, work so hard not to disappoint Elena. Who sees you in that place? Who sees your struggle?
- G:* Nobody. I am alone. I was always alone, nobody was there. Both my parents were from another planet.
- Th:* You could not expect anything from them. No one was there then and no one is there now. The only one whom you could trust was yourself. That is awful; a terrible place to be. Sometimes Gregory is not enough to help Gregory, he feels so small, frightened and lonely... He would need somebody to hold his hand. It must be a very difficult situation when you get there Gregory, and nobody is around, although you are used to it and it is safer after all... still the longing is there.
- G:* Yes, indeed it is . . .
- Th:* I am wondering Gregory, is Elena aware of how you feel when you are in that place where you feel like that little boy? There in that small boys' place?
- G:* I am not so sure.
- Th:* What do you think will happen if you tried to tell her about that lonely place?
- G:* I am not so sure right now.
- Th:* You are not so sure? You are scared she wouldn't listen, she wouldn't understand?
- G:* Yeah
- Th:* It is rather difficult, but look at Elena's face... what do you see?
- G:* (hesitantly) I think she is moved...
- Th:* Would you like to tell her how difficult it is for you to tell her things like that?
- G:* It is difficult for me to tell you what happens to me. I'm afraid of what your reaction might be.
- E:* I want to know.
- Th:* (to Elena) This moves you towards him? Is that right?
- E:* Yes, I want us to be able to talk; to talk like this. Don't be scared. I can listen and understand when you talk like this.
- Th:* Elena, you are asking Gregory to take the risk and open up to you. You are saying "it's ok Gregory, I am here. You are not alone" is that right?
- E:* Yes, you are not alone. I am right here.

I continued working with Elena and Gregory for some time. I worked with Elena doing some "blamer softening" work. That involved staying a little bit more with her and her emotions, validating and empathizing with her until she could talk about her attachment needs and how important it was to share them with Gregory. Elena and Gregory succeeded in stopping "Vangelis." They explored very courageously their difficult feelings and became very supportive of each other. My feeling was that they needed some consolidation work [stage 3], so I suggested that we talk again after summer vacation. Elena called in September to say that everything continued to be fine with them. They

succeeded, most of the time, in preventing “Vangelis.” She was pregnant with a little girl and they were both very happy about it. Gregory was working very hard trying to survive the Greek economic crisis. They could not afford therapy at the present time but they wanted to resume when it was possible.

Therapist’s concluding remarks

The more I work with couples, the more enthusiastic I become with EFT. The EFT model through the delineated stages and steps provides me with a useful road map and I feel secure enough to be available for both partners. Providing structure in a couple’s session had nothing to do with being directive; instead, it made me feel more confident and provided a safety net for my clients. It is really rewarding to see couples on the verge of divorce to be close and loving to each other again. Most important of all is that my Person-Centered philosophy is very much there as well. All qualities and values are there with me. The six PCA conditions (Rogers, 1957) are always present: I try to make good contact with both partners, I am there for them to understand, I empathize with them and their struggles to reach each other, I am congruent whenever I get bothered and I express it, I always ask them for feedback to know how they experienced our sessions. I am still not the expert on their relationship. Nevertheless, I can facilitate their process by slowing down a little bit the pace with which it unfolds. Supervision helped me also understand that having the tendency to withdraw myself, I was reluctant to put more pressure to Gregory and it was easier for me to let him go. Therefore, understanding my own cycle and how this affects me as a therapist helped me not only in my therapeutic work but in my personal life as well.

Supervisor’s commentary

My supervisee had no difficulty tracking the cycle and identifying primary emotions. The challenge was in slowing her down and having her engage the clients in their emotional experience. She had particular difficulty doing this with clients whose default position in the relationship was identified as the “withdrawer” or “distancing partner.” Withdrawers, tend to be unaware of their emotions and frequently lack the language to identify what they are feeling or experiencing. In EFT the therapist must help the clients become aware and identify their feelings. The therapist strives to be attuned to the client and have a felt sense of their experience. In order for the therapist to go emotionally deeper with Gregory, during our supervision sessions, we identified the videotaped segments that could have potentially been more emotionally expanded. We paused and became curious to what was happening for the therapist precisely in the moment where she could have engaged the client in deeper emotion, but had missed the opportunity. By identifying the therapist’s blocks and temporarily letting go of learning the steps and stages of EFT we were able to work through these obstacles. Below is an excerpt of one such supervision dialogue.

Supervisor: If you were to stay with Gregory’s sadness a little longer and explore it more what would that be like for you?

Therapist: It would feel that I was pushing the boundaries and not being respectful to him. I am not sure if there is any more to say about his sadness so it feels like it is ok to move on.

