

Handling Intensity: Unworkable but not Unmanageable

[While I am suggesting that Interactive Focusing Therapy has responded to certain problems within the therapy framework by generating possible strategies for dealing with these arising difficulties, at no time should it be assumed that these strategies are meant to be techniques to be tried one after the other. Strategies are available that have been developed from experiences and should be kept loosely in mind by the therapist. Should the human situation call for another way of working with the individuals, that is what will dictate the manner in which the therapist will choose to respond.

We take for granted the maxim that healing is an inner directed process, that the client knows how it should have been, and she is in charge of her own process and right way of being. We must not forget that this applies equally well to the therapist. And it is with the understanding that the therapist will find her own right way of working with this self-healing client that we put forward, from experience, what we are calling strategies that may aid individual clients when they run into blocks in therapy.]

With couples, often an unworkable level of intensity arises rather quickly, usually signaling unprocessed, entrenched anger or deep disappointment. While this may arise within the relationship, more likely it contains much history from the family of origin and earlier life experiences.

Anger and hostility may be overtly expressed as loud and accusatory outbursts which make it quite obvious. Disappointment may be covertly expressed as withdrawal or passive aggression which makes it less obvious. In either case, it heralds a stuck process.

I make a distinction within energy between negative intensity generated by stuckness such as anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, hopelessness, pessimism, jealousy and the like – and positive intensity attached to change such as a wanting, hope, optimism, belief and the like which provide the energy to remain with the problem and work it through. And I would say that a shift from negative to positive energy is what allows for change to happen.

A capacious model-

How does the Interactive Model accommodate varying levels of intensity, and how does the Model adjust? What can you do when you experience a “melt-down” during a session? How can you help the shift from negative to positive energy to occur?

The first line of defense is simply to track the level of intensity in the interaction. If you come to a stuck place of sound and fury or quiet desperation, you might be wise to suspect that an intolerable level of

negative intensity has been reached. You can use your bodysense to detect the level of tension as your ears might make you play the fool.

An example-

First, let me give you an example of two sessions that used four different strategies to regulate intensity, and I will teach from these sessions in the footnotes and afterward.

This was a second session with Freddy and Isabella. Chris, the therapist, used the first session to take a brief history and introduce them to the way he worked. He learned that they had come to Seattle from Des Moines three years ago, shortly after they married. It seemed that Freddy was escaping an overbearing mother, and Isabella just wanted to move somewhere they could raise their children in safety. They hadn't yet started a family but hoped to soon. They came to therapy because they were excited about Focusing and wanted to improve their communication using a Focusing way. There seemed to be areas where they couldn't talk meaningfully to each other.

They were referred by a Focusing trainer when they asked if she knew of a therapist who used Focusing in therapy. Freddy and Isabella had gone through several levels of Focusing/listening training and were comfortable both with Focusing and the Focusing-listening process. They were excited about this new way of listening. Chris felt that he could introduce them immediately to Interactive Focusing, the process he used with couples in therapy. Since he had given them the description of Interactive Focusing during the first session and in a short article he assigned after the first session, he reviewed it only briefly in this session. Chris said that he would coach them through the session using the Interactive model.¹ They would have a ninety minute session in which to work.

Freddy and Isabella arrived in a seemingly good mood, joking with one another. Freddy listened to Isabella first. He was good with reflections. Isabella took rather a long time to tell her story. She was upset with Freddy because he didn't join in at parties. Isabella was very outgoing and liked to attend parties with their friends. Freddy just sat alone most of the evening or worked on a crossword puzzle while the others were having fun. Isabella felt abandoned by Freddy, but she would join her friends and drink and joke while Freddy sat in isolation.

Freddy was a successful businessman. Her friends called him "Five-O'clock-Freddy" because they said he checked out at five, indicating he shut

¹ Chris' first strategy was to let Freddy and Isabella process directly with one another using the Interactive Focusing Model.

down when he left work. They were used to his quietness and absence. They just partied around him. Still, this embarrassed Isabella, and she feared they would lose all of their friends. She hadn't previously told this to Freddy as she was afraid he would feel criticized by her or stop coming to the parties completely.

Though Freddy was good with reflections, he was not too successful during the double empathic moment. This signaled a disconnect between his ability to reflect and his ability to understand. He could hear the words, but he was unable to understand what they meant to Isabella.² He stumbled around trying to find something that would fit for how it was for Isabella. Even with Chris' help, he finally had to give up in frustration

Chris was uncomfortable with this but didn't comment on it.³ He had a vague sense that he would have done better to listen to Freddy and Isabella separately to begin with. Then he would have moved into their working together only after some sessions of their seeing Chris model listening and the empathic moment for them. Chris hoped that things would improve when the roles were reversed during the Interactive Response.

During the Interactive Response, Freddy seemed to regain his composure. He said he understood how his quietness left Isabella feeling. He also said that he was quiet by nature and never felt comfortable in a crowd. He didn't drink, and it seemed to him that people became louder and sillier when they drank. He didn't want to feel silly so he abstained. Isabella did fairly well with her reflections. Freddy came to a resting place with his story. It was time for the double empathic moment and Isabella's turn to get how Freddy was experiencing all he just revealed.

