

Don't PRESS, Rather LEAN In and Linger

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the EFT community news

24th Issue Winter 2014/15

In Stage One work, we access vulnerable, primary emotions (Step 3). When a partner opens up and expresses sadness, hurt, fears and even longings, as a therapist I feel with them and for them. We may slice this emotion thin and prompt a Stage One enactment, *"Would you turn to Betty and tell her this? Could you share with her that on the outside you often look shut down, but on the inside your stomach churns, you feel a bit as you said, panicky that you'll make things worse."* Bill turns to Betty and more emotion floods out, *"Yes, it's true, I look like I don't care or something on the outside, but my insides are churning and...and (tears come), I'm scared and...lonely too."*

How tempting to turn to Betty and say, *"Do you see that Bill is scared and lonely, can you see that?"* And we wish for Betty to reach back and reassure Bill, to say, *"I'm here, I'm here."* But wait, we are still in Stage One. A careful look at Betty's face and body language indicates that she's not there yet. She's curious. This is new for Bill to share vulnerably. She's not resonating with his words and message. Betty's fear, the dance, her experience of Bill over years, these all conspire with her limbic system and negative attributions to block empathy.

The pull is there to ask Betty to be comforting or to change her moves in the dance. It's a common error in learning EFT, one so common and one I attribute to our own natural tendency to soothe distress. To help me not do this and to support supervisees in becoming aware of this, I coined the term P.R.E.S.S. I like the term. It reminds me of the acronym of K.I.S.S. or Keep It Simple Silly. It gently pokes fun of the tendency to rush in and expect partners to immediately resonate or to change their moves in the dance.

Premature Resonance Expectations Syndrome Silly (PRESS)

It's important in Stage One to remember what the primary purposes are for accessing primary emotion. The right time to explicitly seek empathy from a listening partner will arise. It's tough to see someone struggling emotionally. We wish that the partner would recognize the pain of their loved one and soothe them right away. Or we might want one partner to see how their anger, shutting down or other behavior hurts their spouse, *"Can you see that when you shut down it scares her?"* We then get ahead of ourselves and the process. Worse, I run the risk of shaming or blaming. In that moment, I cease being humanistic. Rather than guiding people into an experience of accessing vulnerability, I risk pushing for empathy not yet present.

What can we do when a partner accesses vulnerable emotion in Stage One? First and foremost, we can remind ourselves that we provide most of the resonance, empathy and validation in Stage One. We help partners slice their experience thinner and prompt an enactment. We ask the receiving partner perhaps to focus on the newness of this move. We might help the emoting partner to place this newfound deeper affect into the dance.

They begin to feel and see how this implicit emotion leads to an explicit action tendency in the negative cycle. We might ask them what this means to them to help prompt deeper exploration of attachment meaning arising from the primary emotion.

So, I try to remind myself when vulnerable emotion comes to the surface with a couple to LEAN in and linger. Listen, Explore, Attach-ify and say “No” to PRESSing. When learning EFT, we often need to practice sitting with primary emotion a bit longer than I, the therapist, might be comfortable with. Some things I have found helpful in those moments are to listen to my own discomfort and use supervision to explore what keeps me from staying with sadness, fear, hurt and longing. I can notice when I exit from primary affect to ask the other partner to soothe or change their move in the dance. I can resonate with the person’s own discomfort about being vulnerable in the room with their spouse. I can remind myself that we are still working towards de-escalation, setting the table for Stage Two work.

In Stage Two, resonance begins to trump reactivity in the limbic system. With therapist guidance, a partner reveals deeper attachment fears and longings (Step 5) and the receiving partner accepts, resonates and empathizes with this new emotional expression (Step 6). The couple’s dance expands and new movement emerges. In this safety, a partner can reach out from a vulnerable place to ask for an attachment need to be met (Step 7). Their partner responds and we have a bonding event. We PRESS in Stage One when we need couples to do this earlier in the work. To expect empathy, resonance and validation as partners respond to each other is premature in Stage One work.

Of course, if in the face of Bill’s vulnerability, Betty is empathetic and she moves towards him in Stage One, we welcome this moment of precious connection. We stay with the closeness and linger there. We can anchor this and ask them to contrast this with what ordinarily happens in the dance. Hope arises and we have what some might refer to as a bonding moment. A bit like “Post-It” glue, the closeness is tentative and not to be confused with “Super Glue” – the deeper connection and vulnerability of a more authentic bonding event. Spontaneous empathy and closeness are to be relished but not expected or forced as we help a couple access, explore and make sense of their primary emotion in Stage One.

In general, counter-intuitively perhaps, couples make steadier progress in a deeper way when I can avoid the urge to PRESS. Rather than indulging in Premature Resonance Expectation Syndrome Silly, I LEAN in and linger when a partner accesses primary emotion in Step 3. Couples then pick up on my acceptance of where they are in their process. There is no hurry, no pressure from me to push through their own vulnerability. I acknowledge a listening partner’s own fears and doubts that block empathy. Rather than pressing them to reach back and be responsive, together we put all this in the cycle. We explore emotions and find the meaning made of their dance of disconnection. They learn to trust that rather than PRESS-ing, I will provide an empathetic response. I will work to co-create with them a safe haven and secure base for each partner within sessions. So when we feel the urge to PRESS, we can attend to our own dysregulation and LEAN in and linger with the newfound vulnerable emotional expression.

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