- S:* There is something hard for you here...pushing the boundaries, not being respectful. Something happens for you...Let's make some space for that... Can we be curious together? What goes on inside for you?
- Th:* Hmm... It is hard because it feels that I am not being true to the Person Centered model and I am not being a good PC therapist if I "push" my clients; if I don't respect them and follow their lead.
- S:* Right...that makes sense to me. The Person Centered model is safe for you, you know it very well; you feel competent using it. When I ask you to stay longer with the emotion, to "hang out" with him in his sadness and expand the present emotion rather than follow him to something else, makes you uncomfortable . . . I'm asking you to do something different, something you don't know how to do and that is not comfortable? Is that it?
- Th:* Yes, it's like I'm betraying the PC model and I am not a good PC therapist.
- S:* What does that feel like to not be a good PC therapist?
- Th:* It doesn't feel good.
- S:* Right... and what do you typically do when you are not in a situation that doesn't feel good?
- Th:* Hmm...I don't know... I guess I keep quiet for a moment while I try to figure out what to do.
- S:* You keep quiet and think – you go to your head and try to problem solve?
- Th:* Yes, in a way.
- S:* You go into thinking mode to figure things out because it doesn't feel good. You get a bit anxious perhaps about not being good enough?
- Th:* Hmm...
- S:* That is difficult for you...How could you not get anxious when that is where you go and you doubt yourself? It must be awful to go there.
- Th:* Hmm...
- Th:* You doubt yourself for a moment and so you try to protect yourself from those feelings by exiting and thinking. However, the very moment you begin to think you have left the client emotionally – you have disengaged with him. By the time you realize the disengagement you have both moved too far away from one another and it's difficult to come back to the emotional stuff.
- Th:* Right...
- S:* It's okay... What would you need in those moments in order to stay with your client and hang around out in his emotional experience and lean in rather than exiting?
- Th:* I need to know that I am not being disrespectful, that I am not pushing the boundaries and doing something wrong.
- S:* Who can give you that reassurance?
- Th:* I think us talking about it makes it easier for me. Your reassurance that it is okay to do that and that I am not harming or disrespecting my client. Also, seeing Susan Johnson's videotapes where she is focusing on emotion and it doesn't seem pushy or disrespectful. All that helps me feel that I can do this and that it is okay
- S:* What's it like to know that you CAN do this and it is okay?
- Th:* It is a very nice feeling, very empowering.
- S:* That's great...feeling empowered to do the work.
- Th:* Yes, it is.

In our supervision session, we identified that the therapist needed to further engage her client. We could have focused purely on the learning process of EFT and kept our supervision session intellectual by reviewing the steps and stages of the model, reviewing what to say next time the client came in or even doing a role play to practice. In our session, we identified the block that prevented the therapist from engaging with her client in deeper emotion and we then worked through that block while temporarily letting go of the learning process.

First, I as the supervisor *recognized* that something was happening to my supervisee and she was not staying long enough with her clients' emotions. Therefore, she was not getting them to engage deeply with their feelings. On an intellectual level, I was certain that the therapist knew how to do this. Remaining curious, I asked the therapist if it would be okay to explore this. She very quickly *identified the trigger* as anxiety of not being "a good PC therapist" "not true" to the PC model and perhaps "being pushy" with her client which did not make her feel good or skillful. I *validated* her feelings of anxiety (how could she not be anxious in moments when she doubts herself as a therapist); and her strategy for regulating her anxiety (by going cognitive and trying to problem solve). Acknowledging that I understand how difficult this must be for her and how awful it must feel, while at the same time letting her know that it is okay to have these feelings. Lastly, we *explored* what she would need in those anxiety-provoking moments in order to lean in to her client's emotions rather than pull away. By being able to slow down the process and model appropriate management of personal issues was extremely helpful for the therapist during EFT supervision.

Note

- Names and places have been changed to protect the couple's identification

References

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. I. Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Brodley, B. (1990). Client-centered & experiential: Two different therapies. In G. Lietaer, J. Rombauts, & V. Balen (Eds.), *Client-centered and experiential psychotherapies in the nineties* (pp. 87–108). Leuven: University Press.
- Gaylin, L.N. (2001). *Family, self and psychotherapy: A person-centred perspective*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Greenberg, L., & Goldman, R.N. (2008). *Emotion-focused-couples-therapy: The dynamics of emotion, love, and power*. Washington, DC: APA.
- Greenberg, L., & Johnson, S.M. (1985). Emotionally focused therapy: An affective systemic approach. In N.S. Jacobson & A.S. Gurman (Eds.), *Handbook of clinical and marital therapy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Greenberg, L., & Johnson, S.M. (1998). *Emotionally focused therapy for couples*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Greenberg, L., Rice, L., & Elliot, H. (1993). *Facilitating emotional change: The moment by moment process*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Greenberg, L., & Safran, J.D. (1987). *Emotion in psychotherapy: Affect and cognition in the process of change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 511–524.
- Johnson, S.M. (1996). *The practice of emotionally focused marital therapy: Creating connection*. New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Johnson, S.M. (2004). *The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy: Creating connection*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.

- Johnson, S.M., Bradley, B., Furrow, J., Lee, A., Palmer, G., Tilley, D., & Woolley, S. (2005). *Becoming an emotionally focused couple therapist: The workbook*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Kerr, E., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Minuchin, S., & Fishman, H. C. (1981). *Family therapy techniques*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Leary, C. (1999). *Counseling couples and families: A person-centred approach*. London: Sage.
- O'Leary, C., & Johns, M. (2007). Couples and families. In M. Cooper, M. O'Hara, P. Schmid, & G. Wyatt (Eds.), *The handbook of person-centred psychotherapy and counselling* (pp. 266–278). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rogers, C.R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Rogers, C.R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21*(2), 95–103.
- Rogers, C.R. (1965). *Client-centered therapy: Its current practice, implications and theory*. London: Constable.
- Rogers, C.R. (1986). Reflection on feelings. *Person-Centered Review, 1*(4), 125–140.
- Sanders, P. (2004). *The tribes of the person-centred nation: An introduction to the schools of therapy related to the person-centred approach*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Simpson, J.A., Rholes, W.S., & Nelligan, J.S. (1992). Support seeking and support giving within couples in an anxiety provoking situation: The role of attachment styles. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 62*, 434–446.