

# Professional Exchange

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# The Felt Experience of Love is the Healing Force Tapped by Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy for Couples (AEDPfc)

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*The AEDPfc treatment approach is about acts of love. In truth though, most couples are brought into treatment by attachment anxiety. It is the movement from fear to love and from survival to thriving, which is the expression of transference. (Fosha 2008, Yeung, 2010) This is the indwelling biological drive to evolve. The focus on moments of transference gives AEDP for Couples its thrust and power as a treatment modality. In session and between sessions, transference is the drive experienced and expressed as the longing to love and be loved. (Mars 2011, 2018)*

AEDPfc helps couple members to uncover and amplify this felt experience of love by softening defenses and creating joyful moments of connection. (Frederickson, 2009) The somatic experience of love becomes the inner compass and motivating force to create accelerated transformational outcomes. (Mars, 2009, 2011, 2013) Two papers and two shorter articles recently published in *The Therapist* magazine offer pithy details of theory and clinical practice of this work. These articles and papers are available on the internet at <http://cfttsite.com/camft3> for your ease of access.

I chose this couple for this third CAMFT article because the challenges they face represent what brings so many young couples and families to seek therapy. I also chose them because the attachment security and wellbeing of the couple and their two children were hanging in the balance. This activates my own transference strivings to evolve myself as a therapist. You will find

transcript of the first twelve minutes of the first session to give you methods to create a secure base for treatment in AEDPfc or any couple approach.

*To protect the identity of the couple, I have changed information about them.*

Sam and Kyra are in their mid-thirties. They have been married for eight years and have two children. Their challenges are triggered by his work stress and frequent travel. His business trips of three to five days leave Kyra struggling at times at a level that reaches panic and fragmentation. This is due to overwhelm and exhaustion, abandonment feelings, isolation from her family, a lack of capable childcare, and also early unresolved trauma that is yet to be discovered.

1. She has chronic insomnia due to nursing her extremely active and intensely demanding six-month old on two-hour intervals
2. They have a second super-active three-and-half-year old who is testing boundaries fiercely on a minute-by-minute basis, leaving her taxed and exhausted.
3. Sam faces extreme daily work pressure, the financial burden of a large mortgage and chronic pain from multiple long-term medical conditions.

We determined over the phone that due to finances and Sam's travel that we will limit our sessions to twice a month. I videorecord each session with a two-camera system, with

one camera directed toward me and the other camera directed toward them. They have committed to witnessing and discussing the video of each session during the week that we do not meet in order to maintain continuity and to keep growing together. Witnessing the video recordings also provides a method for them to identify moments of dissociation, to build self-reflective function and to help them remember to keep the commitments they make to each other as we go along in treatment.

**We begin this first seventy-five-minute session in the first minute.**

**Therapist:** The premise of this therapy is about your forming what you two want with each other. Just turn toward each other, so you are comfortable on the couch. Put your feet up on the couch if you like and make yourselves comfortable. Make the couch your spot and tell each other, one at a time...with I-statements...WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH YOUR PARTNER THAT IS REALLY IN YOUR HEART?

**Sam:** I want emotional intimacy, to share a lot about what is happening and kind of get back to being best friends. I want fun and I just want ease...a sense of like...safety and ease.

**Kyra:** [Nodding]

**Therapist:** When you are nodding Kyra, what are you showing through your nodding? [I am encouraging K to make her non-verbal implicit affirmation explicit.]

“ It is the movement from fear to love and from survival to thriving, which is the expression of transformance. ”

**Kyra:** Sounds good, those things sound good to me. [*Still nodding*] I want to feel like we can be in conflict and know how to do that in ways that don't feel so scary.

**Sam:** Yeah

**Therapist:** How do you want to feel instead of scared? [I am structuring a way for K to find the affirmation of what she wants instead of the negation of what she doesn't want. (Mars 2011, 2017) When you have a difference of opinion with S, what do you want to feel?

**Kyra:** I want to feel trust...faith that we can get through it together. Like we can revisit topics that maybe were inflamed at one point. Like its okay to have something feel hard and that we can have a RUPTURE...because we can come BACK to that place... and I want us to be able to be imperfect together...[*welling up with tears, voice cracking*]...and to feel that the ground is beneath us, even when we were not perfect [*wipes tears*].

