

Conquering the Nemesis Blamer Softening from A-to-Z

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Softening Defined

A previously hostile/critical partner asks, from a position of vulnerability and within a *high level of emotional experiencing*, for reassurance, comfort, or for an attachment need to be met. (Bradley & Furrow, 2004; Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; 1995).

Other partner accepts (just can't reject)

"Antidote" to negative interactional cycle

Leads to more secure bonding interactions

A Common Plight

No softening = poorer results (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988)

The crucial elements of EFT are embedded

- Theoretical
 - Secure attachment unfolds
 - Emotional restructuring crystallizes
- Application
 - Doggedly heightening attachment-related affect
 - Intrapsychic and interpsychic powerfully merge

Softening Process

Most intense step for couple and therapist

Ex. More attacking partner in Step 5 summarized as:

"I am afraid that if I let you in more you might end up leaving. And if I really let you in, and you somehow leave, it would kill me. I don't know if I could handle that kind of pain."

Softening Process

Crystallizes in Step 7 as:

"I am so afraid that you might get enough of me and decide to leave... I just want to feel special to you. (cries... 6 second silence)

I need you to hold me and reassure me that I can count on you, and that you will stay in this when the going gets rough. (5 second silence)

I realize I am battling demons from my past, but I'd like for you to help me with this. And I really want to let you all the way in. Please be patient with me.

Softening I Project

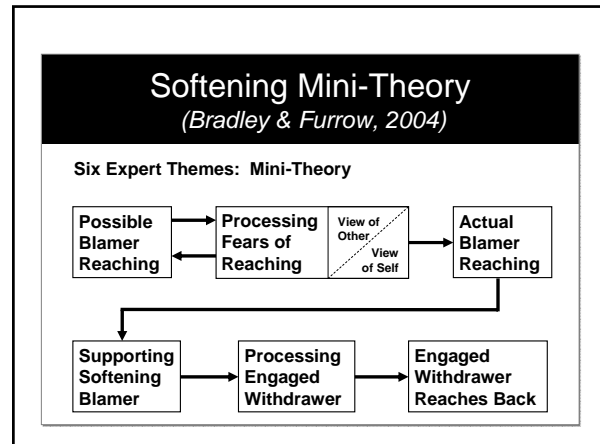
Task Analysis (Greenberg, 1984; Bradley & Johnson, 2005)

- Collected tapes from OCFI
- 10 therapist-reported softening events
- Four met defined softening criteria
- Those four were Sue's - My own experience validated

Task Analysis: A Closer Look

Investigated repeatedly:

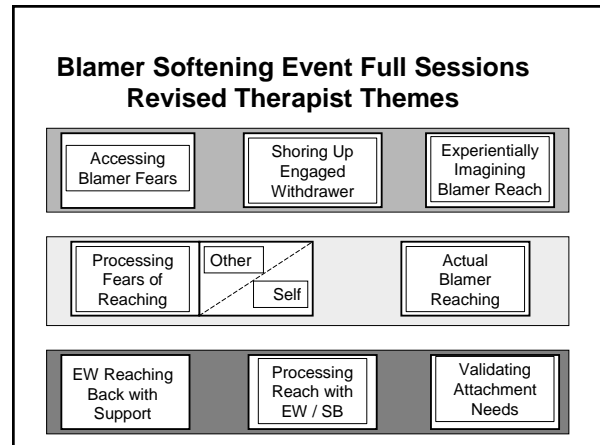
- What are Sue's content themes throughout softenings? (i.e. What does she focus on?)
- Where does she start?
 - What does she say?
 - What does she do? (i.e. interventions)
 - What does all of this look like?
 - How long does it take her?



