

Guide to Early EFT Sessions

An Overview

1. Connect with both partners – build a safe-haven/secure base alliance.
2. Help couple unfold their story – perceptions of problems and strengths, pivotal events.
3. Assess the nature of the problem and the relationship. Is it suitable for couple therapy? Are there contraindications? Compatible goals?
4. Begin to enter the experience of each partner. Discover how each partner constructs his/her experience of this relationship.
5. Identify the typical position each partner takes in the interactive cycle. Who is more pursuing? Who tends to react more with defense and distancing?
6. Listen for vulnerabilities and attachment issues underlying each partner's position of pursuit or withdrawal in the relationship. Look for blocks to secure attachment and emotional engagement between partners. Assess for anxious or avoidant attachment strategies.
7. Track cycle as it happens in the room – noting the triggers, moves and experience of each partner.
8. Note relationship strengths, signs of connection, caring and mattering to each other. (Instill hope by reflecting indications of their bond.)
9. Assess couple's responses to EFT interventions.
10. Create a therapeutic agreement re therapeutic goals, tasks and how therapy will be conducted.

Goals

- To build an alliance with each partner, to get a sense that each partner feels the therapist understands his/her position and experience in this relationship and is getting an experiential sense of the cycle in which they are caught.
- To find opportunities to reflect and track interactions between partners that represent both positive and negative interaction cycles.
- To assess: whether partners have compatible goals, whether there is sufficient safety to do EFT couple therapy and whether an *alliance* – with respect to the tasks of EFT therapy – is developing.

The Process

How The therapist does this by reflecting and validating the couple's distress in the context of the negative interactional cycle in which they are caught and by focusing the couple on *some of the following areas, as they fit into the therapeutic conversation*. These questions are not to imply a question and answer session, nor to suggest you need to ask them all. They are offered rather as a guide to focus the dialogue, assess important issues and build an alliance in the early sessions. From the first session onward, an EFT therapist will include some structured enactments between partners.

Begin An EFT therapist may begin with: "I am curious to hear what has prompted you to feel you are stuck or in need of help at this time?" adding something like, "Frequently people have slightly different or even very different perspectives about the relationship, so it's very important that I get to hear from each of you. Who would like to start?"

Near the beginning or during the first session an EFT therapist may also invite each partner to describe the changes s/he longs for in the relationship, to help determine if partners have compatible goals.

Seating To establish collaborative therapy with a sense that that it will involve tracking interactions *between* partners (rather than two partners *reporting to a therapist*) the partners will be seated on two chairs slightly facing each other, rather than on a sofa where it becomes effortful to turn to one another.

Continue An EFT therapist will listen to and reflect one person's story first and segue to the other partner by inviting them to describe what it is like to hear what the other partner has said. To create the interactive therapy that focuses more on process between partners than on the content, the therapist is likely to reflect a particular comment from the first disclosing partner that has *attachment salience*, because of what was said or how it was said, and to invite the observing partner to begin by commenting on what it was like for him/her to hear the other partner say that (e.g., "What happens for you to hear her say she feels alone in this relationship?/ to hear him say he feels uncared for?/to hear her say she feels like nothing she does is ever enough?")

Relationship history An EFT therapist tries to get a sense of the couple's relationship story: how it evolved, what attracted them to one another, listening for pivotal events that shaped their relationship – vulnerable moments of need – that became positive moments bonding moments or ones that redefined the relationship as untrustworthy. An EFT therapist inquires what initially drew them to one another. This can evoke positive memories, a sense of the strength of the bond and/or awareness of the sudden or gradual shift that has evolved in their relationship.

Comfort Inquire as to what/who they go to for comfort now and assess if they are each other's primary source of comfort now or if they were in the past? Ask whom, if anyone, they had to go to for comfort as a child. ("Who held you when you cried?")

Listen to the emotional tone in the room and watch for signs of safety, hints at addictive processes, competing attachments and pivotal events. Observe how each partner gets triggered by the other partner. Note *the moments when* one partner responds to or turns away from the other. Inquire if they are able to give each other comfort now? How? When?

Negative Cycle An EFT therapist may ask what a typical argument looks like and what are typical triggers for their arguments.

Begin to map out their cycle during difficult/conflictual/distancing moments. The more one does _____, the more the other does _____. Reflect and track their behaviors and their emotional experiences.

EFT therapists may ask who typically begins an argument and who typically approaches after an argument to reconcile. Does either partner ever leave during an argument? Get a picture of how it unfolds and how it is for the other. Find out if they are able to repair when they disconnect, and how the repair takes place. Evoke how each partner ends up feeling when they have arguments or ruptures in their connection (e.g. lonely, sad, fearful of losing, fearful of being rejected etc.)

Violence/Intimidation Assess whether either partner feels afraid of / intimidated by the other during negative interactions. (Verify this again in individual sessions, where a partner may give a different response.)

You may inquire whether there are times when an argument escalates to physical pushing, shoving, slapping, hitting or throwing things. If so, when was the last time this occurred?

Ask if either partner uses alcohol or drugs, and inquire whether (and how) arguments may be different when either partner is using.

Positive Cycles Inquire about times they have felt close and connected, and elicit a picture of how that looks and feels. Note whether they agree on these descriptions. Observe their voice tone and faces when they talk about these times.

Affection and physical intimacy An EFT therapist asks for a picture or story of touch, physical affection, and love making in the relationship. Find out how each one feels about this aspect of their relationship, listening to the emotional tone and for a joint story or different views.

Positive and Negative Cycles Through out the session, find opportunities to reflect positive and negative cycles. Take note of and reflect and track moments when:

- one partner moves close to offer comfort or emotional protection to the other
- partners tell a *joint story*
- one partner becomes notably triggered by something the other partner says or does

Summarize the stuck cycle that comes out as partners describe their interactions and as they trigger reactions in the other. Instill hope for their relationship, normalizing and validating the experience of two people doing their best to stay

connected, yet caught in a cycle that is hurting them both and leaving them both very alone

Before ending

- Check with each partner how they feel about this way of working together – if they are comfortable with the view that there is not one person to blame for their distress, but that it is a two-person dance that they have gotten caught in and that has now become almost automatic. Invite their responses about how they feel about the session and their willingness to make an informal contract to work together in this way. This helps to build alliance around the tasks of therapy.
- Inform them that typically after the first session or 2 there will be an **individual session** with each partner before resuming work together as a couple.
- Many EFT therapists in the first session recommend the couple augment their therapy with reading *Hold Me Tight* and may have books on hand to give them a copy, explaining that their sessions together will mirror the process described in this book.