**Therapist:** I see your tears falling K. Please speak to S directly from your tears now. What do your tears want to say to deepen the message to him even more? [My goal here is for K to express the adaptive action that comes with this core affect of sadness. (Fosha, 2005, 2009b, Mars, 2015, 2018) I hope that K's tender sadness will help create more oxytocin in each of them as her vulnerable and clear messages are being taken in by her husband. Then the release of dopamine from relief and connection can help build more bonding between them from the get go of our work together.] Brizendine, 2010, 2016)

**Kyra:** I just feel like I have some hurt inside [*more tears*]...hurt that's like a little stuck [*voice goes to a whisper*] and I really want to heal it with YOU." [I hear this as a very direct expression of transformance striving and a bold and vulnerable reaching out for love.]

Sam: Nodding, smiling tenderly now. [*Cradling K's hands now, his eyes gazing shyly and softly.*]

**Therapist:** "How is this invitation feeling for you Matt...she wants to heal her hurt inside with you?" [I cue up a follow-up to have S put his nodding affirmation and his soft eyes into words to K that in turn can help build the safe connection that they both have expressed being hungry for. This will combine auditory, visual, energetic and emotional channels, which will increase verifiable trust. (Mars, 2011, 2017)]

**Sam:** Feels good. [Like many men, Sam has few words for affective experiences. (Brizendine, 2010) I want to ask S to stretch to meet Kyra more fully.]

**Therapist:** What about that feels good to you and motivates you Sam? [I am urging Sam to follow the potential of the best-friend experience that he has said he wants with Kyra. I am advocating in these first five minutes of our first session for S to be close to K's side energetically and emotionally, undoing each of their aloneness and loneliness.] (Mars, 2015, 2017, Fosha, 2009b)

**Sam:** Umm. It just feels like...I feel like there is a lot of distance between the two of us. And...umm...just that there is tension kind of always there, because we have hurts that are not healed. And you brought up conflict. I think we've gotten really afraid of conflict, so we don't do it. We've never been very good at conflict. At least we used to repair anyway. [I hear M making four You-statements in a row. I give some space for now to learn more about him and to appreciate his overall kindness of intention.] It feels like its textbook...like tension building upon tension...avoidance and...It feels like distant...cool...chuckles not cool...not cool not like in the 60s here in the US...but not warm. [Two more It-statements along with We-Statements hmmm...I want to

shape this!] We used to make repairs and now we don't.

**Therapist:** [K is still sniffing back tears from her vulnerable reaching out to S with her core emotion of sadness.]. I wonder Sam if you would say what happens when you see Kyra's tears. Will you tell K what gets touched in you with I statements? I hear you have been speaking about "When WE do this...And IT feels like..." The specificity is so important. What happens in YOU, the individual you Sam, when you see Kyra's tears and when you feel your own feelings about this? [I am structuring Sam's differentiated perceiving, receiving and expressing in relation to his embodied experience, which is central to AEDPfc and would lead to more intimate and owned connection.] (Mars, 2011, 2017). What do you want to say to her about how you want to BE and REPAIR and to help the ground be safer between the two of you? [I integrate the PEACE and REPAIR what S has said he wants.]. How does this motivate you? Will you tell K with I statements? [My intention here is to make a sandwich of what each of them wants with the other, so they stretch their internal working models together in the spirit of love in this first eight minutes of the session. This shaping of owned embodied experience right-out-of-the-gate is central to AEDPfc] (Mars, 2011, 2017)

Sam: Well...I love you and I want you to feel good in our relationship. I want you to feel happy and comfortable.

**Therapist:** Yeah...

**Sam:** And I think...umm I don't feel teary right now, but I was teary when we were on the phone today [Right before the session on the phone with me.] and I just feel...