Softening II Project

Task Analysis (Greenberg, 1984; Bradley & Johnson, 2005)

- Collected tapes from EFT community (None from Sue)
- 13 therapist-reported softening events
- 10 met defined softening criteria
- 2nd Generation EFT Therapists (Most not yet certified)
- Most tapes included full session



Accessing Fears of Reaching

Initial focus of the session include:

- Therapist processes pursuer complaints / concerns
 - Response to recent conflict / concern
 - Response to therapist validating couple's progress
- The previous session work in Stage 2 (Steps 5 and 6) prepares way for the therapist to move to attachment-related affect (sadness, fears, hurt)
- Not uncommon to access shame mixed with fear – with shame providing a protective function

Accessing Fears of Reaching

Example:

- EW** Everything's been really good lately. Between me and you. It's been good,...and you know, you not letting our problems get to you and bother you and stress you out.
- TH:** You guys are so different than when you first came in here. How did you guys manage to do that? How do you guys love each other so well?
- B** He just understands me like nobody else ever has. He... And, sometimes it makes me mad, 'cause he knows me better than I know myself sometimes. But, yet, I can't imagine life without him, ever.
- TH:** So, help me understand. Are you saying, he understands you, and knowing that he understands you, sometimes that... that makes you mad? Help me understand why?

Accessing Fears of Reaching

Example:

- B: 'Cause, it's like he can read my mind. It's like, you know, it's my thoughts, [LAUGH], you know. Sometimes it makes me feel that way.
- TH: That he really knows you? Yeah. What's it like to know that he might know you?
- B: It's scary. I feel like, you know, he's inside my mind or something. [LAUGH] I don't know how to explain it.
- EW: I think she keeps her guard up, still a little bit. You know, because she is afraid.

Shoring Up the Withdrawer

Shoring up the engaged withdrawer

- In-session response to expressed fears of blamer
- Focusing on EW experience – promoting acceptance
- Accessing experience through empathic conjecture
- Addressing themes of accessibility and responsiveness
- Setting stage for asking blamer to “imagine a reach”

Possible Blamer Reaching

The stage is often set at the beginning of the session with the couple discussing their cycle, recognizing how the more-blaming spouse has gotten angry, sullen, or sad, shutting down hopes of mutual accessibility and responsiveness.

Therapist “choreographs” entrance into softening with:

- “Have you ever gone to Mike when you are feeling down like this? Have you ever gone to him and shared, ‘Hun, I am feeling so lonely right now. So...unsure.’ What would that be like, to let him in then, to share with him then?”
- Note “first-person stance”

Possible Blamer Reaching

Example: Marcus never considers letting Fresca in when times get intense. “It’s not safe enough for me to let her in during those situations,” he says, shaking his head:

“When I am that overwhelmed and low, she could REALLY hurt me if I let her in on how I am actually feeling” he says. “I can’t see doing that. The stakes are just too high.”

Signals move into processing fears of reaching

- Fears that serve to block and shut down attachment longings for support, comfort, and reassurance.

Processing Fears of Reaching

Fears are often embedded in internal views of self and other

- Negative views of other
 - Fear of partner showing contempt, criticizing, shaming, or abandoning them.
- Negative views of self
 - Inherent sense of deficiency, worthlessness, feeling unlovable, and self-shame.

Processing Fears of Reaching

Heightening Views of Self and Other

Typical Client Statements:

- “Why would he be there for me if I opened up this much to him? How can I trust you? No one has ever really been there for me.” (view of other)
- “I know he’s there. He’s always there. It’s just... It’s just how could someone really love *me*? I mean, just look at me?” (view of self)

Processing Fears of Reaching

Possible Response

Example: So when you feel this shame about yourself, like you're just not cutting it... feeling worthless (Heightening)..., rather than reaching to her and sharing with her that you're hurting and doubting, you show her your anger. Help me out here, but it's like, it's just too scary to show her that side of you that hurts so much. A part of you says, "She will see me as worthless. Weak. A big baby." (Heightening; First-Person Stance) So you hide that from her, it's safer that way. You stay alone in your pain?" (Evocative Responding)

Processing Fears of Reaching
Heightening Views of Self and Other

Therapist briefly summarizes fears of reaching to set up a possible "softening reach" enactment.

Example: "So, to even consider turning to Fresca and saying, 'I am just so scared right now. These demons from my past are accusing me. I am overwhelmed. I need a hug, a little reassurance. But I am so afraid that you would turn away.' That is really scary for you. This fear sort of paralyzes you, it keeps you alone in your doubts and fears."