Isabella was trying to get the essence of how it was for Freddy. She had an image which she offered to Freddy. He said no, it wasn't like that at all! Then he used ten words to describe how it was for him. Isabella tried to reflect those ten words but couldn't seem to get it even when Freddy repeated himself three or four times. Chris was actively coaching trying to help Isabella with the reflections.⁴

² A strength of the empathic response during the double empathic moment is that it can zero in on whether or not the Listener is actually understanding the Focuser. In this instance, while Freddy was able to execute the reflections reasonably well, he wasn't getting Isabella's underlying experience. Not really understanding while appearing to understand adds a level of complexity. Untangling this points the communication in the right direction of actually communicating rather than appearing to communicate.

³ This discomfort in Chris was a signal that might have helped Chris see the direction the session was taking much sooner. If he had paid attention to this signal, he might have changed strategies before the melt-down.

⁴ Again, this is an instance of the appearance of listening without understanding. This isn't uncommon for people in relationship, and it is a major source of the failure of relationship.

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Suddenly Freddy burst out with: You didn't get the reflection right! You're just like my mother! She never really listened! She blamed me for everything. He was speaking rapidly and loudly. Freddy had tears of frustration and anger. Isabella sat quietly looking down with tears welling at the corners of her eyes. She then said to Chris, almost inaudibly, that she needed to take care of herself.⁵

Chris came in quickly to cut off the projection of anger with a time out. He suggested that he listen to each briefly so they could go on with the Interaction.⁶

Even with Chris' listening to him, Freddy was not able to speak from the bodysense. He continued with a voluble story about his mother, her not listening to him and blaming him for everything that went wrong in the family without giving him a chance to defend himself or explain.

Chris then listened to Isabella who came to a place of recognizing that she needed to take care of herself. She said others always told her that she needed to take care of herself and not everyone else, but this was the first time she actually felt it herself.

It was close to the end of the session and Isabella and Freddy were both exhausted. Chris checked in with them to see that they would be okay with one another until the next session. He had learned from many experiences working with couples that often he could hold the safe space if he asked them a simple question: Do you still care for each other?⁷ Freddy and Isabella said that they were upset, but they still cared about each other. Chris asked them *not* to try to process this further without him, and he worked them into his schedule for another appointment in three days.⁸

It was apparent to Chris that without the success of the double empathic moment, neither Freddy nor Isabella had experienced an empathic shift. They were both stuck in the narrowness of their own private worlds in contrast to what they said they wanted from this therapy, greater connection.

⁵ This speaks to Isabella's basic drive toward healing. She is recognizing the need to keep herself safe. It isn't just the coach's job.

⁶ Chris used a second strategy here. He interrupted their listening to one another, and he listened to each separately. He intended to listen just long enough to reduce the intensity so they could resume processing together. He was also hoping that his brief modeling of listening would help them get back on track.

⁷ This direct checking about whether the couple still cares is a basic strategy for monitoring safety. The couple will usually be very honest in their responses. It also alerts them to the fact that their negative emotion may have covered over their underlying caring. It gives them a chance to reposition themselves in their caring for one another.

⁸ Chris used a third strategy. He recognized that they would need a longer break from processing before resuming, so he ended the session sending them home to take a longer time out with no processing in between. This was a cool-down period, but Chris clearly stated that they wouldn't leave this situation dangling. They would attend to whatever still needed processing when they resumed in three days.

This left Chris puzzling how to structure the next session. It percolated in him over the next two days.

Third session-

After the previous session, Chris decided that he would start this session listening to Freddy and Isabella separately, model the double empathic moment and then ask the partner who observed to take the empathic moment with his assistance, if needed. This is what we call the “single-wing.” There is no direct Interactive Response.⁹ Chris felt this would be the most helpful and hopeful way to empathic enlargement and connection.

Freddy and Isabella came into the third session both quiet and appearing tense. Chris told them what he proposed, and they seemed relieved not to have to talk to one another directly. They both said that they felt it would only get worse if they listened to each other.

Chris listened to Freddy first. Freddy apparently had thought about what had happened during the three day hiatus. Freddy was able to get that he was confusing what happened in his early home life with what was going on in his marriage. He realized that he would have to work to keep them separate and to process them separately. When he could separate these two parts of his life, he felt hopeful that he could work on the marriage with Isabella without letting his mother come in on it. Freddy had a touching image of a large rock having fallen over his path. He was struggling to remove the boulder, the part about his mother, to clear the path he wanted to pursue with his wife.

They took the double empathic moment. Chris stayed silent for a while trying to get how all of that was for Freddy. Finally he simply said, “I really feel connected to what you said. I can sense how hard it was for you when your mother didn’t listen. I feel I really heard you.” Freddy was deeply moved and said that Chris’ empathic response was just right. He finally feel heard.¹⁰ Then Isabella offered how she felt it was for Freddy.