**Therapist:** So bring yourself back to that moment again Sam. Let the teariness in you meet the teariness in Kyra.

I am wanting to cue up a genuine matching of undefended core affect in Sam to meet the core affect of sadness in Kyra to undo both her and his aloneness. I want to slow it down, structure, regulate and protect each of them moment-by-moment to create the mind/body

experiences of secure base for this session and all subsequent sessions. This secure base under construction now will allow us in future sessions to treat underlying and pre-existing trauma in the couple therapy context. (Mars, 2015)

**Sam:** I feel lonely...I feel alone in my life (*S's voice quavers now*). [I can feel S is now in his vulnerability and true self.] (Fosha, 2005) I feel really alone...and I don't...I want to feel supported by you again. I feel a lot of hardness in me a lot of hardness in you towards me. I've become afraid of talking to you...[These owned I-statements feel authentic and vital to me.]

**Therapist:** Yeah...There is something about softening...softening some of the defenses...healing some of the hurts. [I am platforming here and converting implied statements of what is wrong into the affirmative change that Sam and Kyra said they want. I am weaving a coherent tapestry of their expressed longings and core affect with softness and vulnerability in my voice.]. I also heard Kyra, that you want to be able to have RUPTURES and be OK with the imperfection of them. I support the possibility of having MANY fewer ruptures. Having disagreements...having different values...different opinions and mood states that may be challenging to let in, AND I want to advocate for fewer and fewer ruptures and instead more and more repair of little...LITTLE mini-DISRUPTIONS of harmony between you two. [Sam and Kyra nod in unison as K's cheeks redden and her tears come again.] Disruption is ENOUGH...without having actual ruptures. Those are QUITE excruciating...and evoke unresolved trauma...trauma from earlier life often.

[*K wipes away more streaming tears.*] [Her now dimmed brown eyes look so pierced and hurt to me. Her cheeks are blotchy and reddened from histamine. She and S are both nodding somberly, gazing at each other with increasing tenderness. S looks more open and attentive to me here with less fog in his now shining brown eyes. I perceive green signals (Mars 2011, 2017) for this direction of travel with Sam and Kyra in this our first session. I know that every moment we are either building undefended love and positivity or we are constructing

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love's alternatives of tactical defenses of projection, analysis and judgement.]

**Therapist:** So with RUPTURES there is a CROWDED ROOM of what just happened with past ruptures...all combined with what is happening NOW in a new RUPTURE... Uhhh! It's SO difficult with two little ones [K wipes a new surge of tears rolling down her hot cheeks.] It's so difficult...and with each of your little ones who each have their own developmental demands they make SO constantly...demands made on EACH of you in your own way.

**Sam:** That's part of it...I feel like we have NO SPACE to deal with anything. [S again speaks informatively and kindly, but still in the We-statement form. I give his way of speaking in a non-differentiated way more space for now, as we are in our early minutes of our first session.] (Mars, 2011, 2017)

**Kyra:** And I have so little emotional capacity...I feel like in the past I had bandwidth to take care of my heart. I would be like to be able to say "Hey there's something here...can we talk about it?" I feel like I keep that all inside...I almost imagine it like I have PLAQUE over my heart. [K strokes her upper chest lightly with her finger tips showing how and where her heart hurts.] You know how you get your teeth cleaned [Smiling, K turns to me to tell me.]

**Therapist:** Umm hmm. Keep telling Sam about this. [I nod and smile warmly and wave my hand gently and persistently toward Sam. The conversation is BETWEEN THEM from minute one. My role is to selectively deepen, shape and regulate, to give occasional psycho-ed and my own relational connection and caring reflections. (MARS, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2018.)

**Kyra:** Yeah, I know. I feel like I don't have the bandwidth to do it now. I don't trust my own capacity to stay calm and take care

of the relationship. I feel like I could be very EXPLOSIVE...and out of control...and that umm...it feels very scary 'cause I DON'T TRUST US. Like for you to hold me when I'm in that way...I need that from YOU now. ([In response Sam is very attentive, present in his eyes gazing into and holding K's hands tenderly.]

**Therapist:** Can I try understanding this and see if my understanding is correct?

**Kyra:** Yeah

**Therapist:** What I am hearing is that as you are very very depleted right now in a scary way Kyra. Demanded of...your boundaries already being pushed by a very demanding three-year old and an intensely willful...and delightful...six-month old and your capacity for self-care is low and your capacity to REGULATE IMPULSES toward Matt is low.

**Kyra:** Yeah.

**Therapist:** And because of your sleep deprivation, anxiety and depletion, you need Sam to step in more for a while to do some of what YOU used to do, like tending your heart and his heart. Is this so? Is this accurate?