Processing Fears of Reaching
Heightening Views of Self and Other

Example: "You never show him this part of you, this part that says, 'Don't you dare open up to him again. You'll get stabbed in the heart.' It just hurts too much to risk. You never let him in when this part raises its head. You never say, 'I am really scared right now that you can't be trusted. Could you please reassure me now?' You never say that, right? Because that is just too scary, too precise..."

Processing Fears of Reaching

Typical Client Responses

Slowly & Quietly: "It's REALLY scary. I don't show this part of me. (Closes eyes) Bad things may happen."



Processing Fears of Reaching
Insights on Heightening Views of Self and Other
(Bradley & Furrow, 2004)

Most time spent in this theme

Has to reach a "boiling point"

With insufficient heightening, softening can take an overly cognitive emphasis.

Actual Blamer Reaching

The therapist gently directs the now softening blamer to reach directly to her partner for comfort and assurance.

OR

Asks the softening blamer to share how it's too scary to reach and risk.

Actual Blamer Reaching

One of the simplest directives the EFT therapist makes, but one of the most intense.

– “Marcus, would you please turn now, and share this with Fresca, in your own words.”

OR

– “Marcus, could you begin now to tell Fresca how scary it is to even think of turning to her during these times, would you share this with her now please, in your own words.”

Short, direct, and to the point.

Supporting Softening Blamer

Marcus' "Softening Reach"

Marcus gathered himself (you must allow timed silence), turned directly to Fresca, and slowly shared:

“This is really hard for me. I really doubt myself and I doubt that you will even want me if I show this weak and scared part of me to you. If there's any way....I'd love your reassurance.”

Supporting Softening Blamer

The therapist supports new stance of more-blaming spouse, and the risk just taken.

- (Therapist, softly) “I think that was great Marcus. You really risked. You opened up and shared with Fresca what you need and how scary that is. Borrowing your own words, that was 'huge.'” (Validation)

Help softening blamer process and organize emerging meaning.

- “What was it like for you Marcus, to turn and say that to Fresca? What's happening inside now?” (Evocative Responding)

Processing with Engaged Withdrawer

Specific focus is the immediate affective response of the engaged partner *to the softening partner's reach*.

The softening reach *pulls* for comforting responses. This is the epitome of *working with*, and *using* emotion.

Therapist helps shape a direct response of accessibility, responsiveness, and safety.

Therapist “sets the table” by slowly repeating the attachment themes of softening reach.

Processing with Engaged Withdrawer

Example:

“Fresca,” the therapist slowly says. “Marcus just shared how afraid he gets, scared that you will see him as weak, or somehow lacking. And how he desperately longs for you to accept and comfort him...to be there for him regardless (Therapist “resets the table” by replaying attachment-related affect). He really risked sharing this with you just now. What happened inside as he let you in like this? (Therapist taps hand just above her own heart as she says this. Evocative Responding)

Processing with Engaged Withdrawer

"It was great" Fresca replies. "I don't see him as weak. When he shows me his heart like this, I want to be with him."

The therapist then reflects Fresca's response, often with a sense of intrigue, framed such as "Let me see if I get this. When he opens up and shows you these parts of him that are afraid and uncertain, when he says, 'I need your acceptance and comfort,' this actually pulls you toward him?"

Engaged Withdrawer Reaches Back with Support

"Yes!" Fresca says adamantly. "It makes me feel close to him. Like I can come be with him. I have something special to offer him."

Therapist: "Would you please tell him this in your own words right now? How when he risks like this and lets you in, that this makes you want to be with him even more? Would you please turn and directly share that with him now in your own words?" (Restructuring Interactions)

- Note: Still setting that table!! Keeping them attachment-focused.

Validating Attachment Needs

Therapist remains focused on emerging attachment needs and longings - helping the couple continue to work through this process repeatedly. (Bonding Events)

- § Returning to more explicit fears and processing attachment needs and wants.
- § Continuing a focus on making attachment clear

Therapist normalizes and supports the couple's expression and efforts to respond to one another's attachment needs and promoting a greater "felt sense" of security in the relationship.

