

EMOTIONAL POPCORN AS A LEAD INTO COUPLES R-CS WORK

I use a “game” called Emotional Popcorn to prime emotional intimacy between members of a couple. I frame it as a game as a way of trying to avoid the defenses of the client.

I believe that what we are doing is actually quite profound. We are teaching our clients how to be mindful in the present while emotionally and physically attuning to their partner’s experience. We are also breaking the rule that most couples have that there is only room for one person’s experience in the relationship. We are providing them an experience of seeing that they have a real impact on their partner’s nervous system when they emotionally attune. We are using the “game” as an excuse to “not have a conversation”; by that, I mean that we are using the structure of the game to get both of them out of their story which they are blaming each other, being the victim, etc. and instead name their experience while holding the capacity to mirror their partner’s experience. We are using the structure of the game to nip in the bud the content that would otherwise be triggering.

Emotional Popcorn Instructions (Short Version):

Stage 1) One person names a feeling that is happening in the present.

Stage 2) The other person does the following:

- 1) [Mirror the other's emotions] You are feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh.
- 2) [accessing and identifying feelings] check in with their own limbic feeling state.
- 3) [Naming feeling] I am feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh
- 4) [Mirroring emotion a second time] Say, “and you are feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh”
- 5) [affirm the attachment bond] Say, “And I’m here.”

Stage 3) The first person does the following:

- 1) [Mirror the other's emotions] You are feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh.
- 2) [accessing and identifying feelings] check in with their limbic feeling state.
- 3) [Naming feeling] I am feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh
- 4) [Mirroring emotion a second time] Say, “and you are feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh”
- 5) [affirm the attachment bond] Say, “And I’m here.”

You repeat Stages 2 and 3 over and over (perhaps 7 to 10 times) until both people shift into core states and feel a limbic resonance and empathy with each other. Any good couples therapist can get mileage by repeating Stage 2 and 3. If you are also adept in R-CS, you can do Stages 4,5, and 6.

Stage 4)

Deepen the limbic resonance between them. You only do this stage after they are both limbically resonating with each other.

Stage 5)

Guide client to internalizing their sense of self as limbically connected to their experience.

Do R-CS work helping them to identify the state that they are in is a right state and help them limbically resonate with this state that this is in is in fact who they are.

Stage 6)

Cheerlead both of them affirming that when they emotionally attune and stay with their partner's experience several times in a row, that it creates an experience that isn't just a pleasant feeling but helps their partner become who they actually are. Then affirm that they truly love who their partner is and don't like their partner's habituated patterns they've learned. Elicit a commitment to learning how to come into their core when their partner is not available and elicit a buy in to the notion that we have a special mission in life to help our partners shift states into who they are.

Tips for Stage 1:

Get her to say, **I'M HERE AND I HAPPEN TO FEEL "BLAHH BLAHH BLAHH"**

I will choose the person in the couple who is least defended and/or has more access to being able to track their feelings. I will say, "Scan your body and your emotions" and notice what you notice and then tell your partner, "I'm here and I happen to feel 'blahh blahh blahh'". Until it is not necessary, I will provide a few examples (I try to provide some examples that are likely what the client is feeling and also provide a few ridiculous ones) to choose from. So, because what I am asking her to do is vulnerable, I'll normalize naming a few feelings and say, "Just check in to see what is actually happening, not what is supposed to be happening. And look at your partner and say: "I'm here and I happen to feel "Blahh Blahh Blahh".

REIGHN THEM IN

And when they have a few sentences that don't name a feeling, help them redirect it to a feeling. I'll say try to make it a word or two. And for clients who are wordy, really reign them into no more than two sentences and make sure it names a feeling that they are having in the present.

For example if they say, "when I think about you yelling at me when I didn't do the dishes right last night, it made me pissed."

Tx: [interrupts] Great! (celebrate them naming their experience even if it is a negative one). "Of course you were pissed when he yelled at you, who wouldn't be. (as if speaking for them, continue) ... and right now, when I think about last night, I happen to feel Blahh Blahh Blahh. (I could offer a few suggestions). When I think about last night right now on this brown couch, I happen to feel hurt, disappointed, unimportant, sad.

After they get their feeling in the present, continue to Stage 2.

Tips for Stage 2/3 work

Get him to say YOU ARE FEELING BLAHH BLAHH BLAHH

I'll then turn to him and tell him to look at her for a few seconds and take in her emotion. Care about it for a second whether you like or don't like want her to have or don't want her to have the feeling. And simply look at her and say, "You are feeling Blahh Blahh Blahh."

Use directives in how you instruct them to make contact. Slip it in and don't make a big deal of it. But rotate your language each round a feeling is mirrored. The idea is each time they mirror their partner's feelings is an opportunity for you to direct them towards more direct contact. I'm intentionally at first not asking them to be mindful because I don't want to interrupt the experience. Only after they are able to give contact a few times do you want to have them reflect on their experience while they are doing it. It is an interesting dance between not being overwhelming and putting them on the spot and enhancing their connection.

Examples of language that encourages emotional presence and permission such as:
look at her with compassion,
look at her with soft eyes,
look at her with a warm heart,
look at her with a sense of "of course honey",
love her with your eyes for 3 seconds and then say I'm here"

EXAMPLE FEELINGS for Stage2/3 work:

“I’m here and I happen to feel nervous”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel suspicious”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel warm”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel uncomfortable because Todd is looking at me”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel hungry”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel horny”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel connected”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel playful”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel frustrated”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel [insert any emotion or physical sensation]”, or
“I’m here and I happen to feel tense in my shoulders”, etc.

Example of Stage 4 work:

[Therapist says, "What is it like when your partner really gets your experience? How do you feel?"]

He says, "I feel empowered that I can really make a difference?"

[Therapist says to her, "What is it like that when he listens to you, he feels empowered?"]

She says, "It makes me feel closer, like my guard goes down"

[To him, therapist says, "What is it like for you to be the man who helps her guard go down?"]

He says, "It makes me feel important and loved"

[Therapist says to her, "What is it like that when HE listens to you, it makes HIM feel important and loved!?"]

Therapist keeps going back and forth affirming the feeling good state from being seen by their partner, but also use language to affirm the good empathizer with language that it reflects who they are. Reinforce positive affect with language of self; for example: Who he is really loves you. Depersonalize negative affect by third personing it or talking about a learned habituated pattern. For example, "Who he is loves you and he gets caught into his learned habituated pattern of dismissing you." Always affirm the self and help your couples develop a pattern of seeing their partner as being victims of their strategies that they are learning how to get out of rather than who they are is the pathology.

Note: The whole time, we are orchestrating emotional intimacy. In between each question, you are encouraging them to say it slowly, to check in with their body and emotions what it is like. You are encouraging them to be honest about their experience rather than tell the therapist or their partner what they think they should be feeling. When they are sharing positive experiences, encourage them to look at each other and touch each other and repeat slowly what they just said.