

The EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) Road Map

Stage 1 – Understand Your Strengths and the Patterns that Keep You Stuck

Step 1: Set goals for counseling; understand some of the ways your relationship history affects your relationship now.

Step 2: Discover and describe the negative patterns of interaction you get stuck in. You and your therapist will track your interactions with your partner and identify where and how your communication breaks down.

Step 3: Emotions are stirred up in your relationship, especially when you get stuck in these negative cycles of interaction. Emotions also drive the cycle. You may first be aware of anger, frustration, anxiety, numbness or even withdrawal. Notice inside what other feelings are beneath these initial feelings, such as hurt, sadness or fear. Begin to share these “underneath” feelings with your partner. It is OK if it feels “bumpy” – it helps diffuse the cycle sometimes, but not always.

Step 4: Describe your cycle and recognize what the triggers are. Understand how the things that you do to protect yourself and your relationship affect and may even threaten your partner. Notice how you cocreate the cycle: “we’re doing that thing again...the more I go after you, the more you withdraw because you’re feeling hurt...” Slow down your conversations so that you can tap into the feelings that are beneath the surface. Catch your own thoughts (“She doesn’t care;” “I don’t matter”) before acting on them. You might notice that you can hold back your knee jerk reactions to avoid the cycle. You might not know yet how to pull each other close and you might be afraid the “old way” will come back. However, when you discover that this negative cycle is the source of unhappiness in your relationship, you realize that your partner is not the enemy. You can then work together to gain control over this negative cycle and that already feels infinitely better.

Stage 2 – Create a New, Intimate Relationship Bond; Change Your Communication Patterns

Step 5: Both of you are now able to talk about your feelings that get triggered by the negative cycle, including things you might not have been able to say before. With less friction and more compassion between you, there is safety to explore your experience more deeply. We all have doubts about ourselves at times and may also have fears about depending on others. You may struggle with personal fears or insecurities in this relationship. You may have had life experiences that make it difficult to trust others to be there for you. With the help of your therapist, you can take turns and begin to share these “raw spots” with your partner. As you take these risks, your partner begins to truly see and understand where you are coming from, which creates empathy.

Step 6: This step involves staying engaged and listening to your partner’s disclosures. Your partner may share feelings that take you by surprise. You may feel disoriented or even hurt that you have not heard your partner share so personally like this before. It is OK to experience a mixture of emotions. Start by trying to understand at an emotional level what your partner is saying, without needing to change his/her experience or take responsibility for it yourself. Stay open to the possibility of experiencing and understanding your partner in a new way. Allow yourself to be moved by your partner’s new disclosures.

Stage 2 – Create a New, Intimate Relationship Bond; Change Your Communication Patterns(cont’d)

Step 7: Explore what helps you feel deeply connected, what is most important for you in this relationship. In this stage of therapy your therapist helps you find ways to ask for your needs in the relationship in a way that is both caring and direct. You can lean into and reach for your partner and he/she is able to reach back in a loving way. You have found a new way to relate when one of you feels stressed, hurt or insecure. The bond between you shifts, becoming closer and more intimate. You can check out your perceptions and talk about feelings. You can listen with an open heart, be curious about one another and offer reassurance when needed. Both of you have a felt sense of “being there” for each other.

Stage 3 – Use New Communication Patterns to Solve Problems and Maintain Intimacy

Step 8: Revisit old problems or decisions that have been put on hold (e.g., parenting, finances, sex, family issues, health concerns, etc.) while staying emotionally connected. They don't seem as loaded now that you feel heard, valued, close and secure. Focus on staying accessible, responsive, and engaged while talking about practical issues. Together, you can face any of life's challenges more easily.

Step 9: Congratulations! You have reshaped your relationship. Or perhaps this is the first time in your relationship that you have felt a profound bond with one another. You have worked hard to get here, so it's important to celebrate it and put safeguards in place to protect it. Create rituals together that privilege your relationship. Find ways of keeping this new way of relating strong.

By Pat LaDouceur, PhD, LMFT