**Kyra:** That's how it is. Yeah. [K sounds and feels so translucent to me. I perceive Sam to be SEEING AND FEELING INTO Kyra with compassion and love.]

**Therapist:** Part of the delight I feel in doing the work that I do is that I am very moved to see couples develop more EARNED SECURE ATTACHMENT (Roisman et al, 2002) session by session over the course of couple therapy. (Mars, 2011, 2013, 2017) So between birth and age three we all develop an attachment style that has aspects of INSECURITY in it...reactivity. (BOWLBY, 1969) And a low tolerance for particular kinds of stress and that is quite triggerable. In the

therapy that we are starting now, the theme is about increasing the window of tolerance [showing the palms of my hands moving closer and farther away from each other horizontally first, and then vertically to show the window's height and width.] To be able to FEEL MORE, SENSE MORE AND REGULATE more. This is all part of the process. (Pando-Mars, 2016) Look at the chart above me...the seven channels of experience: sensation, emotion, energy, movement, auditory, visual and imaginal. (Mars, 2008, 2011, 2017, 2018)

### SEVEN CHANNELS OF EXPERIENCE



Each of these channels expand, deepen and broaden how each of us relate. This way of knowing ourselves goes way beyond I THINK THEREFORE I AM, it's a set of skillful body perceptions...conscious capacity for interoception (Craig, 2015) that grows with practice.

**Sam and Kyra:** [Nodding in unison, both looking more animated.] Mmm hmm. Mhmm

**Therapist:** And the more you can regulate your own emotions or sensations or energies and grow your the capacity to FEEL WITH YOUR PARTNER'S BODY EXPERIENCE and not be swallowed up in that, the more that broad window of tolerance grows and that helps your security of attachment grow. This way your brains actually change together for the better, because the chips are down for your two kids and for the two of you. [Children provide the ultimate biological transformance strivings.]

**Sam and Kyra:** Mmm hmm. [More mutual nodding]

**Therapist:** Rather than becoming more worn down, this is actually about constructing


yourselves together. When your caring for yourself and your caring for your partner is matched, it is the forming of a more secure base. As you said Kyra, the ground then becomes more firm.

### End of the twelfth minute of the first session.

Throughout the twelve-minutes above, I tapped into and amplified Sam and Kyra's transformance strivings to become more capable to be best friends, lovers and optimal teammates as parents and to get through this developmental crisis/opportunity in their lives.

Four sessions later, Sam and Kyra have faithfully witnessed and discussed each of their video recorded sessions, despite his continued travel and the lack of a babysitter who is capable of handling both kids. They came yesterday for their fifth session describing the ongoing relief of feeling better rested, mutually supported, more connected, trusting and stable. While the external circumstances are still challenging, their responses are more owned, somatically mindful and differentiated. They each describe feeling more accompanied both when they are together and when Sam is traveling for work. The portable internalized loving other is a felt experience now in each of them. In this fifth session, Sam and Kyra brought in their 3-year-old son. He and I formed a sweet, bonding and affirmative connection from the moment he arrived. He navigated the whole seventy-five minute session with an uncharacteristic level of cooperation, sharing of focus and calm. In the sixth session to come, Sam, Kyra and I will unpack how we as a team arrived at that remarkable outcome with Sammy. In the two weeks between, Sam, Kyra and Sammy will witness the video together and celebrate how we all helped young Sammy to be SO amazingly illuminated, cooperative and delightfully self-regulated!

CAMFT is sponsoring an intensive three-day certificate program in AEDPfc on November 9-11, 2018 at the Hyatt Regency SFO. Video of moving clinical sessions will illustrate AEDPfc theory and methods with couples with hot and cold conflict, infidelity, tailoring treatment to attachment styles

and more. The skills demonstrated will be applied in experiential practice sessions each afternoon. More than a dozen highly trained and dedicated assistants will support each experiential practice period. 



Dr. David Mars and his marital partner of thirty-three years, Karen Pando-Mars, LMFT, will be presenting a new three-day certificate program at the CAMFT

Symposium on AEDP and AEDP for Couples at the Hyatt Regency Hotel at the SFO Airport November 9–11, 2018.

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