⁹ Chris used a fourth strategy. Typically, he starts couples out with this strategy of listening to each separately until he feels that they can listen to one another. He misread the severity of the situation when Freddy and Isabella came in for the second session. They seemed quite comfortable with each other. Lurking beneath this façade was an ongoing problem in the relationship as well as a traumatic history from youth. Also, Chris was aware that they had good training in the Focusing/listening process as they had taken several levels of training with a very competent trainer. These two conditions mislead Chris, but also taught him that a more conservative strategy might be the preferred way. The therapist must always be checking to see what is needed. Ideally, he will be neither too fast nor too slow in offering healing strategies.

¹⁰ The empathic response can take a myriad of forms. Here, Chris working from his bodysense, got that all Freddy needed to know was that he was finally heard. If Chris had used an image or metaphor it might have worked. Freddy might have felt heard. But what Chris said which was formed in his own bodysense seems to have been exactly what Freddy needed to hear in order to felt heard.

She was hesitant but seemed to know her direction. She was brief, taking a cue from Chris' modeling. When she finished, she looked apprehensively at Freddy. He had a faint smile and acknowledged that she did get how it was for him. She was visibly relieved.

Chris then listened to Isabella tell her part of the story. Isabella first said that she really felt relieved that she understood how it was for Freddy. At the end, she revealed that during the last session she had been unable to reflect the ten words Freddy wanted her to hear during the double empathic moment because something had come in to fill her leaving her no room to hear him. She described it as an immense ball that started in her middle but became larger than she was. She said that it wasn't quite fear though she was afraid that things were getting out of control. It was a kind of confusion where she seemed to lose the ability to use her reason under stress.

As the session ended, Chris realized that he would continue in future sessions with the single-wing until he was convinced that Freddy and Isabella could process directly together. He indicated this to them, and they were in agreement. They felt that they really could understand one another if they didn't have to do the direct listening. And they hoped that it wouldn't be too long before they could process together.¹¹

After this session, Chris could sense the empathic shift in both of them. He realized that his own hopefulness was touched into along with theirs.

A fifth strategy-

Chris sometimes uses a unique strategy when his clients seem too unprepared to listen to one another. He will ask them to listen to him. He gives them feedback to help them with their listening. He also takes the double empathic moment with them to model the subtleties of empathy.¹²

¹¹ While in this instance Chris decided to damp down the intensity, part of the function of the therapist/coach is to *not* prematurely cut off intensity. If negative intensity is left unprocessed, it becomes even more dangerous. Being able to discern between unsafe and uncomfortable is important. Often what is labeled as unsafe is actually uncomfortable. The therapist can help the couple sense into the difference as well as help them defuse unsafe situations so they can shift to uncomfortable. Unsafe is stuck. Uncomfortable is in process. However, it is important to not lose the energy as the intensity is shifted. Just having a trusted therapist present will often provide enough of an anchor to anger to allow it to de-escalate and to be processed when the anger would have escalated and been stuck without the presence of the therapist.

¹² This is based on what we call Focuser-as-teacher (F/T). When we teach workshops of Focusing/listening, we make the assumption that healing is an inner directed process and only the Focuser knows how it should have been for her. Also, it is only the Focuser who knows when she feels understood by her listener. We use this logic to further say that it is only the Focuser who can give the listener feedback about when and how she feels empathically understood. The Focuser will resonate the listener's response against what she is sensing in her body. She will use this matching to give the listener feedback and to help the listener stay on track.

This is a powerful way to teach experiential, empathic listening. It is especially useful when there is a deep-seated inability to listen. The inability to listen to the other is a fundamental stuck place, and it won't allow any further processing until it is attended to.

Summary-

I have used an example to illustrate how the Interactive Focusing Model can be used at varying levels of counterproductive intensity exhibited in therapy sessions with couples. The therapist will try to maintain a therapeutic level of energy but limit disabling, negative intensity.

There are a variety of ways or strategies the therapist can use depending on the situation as it unfolds before him. This single session shows how elastic the Interactive Focusing Therapy model is. It kept expanding to fit the requirements of the situation.

Some strategies -

Level One, dealing with the client's inability to listen by having the client listen to the therapist using the Focuser-as-teacher model

Level Two, the therapist modeling listening and empathy using the single-wing

Level Three, direct participation in the Focusing/Listening process where the therapist coaches the couple in a direct Interaction

Four ways of de-escalating intensity in the session:

- 1. Checking with the couple to see if they still care about one another*
- 2. A brief time-out with the therapist listening to each partner using the single-wing and returning to the full model relatively quickly*
- 3. Taking a longer time-out to let the situation simmer down to a point where an Interactive Process can resume, probably as a single-wing listening by the therapist. It is important to make clear that the process isn't being abandoned, and that the issue will be processed at a later, agreed-upon time.*
- 4. Identifying a tangential issue that might come in to derail the process. It can be processed separately by marking it and making an appointment to work on it at a later time.*