Validating Attachment Needs

Example:

- TH: Well, you guys are great. This is really, really important, you know, you digging down deep to talk about what it's really about for you, and you listening to it and sharing some of your own fears. You guys are fantastic. This really touches you, doesn't it.
- EW: Uh-hum (Affirmative).
- TH: It touches you deep to hear her take that kind of risk with you?
- EW: Okay, you can stop staring at me. (Laughter)
- SB: I was trying to look away.
- TH: What's happening for you now? You look like you're full of something right now. Talk about it a minute.

Validating Attachment Needs

- EW: It makes me feel more confident about going forward and looking for a new job, and not having to worry about falling on my face to...to just confront those fears. It just makes me feel stronger.
- TH: To know how needed you are, and that she will count on you?
- EW: Yeah.
- TH: She'll let you know that she needs you. Good for you. Well, you guys ready to wrap it up?
- TH: I think... I think she's been amazing
- EW: Yeah.
- TH: You guys too, you've been amazing with this. You really just stepped right out there. Terrific, you should be really proud.

Softening Gone Astray: Top 4 Reasons

1. Attachment-Related Affect Distant
2. Attachment Fear Related Allergy
3. View of Other and Self Deficiency
4. Interpersonal Enactment Failure

Softening Gone Astray: Top 4 Reasons

1. Attachment-Related Affect Distant
 - Talking "about" rather than from "within"

Lack of Evocative Responding and Heightening

Softening Gone Astray: Top 4 Reasons

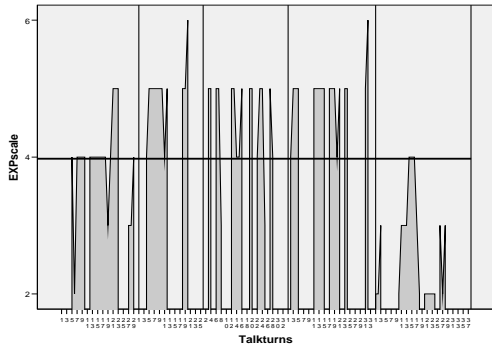
2. Attachment-Related Fear Allergy

Bowlby: Fear blocks attempts (or bids in Gottman language) for attachment.

It makes total sense we would see this fear at this step in the EFT process.

"Fear" remained unrecognized or unprocessed.

Client Experiencing in B.S. (Choi, 2006)



Softening Gone Astray: Top 4 Reasons

3. View of Other & Self Deficiency

Clients would talk about fear of the other partner being there, but some would then shift into fears of personally being unlovable or deficient.

 - Therapists rarely reflected this shift.
 - In fact, only Sue did, and even then coding team noted that she "missed" the client for three or four talk turns before catching the shift.

Shift to View of Self: Clinical Example

Sue: Can you risk with him now? He's here. I know he will be there, I just don't think I am worth it.

Sue: Do you see him here - he's saying, "You can trust me."

Client: I see him, and I do trust him.

Sue: His arms are open, and he's saying, "Risk with me."

Shift to View of Self: Clinical Example

Client: And I believe him... But I drive people away because I have so many problems. I am just f_____d up.

Sue: So you know he's there, right? But what we're talking about now is you, right? (Bingo)

Sue: You see him there, and he's safe, but you run to a place that says, "Don't go to him. There is something wrong with me... something unlovable." (Neg. view of self)

Softening Gone Astray Top 4 Reasons

4. Interpersonal Enactment Failure

No "softening reach" initiated

Several times there was sufficient heightening, but therapist would fail to have the softening partner then REACH to the other for comfort and attachment wants/needs to be met.

EFT softening MUST include the interpersonal

Final Thoughts

The number of softening events needed varies.

Softening events start the bonding event process. At completion of Step 7, both partners are accessible and responsive, able to share and let the other in.

They ask for comfort, reassurance, for fears to be soothed, and attachment needs to be met – *in their own particular words*.

Key Interventions include Heightening, Evocative Responding, and Restructuring Interactions.

References

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2010 Coming Attractions

Blamer Softening Training Tape

- Actual clinical examples of softening events
- Brief overview of blamer softening mini theory
- Expert commentary on the blamer softening process



Training Tape is currently in production. For updates on release and purchasing information see:

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